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**Proscriptive versus Prescriptive Morality:**

**Two Faces of Moral Regulation**

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## Abstract

A distinction is made between two forms of morality based on approach-avoidance differences in self-regulation. Prescriptive morality is sensitive to positive outcomes, activation-based, and focused on what we *should* do. Proscriptive system is sensitive to negative outcomes, inhibition-based, and focused on what we *should not* do. Seven studies profile these two faces of morality, support their distinct motivational underpinnings, and provide evidence of moral asymmetry. Both are well-represented in our moral repertoire and equivalent in terms of moral weight, but proscriptive morality is condemnatory and strict, whereas prescriptive morality is commendatory and not strict. More specifically, in these studies proscriptive morality was perceived as concrete, mandatory, and duty-based, whereas prescriptive morality was more abstract, discretionary, and based in duty or desire; proscriptive immorality resulted in greater blame, whereas prescriptive morality resulted in greater moral credit. Implications for broader social regulation, including cross-cultural differences and political orientation, are discussed.

**Proscriptive versus Prescriptive Morality: Two Faces of Moral Regulation**

Reflecting our fundamental social interdependence, morality involves standards of conduct developed to coordinate and facilitate group living (DeWaal, 2006; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Haidt, 2008; Hauser, 2006, Krebs, 2008). As DeWaal (1996) notes, “Social inclusion is absolutely central to human morality, commonly cast in terms of how we should or should not behave in order to be valued members of society” (p. 10). For decades the psychology of morality focused on moral reasoning and specifically on rights, justice, and fairness, as represented in the work of Kohlberg (1981, 1984; also see, e.g., Turiel, 1983). Recently, however, this “main line” (Haidt, 2008) was joined by a second orientation, which recognizes the central role of affect and emotion and expands the moral domain to include other human concerns, including “purity, sanctity, and sin” (Krebs, 2008, p. 150). In particular, Shweder’s (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997) three moral “ethics”—autonomy, community, and divinity—and Haidt’s (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) five foundational categories of morality—harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity—have been ground-breaking in broadening our understanding of the moral domain. Thus morality facilitates social living by regulating not only fair and just social relations, but also personal behaviors that reflect self-interest and self-indulgence. Earlier distinctions between social convention and morality (Turiel, 1983) have blurred, as this more inclusive, historically and cross-culturally informed perspective has come to define morality and dominate research in moral psychology (Haidt, 2008, Hauser, 2006; Krebs, 2008).

The work presented here embraces this expanded perspective and seeks to further unpack the nature of morality by viewing it through the lens of motivation and self-

regulation. By applying and translating what we know about self-regulation and motivation from other areas of psychology, we hope to gain a better understanding of morality and moral regulation in particular.

We begin by distinguishing between two fundamental forms or constructions of morality, which we believe provide rudimentary support for investigating distinct modes of regulation. Consider our obligations “not to harm others” and “to help others.” At first glance these might seem synonymous; yet although both are socially desirable, not harming is not the same as helping, for surely we can refrain from harming others without helping them. We believe these differences are not simply semantic or trivial, but rather reflect two distinct types of moral regulation. Most simply, one is represented by what we *should* do, and the other by what we *should not* do. The former, which we label *prescriptive morality*, involves activating “good” behaviors to approach positive outcomes, whereas the latter, which we label *proscriptive morality* involves inhibiting “bad” behaviors to avoid negative outcomes.

### **Approach Versus Avoidance**

Work on self-regulation in diverse fields of psychology acknowledges the central role of distinct approach and avoidance systems in motivation. Early discussions include Thorndike’s (1911) Law of Effect regarding rewards and punishments, Pavlov’s (1927) distinction between reflexes oriented towards or away from stimuli, Tolman’s (1932) theory of drives based on appetites and aversions, and Miller’s (1959) investigation of approach-withdrawal learning processes. Contemporary perspectives on these two orientations essentially posit a dual system of self-regulation, alternatively framed in

terms of approach-avoidance, activation-inhibition, and appetitive-aversive motivation (for reviews, see Carver & Scheier, 2008, and Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003).

