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On Cooperative Libertines and Wicked Puritans

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Commentary on Fitouchi et al. (2022), *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*

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Abstract

We agree with Fitouchi et al. (2022) that self-denial is sometimes moralized to signal capacity for cooperation, but propose that a person's cooperative character is more precisely judged by willingness to follow cultural, group, and interpersonal goals, for which many rules can serve as proxies, including rules about abstention. But asceticism is not a moral signal if its aims are destructive, while indulging impulses in a culturally approved way can also signal cooperation.

On Cooperative Libertines and Wicked Puritans

Fitouchi et al. (2022) argue that puritanical morality is concerned with signaling and diagnosing cooperation. We agree that self-denial is sometimes moralized to serve this function, but propose a more accurate scope. Specifically, puritanical adherence only signals resources for cooperation -- resources that can also bend toward non-cooperative ends. A person's cooperative character is more precisely judged by willingness to follow cultural, group, and interpersonal goals, for which many arbitrary rules can serve as proxies, including rules about abstention. But asceticism is not a moral signal if its intent is destructive; and indulging impulses in a culturally approved way can also signal cooperation.

First, the assumption that selfishness is self-evidently automatic, and that cooperation is self-evidently controlled, does not fit the whole story of research on the topic (e.g., Buckholtz, 2015; Nitschke et al, 2022; Speer et al., 2022). Fitouchi et al. note failures to replicate "intuitive cooperation" effects. They recognize that intuitive selfishness may be moderated by prosocial disposition. But many findings still reveal intrinsic motives to help. Cain et al. (2014) call intrinsic prosociality "giving," versus "giving in" to a social norm or social pressure to be unselfish. Evidence for giving comes from the "warm glow" literature on prosocial behavior (Andreoni, 1990; Dunn et al., 2014). If some people get a "helper's high", a prosocial disposition needs no self-control. More recently, Bago et al. (2021) have shown that individual differences in cooperation and selfishness both result from intuitive processes, rather than greater or lower control. If self-control is secondary to intuitive cooperativeness, then when diagnosing morality, cooperativeness itself is surely a better cue.

We are not saying that puritanism plays no part in moral inference. It might work as a multiplier, given baseline assumptions of prosocial intent. But tellingly, people are not seen as more moral when they give up short-term pleasures for evil ends. For example, after the September 11th attacks, attempts to acknowledge the suicide attackers as “courageous” were strongly resisted. Their ultimate self-sacrifice could not be seen as virtue, given the evil of their aims (Kyle, 2007). A self-controlled villain is worse, not better, than a sloppy, pleasure-seeking one. Likewise, self-control contributes to judgments of good (but not bad) character as a necessary ingredient to carry out good intentions, not as a virtue on its own (Gai & Bhattacharjee, 2022). In actual behavior, too, self-control is not always beneficent. As a trait, it can facilitate less frequent but more successful antisocial acts (Mathes et al., 2017), and can work toward selfish ends when social control is low (Uziel & Hefetz, 2014).

More parsimoniously, we see puritanical morality as one of many rules that might be adopted by a society to signal willingness to abide by other rules concerning harm and help. Rules that require self-abnegation may indeed have an advantage in practice. They are costly to enact, but can be enacted consistently, because they require no food, drink, or partner to be available. Indeed, proscriptive morality (i.e. following social/moral norms about what should not be done) has been shown to carry a stronger motivational force than prescriptive morality (i.e. seeking a prosocial end for its own sake). (Janoff-Bulman et al., 2009; Janoff-Bulman and Carnes, 2013). However, the important ingredient of proscriptive morality is still the adherence to the norm in the first place, and indulgence is just one of many things that can be proscribed.

Purity also loses standing as a universal signal of cooperation when group norms license rowdy behavior. If the dynamics of university “Greek” organizations and drinking societies are not proof enough, Lowe and Haws (2014) showed that in a variety of self-control arenas such as

spending and eating, people formed social bonds over shared indulgence as well as shared abstinence. Abstinence was preferred mainly when self-control failure was seen as more harmful than innocuous. Likewise, Rawn and Vohs' (2011) model of "self-control for personal harm" marshals evidence that many dangerous, self-harming, and impulsive-seeming acts aim to gain social acceptance. True, in such cases people may internally need self-control to propel themselves into excesses they would otherwise recoil at. But the external signal being sent, most germane to their reputation, is one of indulgence.

Conversely, derogatory terms such as "prig", "prude", and "wowser" tell us that people who shy away from fun can pay a cost, by being seen as cold, unfriendly, even uncooperative. Uziel and Hefetz (2018) review studies showing that self-control can have downsides in personal relationships and interpersonal problem solving: lack of spontaneity engenders mistrust. More recently, Röseler et al. (2021) found that people with high self-control were not always liked more. Self-control was a liability in socializing (vs. duty) situations and when the perceiver themselves had low self-control. This last effect shows that individual as well as cultural norms may determine whether tight or loose people are most to be trusted.

By their admission, Fitouchi et al.'s (2022) analysis covers only puritanism, one facet of the "purity" set of moral concerns. However, a focus on general social norms might bring in more purity concerns under a common roof. Although some observances and taboos plausibly concern pathogen control, other rules antithetical or irrelevant to immune defense take on lives of their own as cultural signifiers. Why the British and not the French historically abhor horse meat; why rotten-smelling dairy and fish concoctions have adherents in certain corners of Europe; the varied toleration worldwide of two people of the same gender who fall in love or have sex -- all of these purity and impurity norms seem like arbitrary, sometimes costly, rules to

follow. But they point toward a person's general rule-following tendency, taken as a very rough cue to whether they will cause harm or do good in society (for experimental evidence, see Chakroff et al., 2017). In conclusion, not just puritanism, but all kinds of culturally sanctioned observances are moralized to bear on judgments -- justified or not -- of a person's helpfulness or depravity.

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