

Fitouchi, André, and Baumard

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**Purity is linked to cooperation but not necessarily through self-control**

<sup>a,b,c</sup>Samuel Murray, <sup>a,d</sup>Santiago Amaya, <sup>a,e</sup>William Jiménez-Leal

<sup>a</sup> Laboratorio de Juicios y Emociones Morales, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

<sup>b</sup> Philosophy Department, Providence College, Providence, RI

<sup>c</sup> Neuroscience Program, Providence College, Providence, RI

<sup>d</sup> Department of Philosophy, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

<sup>e</sup> Department of Psychology, Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

*Institutional addresses*

SM: 105 Siena Hall, 1 Cunningham Sq., Providence, RI, 02918

SA/WJL: Cra 1 N° 18A- 12 Edificio Franco. Bogotá, (Colombia). 111711

*Institutional phone numbers*

SM: (401) 865-2748

SA: +57 601 3394949

WJL: +57 601 3394949

*Email*

SM: smurray7@providence.edu

SA: samaya@uniandes.edu.co

WJL: w.jimenezleal@uniandes.edu.co

*Webpages*

SM: < <https://philosophy.providence.edu/faculty-members/samuel-murray/>>

*Abstract*

Fitouchi et al. claim that seemingly victimless pleasures and nonproductive activities are moralized because they alter self-control. Their account predicts that: (1) victimless excesses are negatively moralized because they diminish self-control, and; (2) restrained behaviors are positively moralized because they enhance self-control. Several examples run contrary to these predictions and call into question the general relationship between self-control and cooperation.

Fitouchi and colleagues outline two puzzles related to puritanical morality, or the “moralization of apparently victimless pleasures.” The first concerns the heterogeneous set of moral concerns that purity norms encompass (the Puzzle of Association). The second concerns the moralization of behaviors that seem unrelated to concerns about cooperation (the Puzzle of Morality without Cooperation).

The Moral Disciplining Account is meant to resolve both puzzles. On this account, self-control is necessary for cooperation. Thus, behaviors that diminish the capacity for self-control are negatively moralized, while behaviors that enhance the capacity for self-control are positively

moralized. Puritanical norms encompass behaviors that are perceived to either diminish or enhance self-control, such as substance abuse or ritual observance, respectively. These behaviors are indirectly harmful or beneficial because engaging in them makes one a better or worse cooperative partner in the long run. Thus, the Moral Disciplining Account not only draws a link between puritanical morality and cooperation, but also explains why puritanical norms encompass the behaviors that they do: these are behaviors that are perceived to alter individual self-control.

Fitouchi and colleagues have made an important case for the relationship between purity and cooperation. In addition to the evidence they provide, we have also found significant, cross-culturally robust correlations between responses to the Morality-as-Cooperation scale (Curry et al., 2019) and judgments about the moral wrongness of purity violations depicted in the Moral Foundations Vignettes (Clifford et al., 2015; Jiménez-Leal et al., 2022). Insofar as MAC responses index attitudes about cooperation, this suggests that there is a cross-culturally stable association between attitudes about purity violations and attitudes about cooperation.

We want to raise three issues that might help refine and extend the Moral Disciplining Account. The first concerns two specific predictions of the account stated explicitly by Fitouchi et al.:

Victimless excesses should be preemptively moralized when perceived to causally contribute, through their deleterious effects on self-control, to an increased prevalence of uncooperative behaviors. Restrained behaviors should be praised when perceived to positively contribute through their preserving effects on self-control, to the improvement of people's cooperativeness (p. 23)

Purity violations are negatively moralized because they diminish self-control, while purity compliance is positively moralized because it enhances self-control. But puritanical behaviors and self-control sometimes dissociate. Consider someone who confesses having sexual fantasies about his coworkers. Such thoughts could constitute a purity violation that might be moralized, even if the individual exhibits exemplary self-control and never acts on them.

Fitouchi et al might argue that these cases are grist for their mill. Impure thoughts are evidence of intra-psychic self-control while also indicating low trait self-control. But this strategy cannot accommodate other examples that raise different problems for their prediction. Defecating on someone's grave out of spite may be regarded as a purity violation. But people would not make negative moral judgments about it because of diminished self-control. For that to be the case, people would have to view these acts as signs of inappropriate temporal discounting, evidence of inability to delay gratification, or anything of this sort, depending on how they conceptualize self-control (Bermúdez et al., 2021). But that seems implausible. In fact, the more deliberative (and less impulsive) these behaviors appear the worse the violation seems.

Fitouchi et al. imply that people view certain behaviors as inherently addicting: "...intoxicants are moralized because they are perceived as favoring uncooperative behaviors...by leading people to lose control over immediate impulses and fueling disregard for future consequences" (p. 18). They cite several studies that show people believe that alcohol consumption causes loss of self-control (Brett et al., 2016; Critchlow, 1986; Leigh, 1987). But these studies measure attitudes about *heavy* drinking, which involve a recurrent pattern of behavior symptomatic of addiction. What about one-

off purity violations? Is the family who eats the carcass of the dead pet losing control over some impulsive urge?

Fitouchi et al. are correct that we normally infer what others are like generally based on how they behave, and beliefs about self-control inform these inferences. Perceived self-control, however, is unlikely to fully mediate perceived cooperativeness, even for purity violations. We might look down on someone who defecates on a grave not because doing it makes them less self-controlled, but because it tells us something about how this person relates to things we respect. Perceptions of cooperativeness, therefore, can dissociate from perceptions of self-control when evaluating purity violations.

Suppose, for example, that someone is committed to the masculine ideal of the stiff upper lip. Upon hearing a touching story from a grieving friend, this person bursts out in tears. This is a case of *inverse akrasia*, where acting against one's better judgment ends up being morally appropriate (Arpaly, 2000). In this situation, a failure of self-control ends up leading to behaviors that enhance the perceived cooperativeness of the individual: weeping in solidarity with a friend can be a good thing, even if in doing so one violates a deeply-held commitment. This is because in breaking this commitment, the individual shows that he cares for his friend. And caring is an important aspect of being a cooperative partner. Thus, perceived cooperativeness can dissociate from our judgments about individual capacity for self-control, which violates the first prediction of the Moral Disciplining Account. In fact, the example suggests that diminished self-control can sometimes promote cooperation.

In sum, the Moral Disciplining Account is correct that purity behaviors are moralized because of how such behaviors anchor inferences about what a person is like deep down. These inferences then shape how we think about people as cooperative partners, but they are distinct from judgments about individual control (Irving et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2019). Thus, puritanical morality is related to cooperation, although this relationship cannot be explained entirely through perceived alterations in self-control. Instead, it is explained by our perceptions of what an individual is like deep down (what she cares about, what she respects, and so on), which encompasses but also extends beyond how a person exercises self-control.

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### **Competing Interests**

The Authors have no competing interests to disclose.

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