Carver (2006) summarizes theory and research on motivation by noting that these “two classes” of motivation have re-emerged in the past 20 years in a “family of theories with roots in neuropsychology, psychopathology, animal conditioning, and psychopharmacology. The theories of this family all include the idea that appetitive motivation and approach behavior are dealt with by what is termed a behavioral activation system....Aversive motivation and withdrawal or avoidance behavior are managed by a second system, usually called the behavioral inhibition system... These systems are believed to have partially distinct neural substrates and exert distinct influences on action” (p. 105).

A number of psychologists in the area of self-regulation and motivation have emphasized this dual regulatory system. Carver and colleagues (Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2008; Carver & White, 1994; Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000) differentiate between approach and avoidance systems and focus on the different feedback processes involved in each. Discrepancy-reducing loops, which characterize approach systems, act to reduce the discrepancy between a behavior (input) and a goal (reference value); in contrast, discrepancy-enlarging loops seek to avoid the reference value, which is a “a threat or an *anti-goal*” (Carver & Scheier, 2008, p. 309). Similarly, Higgins (1987, 1988) posits a dual-regulation system; a promotion orientation, based on needs for advancement, is focused on positive end-states, whereas a prevention orientation, based on needs for security, is focused on negative end-states.

Gray's (1982, 1990) work on motivation also emphasizes a dual system of regulation: the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS). Based on principles of conditioning, he distinguishes in particular between positive and negative reinforcers, rewards and punishments, and appetitive and aversive stimuli. He maintains that the BAS is an appetitive motivational system, associated with approach behaviors, whereas the BIS is an aversive motivational system, associated with avoidance behaviors. Support for distinct neural substrates underlying these two regulatory systems has been provided by Sutton and Davidson (1997), who have found that BIS and BAS are uniquely (and respectively) associated with activation in the right and left prefrontal cortex (also see Davidson, Ekman, & Saron, 1990).

Overall, work on these two regulatory systems suggests that there are two core characteristics that distinguish between approach and avoidance motivational systems: end-states and action tendencies (see Carver, 2006; Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2008). Approach regulation involves a *positive end-state* or goal, and the related action tendency is *activation*; thus approach motivation involves moving towards a desirable outcome. Avoidance regulation involves a *negative end-state* or "anti-goal," and the related action tendency is *inhibition*; thus avoidance motivation involves withdrawing from an undesirable goal.

This approach-avoidance distinction has proved instrumental in understanding diverse phenomena across psychology, from achievement (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997) to attention (e.g., Forster, Friedman, Ozelsel, & Denzler), and power (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003) to interpersonal relationships (Gable & Strachman, 2008).

Can the approach-avoidance motivational distinction inform the moral domain as well?

What are the implications of this dual-regulatory system for moral regulation?

### **Approach-Avoidance: Applications to Morality**

We believe there are two systems of moral regulation as well—a proscriptive system sensitive to *negative outcomes* (i.e., “anti-goals,” threats, punishments, and other undesirable end-states) and based in *behavioral inhibition*, and a prescriptive system sensitive to *positive outcomes* (i.e., “goals,” rewards, incentives, and other desirable end-states) and based in *behavioral activation*. Thus proscriptive regulation focuses on what we *should not* do—on refraining from immoral actions to avoid negative outcomes; prescriptive regulation focuses on what we *should* do—on engaging in moral actions to attain positive outcomes.

To date differences between approach and avoidance regulation have not been used to inform the moral domain. A focus on responsibility and obligation may readily lead to an emphasis on a single regulatory system for morality. Thus in Higgins’s (1997, 1998; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994) rich theory and research, a promotion focus involves self-regulation with regard to “ideals” (i.e., hopes and aspirations), and a prevention focus involves self-regulation with regard to “oughts” (i.e., duties and responsibilities). When viewed within the framework of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998), the moral domain, which clearly involves oughts and responsibilities, would seem to fall squarely within a prevention focus, and this would seem to be the case regardless of its prescriptive or proscriptive form. Helping a friend and not harming a friend are both moral “oughts” or obligations. Are they, then, both prevention-focused? Do they follow similar rules, or do they involve different regulatory systems?

