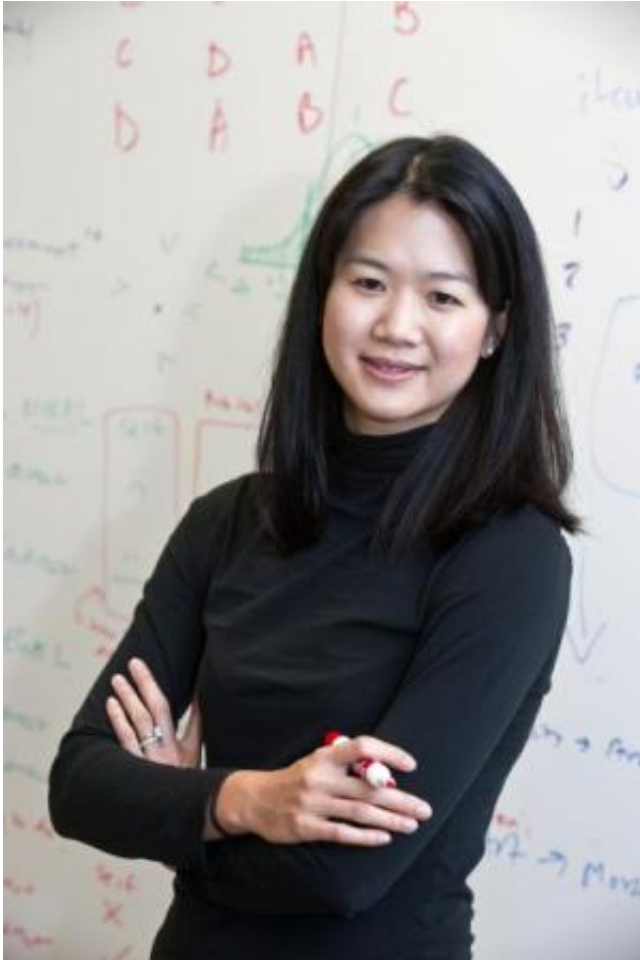


# 'Moral realism' may lead to better moral behavior

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Getting people to think about morality as a matter of objective facts rather than subjective preferences may lead to improved moral behavior, Liane Young, Boston College, psychology professor and researcher reports in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Credit: Lee Pellegrini

Getting people to think about morality as a matter of objective facts rather than subjective preferences may lead to improved moral behavior, Boston College researchers report in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

In two experiments, one conducted in-person and

the other online, participants were primed to consider a belief in either moral realism (the notion that morals are like facts) or moral antirealism (the belief that morals reflect people's preferences) during a solicitation for a charitable donation. In both experiments, those primed with moral realism pledged to give more money to the charity than those primed with antirealism or those not primed at all.

"There is significant debate about whether morals are processed more like objective facts, like mathematical truths, or more like subjective preferences similar to whether vanilla or chocolate tastes better," said lead researcher Liane Young, assistant professor of psychology at Boston College. "We wanted to explore the impact of these different meta-ethical views on actual behavior."

Ideas have previously been advanced on the subject, but Young and her former research assistant A.J. Durwin, now a law student at Hofstra University, are the first to directly investigate the question.

In one experiment, a street canvasser attempted to solicit donations from passersby for a charity that aids impoverished children. Participants in one set were asked a leading question to prime a belief in moral realism: "Do you agree that some things are just morally right or wrong, good or bad, wherever you happen to be from in the world?" Those in a second set were asked a question to prime belief in moral antirealism: "Do you agree that our morals and values are shaped by our culture and upbringing, so there are no absolute right answers to any moral questions?" Participants in a control set were not asked any priming question.

In this experiment, participants primed with realism were twice as likely to be donors, compared to those primed with antirealism or not primed at all.

A second experiment, conducted online, yielded

similar results. Participants asked to donate money to a charity of their choice who were primed with realism reported being willing to give more than those primed with antirealism or not primed at all.

"Priming participants to consider the notion that morals are like facts increased decisions to donate in both experiments, revealing the potential impact of meta-ethical views on everyday decision-making," said Young. "Simply asking participants to consider moral values, as we did with the antirealism prime, did not produce an effect," she said, "so priming morality in general may not necessarily lead to better behavior. Considering the existence of non-negotiable moral facts may have raised the stakes and motivated participants to behave better."

Since "real" moral stakes may be accompanied by "real" consequences—whether good (e.g., helping others, enhanced self-esteem) or bad (e.g., retribution), priming a belief in moral realism may in fact prompt people to behave better, in line with their existing moral beliefs, the researchers say.

The researchers note that priming a belief in moral realism may enhance [moral behavior](#) under certain conditions—such as when the right thing to do is relatively unambiguous (e.g., it is good to be generous). A different outcome could be possible when subjects are faced with more controversial moral issues, they say.

Liane Young's research frequently focuses on the psychology and neuroscience of moral judgment and behavior. In 2012, she was awarded a Sloan Research Fellowship from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and was named a Dana Neuroscience Scholar by the Dana Foundation, which also awarded her a three-year grant to support her study of brain activity and moral decision-making in individuals with autism, a project that will provide a valuable research opportunity for BC undergraduates. In addition, she received the 2011 Early Career Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions to Social Neuroscience from the Society for Social Neuroscience, among other honors.

Her research on attributions of responsibility to

groups (e.g., corporations) versus members of groups was published in the journal *Psychological Science* in 2012; she is also co-author of a study of moral judgments in adults with autism that was reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

**More information:** The study, "Moral Realism as Moral Motivation: The Impact of Meta-Ethics on Everyday Decision-Making," was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. It appears in the March 2013 print edition of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* and is available online at [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.11.013](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.11.013).

Provided by Boston College

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