Consistent with Higgins's prevention perspective, morality is all too readily viewed monolithically, as a conflict between duty and desire. No doubt in part the legacy of thinkers as diverse as Kant (1785) and Freud (1923), immorality is typically seen as having its source in desire, particularly in the temptation to engage in "undesirable" behaviors; and thus morality is apparent in efforts to overcome such temptations through force of will. This is the domain of proscriptive morality.

There is considerable work in psychology on prosocial behavior, particularly in the areas of child development (see, e.g., Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998, Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, Eisenberg, Spinrad, and Sadovsky, 2006) and social psychology (see, e.g., Batson, 1994; Batson, Ahmad, & Powell, 2008; Batson, Dyck, Brandt, Batson, Powell, & McMaster, 1988). However, although these positive behaviors also seem to reflect morality and moral regulation, this work essentially exists as a separate literature that has not been well-integrated with theory and research on morality. In exploring both proscriptive and prescriptive forms of morality, we hope to more broadly and inclusively map the moral domain by addressing instances of both activating the good and inhibiting the bad.

Interestingly, the importance of recognizing a distinction between moral rules that "prohibit harming others" and those that "enjoin one to help others" has recently been acknowledged in moral philosophy. Gert (2001, 2004) in particular notes that although philosophers have sometimes at least noticed a difference, the importance of the distinction "has not been sufficiently appreciated" (Gert, 2001, p. 1169).

Relatedly, to date there has been virtually no empirical work that specifically explores the question of single versus dual systems of moral regulation. A noteworthy

exception is recent research by Kochanska and colleagues (Aksan & Kochanska, 2005; Kochanska, 2002; Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001) on the early development of morality in children, which provides preliminary support for differentiating between two forms of moral self-regulation. These researchers have distinguished between “do’s” and “don’t’s” in early childhood, with the former involving activating and sustaining an activity (e.g., toy cleanups) and the latter involving prohibitions and suppressing behaviors (e.g., not playing with a forbidden attractive toy). Kochanska and colleagues (Aksan & Kochanska, 2005; Kochanska, 2002; Kochanska et al, 2001) found that during early childhood, compliance with prohibitions (don’ts) was higher, and do’s were more challenging for children at all ages studied (i.e., 14, 22, 33, and 45 months). Further, compliance was longitudinally stable within context (do’s or don’ts) but not across the two contexts. Kochanska et al. (2001) also found that fearfulness was positively associated with children’s success at refraining from prohibited behaviors (don’ts), but was not at all associated with measures of success in the domain of do’s. This latter finding is particularly interesting given that in a dual system of moral regulation, the inhibition-based system would be more sensitive to negative outcomes. Kochanska et al. (2001) conclude that their data provide “impressive evidence of substantial differences” between do’s and don’ts in early self-regulation.

In applying approach-avoidance motivation to morality, we can distinguish between different types of moral behaviors. Proscriptive morality entails avoidance motives--overcoming a negative desire and restraining a motivation to do something bad. Prescriptive morality involves approach motives--establishing a positive desire, overcoming inertia and activating a motivation to do something good. More specifically,

proscriptive morality is an omission (inhibition), whereas prescriptive morality is an act (activation). Conversely, proscriptive *immorality* is an act (failure to inhibit) and prescriptive *immorality* is an omission (failure to activate). Consistent with these differences, research has shown that those with a promotion focus feel worse about “sins” of omission, whereas those with a prevention focus feel worse about “sins” of commission (Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003).

Considering their differential focus on negative versus positive outcomes and their distinct action tendencies (i.e., inhibition versus activation), it follows that proscriptive and prescriptive morality involve different behavioral domains. Proscriptive morality includes the inhibition of harmful behaviors, including both physical harm and violation of others’ trust, as well as restraint of behaviors that are believed to violate valued group norms. This is also the domain of many of the popularized “seven deadly sins,” which involve excesses or indulgences that presumably call for self-control. Prescriptive morality involves those behaviors that help others by relieving their suffering or advancing their well-being. These include acts of benevolence, charity, and generosity. Prescriptive morality encompasses more than prosocial behaviors, however. It also includes behaviors that are popularly termed the “Protestant ethic”—industriousness, self-reliance, and hard-work; these involve motivational activation, action rather than inaction. Although in some cases the very same behaviors can be framed as both prescriptions and proscriptions, these are likely to be the exceptions rather than the rules. Thus “do not lie” and “tell the truth” may be essentially equivalent. Yet what is the prescriptive form of “do not steal,” or the proscriptive form of “volunteer your time” As will become apparent below, even when we attempt to behaviorally equate the two

morality, these framing differences take on the qualities of two different forms of moral regulation.<sup>1</sup>

We can readily distinguish between activation and inhibition, shoulds and should nots. These differences in restraint and positive action appear to reflect the distinct action tendencies characteristic of approach and avoidance regulatory systems. Of particular interest in attempting to apply approach and avoidance to the moral domain is the question of whether they entail different rules of regulation. In what ways might regulation of proscriptive and prescriptive morality differ?

### **The Negativity Bias and Moral Asymmetry**

In recognizing the positive versus negative end-states in approach-avoidance motivation, we can begin to postulate some differences that might be expected in the regulation of prescriptive and proscriptive morality. In particular, the avoidance-based focus on negative (versus positive) outcomes in proscriptive morality suggests a moral asymmetry—that is, that the proscriptive system is likely to be harsher and more demanding than the prescriptive system. This follows from the substantial work on the negativity bias found in psychology (for reviews, see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008; also see Taylor, 1991). Across multiple psychological domains, research has found that “bad” and “good” have differential impacts, with bad having a stronger effect than good. As Baumeister et al. (2001) note, “That is, events that are negatively valenced (e.g., losing money, being abandoned by friends, and receiving criticism) will have a greater impact on the individual than positively valenced events of the same type (e.g., winning money, gaining friends, and receiving praise)...When equal measures of good

and bad are present...the psychological effects of bad ones outweigh those of the good ones" (p. 323)." The greater power of undesirable, unpleasant, or harmful outcomes, as compared to desirable, pleasant, or beneficial outcomes is apparent in effects that are stronger, larger, and more consistent.

Explanations for the negativity bias generally emphasize the adaptiveness of vigilance to negative outcomes; organisms attuned to bad outcomes would be more likely to survive, because there are greater consequences of ignoring harmful, dangerous outcomes than positive outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Vaish, and the et al., 2008). Relatedly, Cacioppo & Berntson (1994) suggest that it is more difficult to reverse the consequences of a harmful or fatal event, and thus natural selection may help account for this asymmetry.

The negativity bias is clearly evident in work on motivation. Back in 1944, Miller noted that with regard to learning, the avoidance gradient is steeper than the approach gradient. More recently, Baumeister et al. (2001) reviewed research on the impact of reward and punishment on learning and conditioning and concluded that punishment of incorrect responses has consistently been found to be more effective than reward of correct responses, even when the objective magnitude of the reward and punishment are equal. Similarly, Cacioppo and colleagues (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997) maintain that with comparable degrees of activation, the negative motivational system is affected more than the positive motivational system, involving in part steeper slopes for responses to negative than positive stimuli. And Kahneman & Tversky's (1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991) work on loss aversion in prospect theory provides further evidence of the negativity bias in motivation, for their

research suggests that outcomes that are objectively equal are nevertheless subjectively regarded as unequal, with losses looming larger than gains. From a motivational perspective, there is considerable support for both “negative potency” and “negativity dominance” (Rozin and Royzman, 2001).

The pervasiveness and strength of the negativity bias would lead us to expect a similar asymmetry in the domain of moral motivation. The distinction we are drawing between proscriptive and prescriptive morality would appear to have implications for the motivational potency of each system. More specifically, given the proscriptive focus on negative outcomes and the prescriptive focus on positive outcomes, we would expect the proscriptive system to be the harsher, more demanding regulatory system. Recent work by Knobe and colleagues (Knobe, 2004; Leslie, Knobe, and Cohen, 2006) provides some support for such a negatively-biased moral asymmetry. They have found that negative side effects have a greater impact (and are seen as more intentional) than positive side effects in moral dilemmas, suggesting greater vigilance with regard to negative outcomes.

The approach-avoidance based distinctions that respectively underlie prescriptive and proscriptive morality suggest strong negative biases in moral regulation as well. In particular, the greater potency and dominance of negative consequences should be reflected in a stronger motivation to avoid “errors” in the proscriptive than prescriptive system, and therefore a greater demand to avoid bad, immoral behaviors than approach good, moral ones. Although we would expect people to highly value “doing good” and “not doing bad,” we nevertheless propose that proscriptive morality is nevertheless the more mandatory, stricter regulatory system; the prescriptive system is expected to be somewhat more discretionary. It follows that greater blame would be expected in the

case of proscriptive than prescriptive *immorality*, but greater credit for prescriptive than proscriptive morality. Figure 1 presents the two types of morality and the hypothesized asymmetries in moral regulation, one based on approach motives and the other on avoidance motives. Overall, we propose that proscriptive morality is a stricter, more condemnatory system of moral regulation.

### **Current Studies**

Our goal in this research was to begin to provide a profile of prescriptive and proscriptive morality by first exploring the applicability of approach versus avoidance motivation and then investigating the asymmetries that might be expected to follow from these two moral systems. Ultimately our aim is to more fully understand our moral sense and its regulation.

The seven studies that follow explored differences in responsiveness to a threat-based avoidance prime and a reward-based approach prime (Study 1), linguistic representations of proscriptive and prescriptive morality (Study 2), and associations with dispositional measures of behavioral inhibition and activation (Study 4) in order to assess the extent to which prescriptive and proscriptive morality represent a dual regulatory system based in approach and avoidance. The research further investigated possible moral asymmetries through assessments of “mandatoriness” versus personal preference (Studies 3 and 4) as well as attributed credit and blame (Studies 5, 6, and 7). Most generally, we expected to find support for avoidance-based motivational underpinnings of proscriptive morality and approach-based underpinnings of prescriptive morality, as well as for the stricter, more demanding nature of the proscriptive system. A more detailed treatment of hypotheses based on approach-avoidance differences and moral

asymmetry are presented with each study. We believe the differences between the two faces of morality have broader implications for social regulation, both in terms of cross-cultural differences and political orientations, and these will be addressed in the final discussion.

### **Study 1: Motivational Priming:**

#### **Threat-Based Avoidance versus Reward-Based Approach**

The goal of this first study was to determine whether priming approach versus avoidance would differentially impact the elicitation of prescriptive versus proscriptive moral responses respectively. If the two forms of morality reflect different forms of self-regulation, we would expect the presence of a possible negative outcome (i.e., threatening stimulus) as an avoidance cue to result in greater inhibition-based proscriptive morality, and the presence of a possible positive outcome (i.e., reward stimulus) as an approach cue to result in greater activation-based prescriptive morality. More specifically, would the proportion of proscriptive responses be greater following a threat-based avoidance prime, and the proportion of prescriptive responses greater following a reward-based approach prime?

#### Method

Participants. Participants were 94 (26 males, 68 females) undergraduates who received experimental credit. Six respondents were eliminated (see below), leaving a total of 29 in each of the threat and reward conditions and 30 in the control condition.

Procedure. We were interested in using a non-linguistic priming procedure and therefore turned to a set of mazes developed by Friedman & Forster (2001; see also Forster et al., 2006). In all cases the solutions entail getting a mouse to its home outside

the maze. In the approach prime condition, there is a piece of cheese beside the entrance to the mouse's home; in the avoidance prime condition, there is a large dark silhouette of an owl set above the maze. In the control condition there is neither reward nor threat. As Friedman & Forster (2005) suggest, "Completion of the 'cheese' maze has been posited to subtly activate an avoidance state by cuing the mental representation of 'seeking reward,' whereas completion of the 'owl' maze has been posited to activate an avoidance state by cuing the mental representation of 'avoiding threat'" (p. 71). These authors also note that the mazes activate approach and avoidance motivational systems without producing systematic differences in conscious emotional experience (Friedman & Forster, 2001).

Participants first completed one of the three mazes as a "brief distractor task." They were then given the following instructions:

"We each have our own ways of understanding right and wrong. We are interested in your views. What comes to mind when you think about what it means for people to be moral, ethical and good? When we think about morality, we are basically considering behaviors people should or should not engage in, ways people should or should not act, types of people we should or should not be. With this in mind, please complete the sentences below using *should* or *should not*. In other words, each sentence should begin 'To be moral, people *should*....' Or 'To be moral, people *should not*....' Please fill in as many lines as you can."

Ten lines were then provided, each beginning with the phrase, "To be moral, people...."

Six participants were removed from analyses; three didn't follow instructions and three provided only a single response; the latter were presumably highly unmotivated

respondents (only one line completed of 10) and yet would have had the most extreme scores (100% proscriptive or 100% prescriptive based on the single item). The number of “should” responses was summed to provide the prescriptive morality (PreM) total, and the number of “should not” responses was summed to provide the proscriptive morality (ProM) total.

### Results and Discussion

The approach, avoidance, and control groups did not differ in total number of responses given (overall  $M = 6.9$ ), but they did differ in the proportion of PreM and ProM responses,  $F(2,84) = 5.40$ ,  $p < .01$ . Post hoc comparisons found that the avoidance group differed from the approach and control conditions, which didn't differ from each other. The means for proportion of “should” (PreM) statements was .48 for the avoidance condition, but .57 and .59 for the approach and control conditions respectively.

Alternatively viewed in terms of “should not” (ProM), the avoidance condition mean was .52, and the approach and control conditions means were .43 and .41 respectively.

Both “shoulds” and “should not” were readily generated by participants, suggesting that both forms constitute what we naturally think of when considering morality. Overall, an avoidance prime increased participants' focus on proscriptive moral strategies, suggesting the sensitivity of this system to negative outcome cues. Significantly more “should not” were generated in the avoidance condition, despite the fact that the primes involved no linguistic cues. Prescriptive responses were not sensitive to the avoidance-based threat, but did not differ from the control condition in this study. The control maze, with its solution goal, might have been regarded as an incentive task in the absence of threat. Further, work by Cacioppo and colleagues (Cacioppo, Berntson,

1999; Cacioppo et al. 1997) suggests that neutral conditions will often look like approach conditions in research because of a positivity offset; that is, in the absence of any additional cues, there is likely to be an approach drive, which helps us learn about the environment and promotes social cohesion. Thus an approach motivation may function as the default motivation, suggesting it would often not differ from a control condition.

### **Study 2: Linguistic Coding**

In this second study we were interested in exploring the linguistic representations of prescriptive and proscriptive morality as a means of further investigating the extent to which they reflect approach and avoidance motivation respectively. Past research suggests that motivational differences are reflected in the concrete versus abstract nature of language (e.g., Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005). We would expect differences in linguistic representation if proscriptive and prescriptive morality involve different types of self-regulation. Specifically, an inhibition-based proscriptive morality would be particularly sensitive to avoiding mistakes, because of the threat of negative outcomes (e.g., punishment, disapproval, rejection). Proscriptive morality would therefore be expected to be most concrete, detailed and clearly defined; one must know specifically what not to do so as to avoid errors. An activation-based prescriptive morality would be most inclusive, so as to insure the greatest number of “hits” (and thereby positive outcomes, or rewards) and would thus be expected to be linguistically most abstract. Thus past research on language registers has found that people in a prevention focus use more concrete language, whereas those in a promotion focus use more abstract language (Semin et al., 2005).

In counting the “should” and “should not” responses in Study 1, we noticed the different language used by participants, particularly verbs (e.g., should not cheat, should help others) and adjectives (e.g., should not be dishonest, should be generous). Would these be differentially associated with prescriptive versus proscriptive morality? To address this question, we turned to Semin and Fielder’s (1988, 1989) linguistic four-level Linguistic Category Model, which differentiates between concrete and abstract terms, the former best represented by direct action verbs and the latter by adjectives. This model provided a means to investigate whether proscriptive morality is more concrete and prescriptive morality more abstract in terms of linguistic representation.

### Method

Participants. Eight-nine undergraduates (64 females and 25 males) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, participated in this study for experimental credit and were randomly assigned to one of two study conditions.

Procedure. Two brief questionnaires were distributed, differing in proscriptive morality (ProM) versus prescriptive morality (PreM) manipulations. Participants were informed that we were interested in morality (“Each of us has our own way of understanding right and wrong. We are interested in your views. What comes to mind when you think about how to be moral or not be immoral?”). PreM were asked to indicate what they *should* do if their goal is to be moral and not immoral, whereas ProM participants were asked what they *should not* do. Each group was then provided the phrase “*To be moral or not be immoral*” followed by 10 lines, each preceded by the stem “*I should*” (PreM condition) or “*I should not*” (ProM condition). Participants clearly provided their “should” and “should not” responses in the context of morality.

Coding Procedure. Two independent judges blind to the study hypotheses coded participants' responses (Cohen's  $k = .85$ ) in accordance with the linguistic category model (LCM) developed by Semin and Fiedler (1988). The four categories distinguished in this model, from most concrete to most abstract are: Descriptive-Action Verbs (DAV), Interpretive-Action Verbs (IAV), State Verbs (SV), and Adjectives (ADJ). As specified by LCM, an index of linguistic abstraction is calculated by first multiplying each category by an abstraction weighting (i.e., DAV multiplied by 1, IAV by 2, SV by 3, and ADJ by 4), combining these scores, and then dividing the sum by total number of linguistic responses. Abstraction scores have a possible range of 1 to 4 (Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Coding in the moral domain raises some interesting issues regarding the LCM. In particular, Semin & Fiedler (1989) specify that both DAV and IAV are actions with clear beginnings and ends, but DAV terms “generally do not have positive or negative connotations,” whereas IAV terms do. In the domain of morality, essentially all linguistic verbs (and adjectives) have positive or negative connotations—this is intrinsic to the domain of right and wrong, good and bad. Based on the Semin and Fiedler (1989) coding, the DAV category would drop out and three codes would remain. However, in coding the data, it immediately became clear that there were some (non-state) verbs that were more concrete than others. Thus, “help” and “hurt” were verbs that arose frequently and were clearly IAV's. However, “steal,” “volunteer time,” “lie,” “cheat on partner,” “listen to parents,” “attend church” were examples of more concrete verbs. We therefore took these differences into account and first categorized all responses using a four-category coding scheme, categorizing the latter responses as DAV's. In addition, we then

dropped the DAV category and recoded these responses as IAV's to create a three-category coding scheme. The same significant findings emerged in both cases, and thus the more detailed 4-category findings are presented below.

### Results and Discussion

“Should” (PreM) responses received significantly higher linguistic abstraction scores than “should not” (ProM) responses; means for PreM and ProM were 2.56 and 1.65 respectively,  $t(87) = 6.89$ ,  $p < .001$ .<sup>2</sup> Overall the conditions differed in total number of responses provided, with participants in the ProM condition listing more responses than those in the PreM condition,  $t(87) = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M$ 's = 7.64 and 6.49. A closer look at the proportion of responses across the coding categories indicated that the linguistic differences between the PreM and ProM conditions were significant and most apparent at the category extremes. As shown in Figure 1, in the ProM condition, the proportion of DAVs was considerably greater than the proportion of adjectives,  $t(49) = 9.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M$ 's = .59 and .09; in the PreM condition, the proportion of adjectives was greater than the proportion of DAV's,  $t(38) = 2.18$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $M$ 's = .31 and .15 respectively.

These differences were evident in participants' responses; in completing the “I should not” (ProM) stem, the most common items were “lie,” “hurt others,” “cheat,” and “steal.” In contrast, in completing the “I should” (PreM) stem, the most common responses were “be honest,” “help others,” “be kind/considerate” and “respect others.” Other ProM responses mentioned by a number of participants included: kill, sleep around, discriminate, be aggressive/violent, and drink too much. Other PreM responses

mentioned by a number of participants included: be generous, donate to charity, be caring/compassionate, work hard, and stand up for others.

It appears that linguistic representations of proscriptive and prescriptive morality respectively reflect regulatory differences based on approach and avoidance. Proscriptive morality, with its lower abstractness score, appears most apt to be represented by verbs that specify particular behaviors to be avoided. Prescriptive morality, in contrast, is represented more generally in terms of broader categories of behavior reflected in adjectives. The threat of an error is greater in the case of proscriptive morality, and thus specificity is required in terms of actions to be inhibited. Prescriptive morality, with minimal danger of misses and the promise of reward for hits, can function more generally as a guide or directive.

The concrete-abstract differences between the two types of moral regulation also suggest possible differences in psychological distance, as discussed by Trope & Liberman (2003; see also Eyal, Trope, Liberman, & Walther, 2004) EyalLiberman & Trope, 1998; also see ) in their work on construal level theory. They have found that psychologically more distant events—including more temporally distant events—are represented at higher, more abstract levels, with less concrete detail. Proscriptive morality, involving more concrete, lower level construals, seems to demand attention in the present or near (versus distant) future; it appears that prescriptive morality can be treated more abstractly, with greater psychological distance and less urgency.

Interestingly, these concrete-abstract distinctions may underlie debates in moral philosophy on the centrality of duties versus virtues (see Sterba, 1988; also see Kant, 1964/1785, and Aristotle, 1989/350BC), which we believe may in part reflect differences

in emphasis on proscriptive versus prescriptive morality. Discussions of morality from the perspective of duties focus primarily on specific moral acts and linguistically rely on verbs (i.e., whether a person did or did not engage in particular behaviors); Kant, (1784/1785) in particular, is associated with this duty-based view of morality. From the perspective of virtues, which focus on moral traits or character, we typically rely linguistically on adjectives (e.g., whether a person is benevolent or just); thus Aristotle (384/322BC) emphasizes that the virtues are the font of right action. As such, duties may be more apt to lie in the realm of proscriptive morality, with its sensitivity to negative outcomes, and virtues in the realm of prescriptive morality, with its emphasis on positive outcomes. These differences are apparent in the linguistic representations that seem to characterize each domain.

### **Study 3: Moral Judgments and Perceived Personal Preference**

The proscriptive moral emphasis on concrete behaviors provides relatively specific information about how to behave, or more accurately, how not to behave—that is, transgressions to avoid. The prescriptive emphasis on abstract behaviors provides more general (as opposed to specific) guidance about morality. Returning to predictions based on the negativity bias in psychology and the potency of negative motivation, if the proscriptive system is harsher than the prescriptive system, and should nots are more mandatory than shoulds, these concrete-abstract differences are precisely what one would expect: clearer, more specific information regarding those behaviors that are most apt to produce negative outcomes. In this study and the next, the greater potency of the proscriptive system is directly explored, for the perceived mandatory versus discretionary nature of proscriptive and prescriptive morality are specifically addressed.

Morality is often equated with universality, whereby people believe a behavior should be applied universally (see, e.g., Gewirth, 1978; Hare, 1981; Kant, 1964/1785). Although people may believe that everyone should be subject to the same obligations and rules, this does not address the question of the “mandatory” nature of morality, which was a key element of the Kantian equation as well (i.e., moral laws are universal commands that “must” be obeyed; Kant, 1964/1785). Relatedly, Turiel (1983) specifically differentiated between three types of social knowledge--personal preferences, social conventions, and morality--and argued that morality is the opposite of personal preference; in other words, morality is mandatory and specifically does not involve personal choice. Recent work by Shweder (Shweder et al., 1997) and Haidt (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) has served to seriously challenge past categories (also see Krebs, 2008). Within this broadened perspective, the distinction between proscriptive and prescriptive morality raises questions about the blanket mandatory conception of morality as well.

Consistent with the differences in abstraction found above, as well as the hypothesized differences in strictness of the two regulatory systems, we hypothesized that prescriptive morality would be regarded as less mandatory and more subject to personal preference than proscriptive morality, which calls for stricter adherence in the face of negative outcomes. In this study we were interested in two distinct judgments: 1) the extent to which we believe people should or should not engage in a particular behavior or disposition, and 2) the extent to which we believe this decision is a matter of personal preference or choice. We labeled the former “moral weight,” an indication of participants’ belief about the “rightness” and “wrongness” of behaviors, and

distinguished it from perceived personal preference. These two evaluations have not been differentiated in the past, no doubt largely because people have assumed that greater moral weight would be associated with lower perceptions of personal preference or choice. Whether this is the case, however, is an empirical question, one which we hoped to begin to address in this research.

For this study we drew from the responses provided by participants in Studies 1 and 2 to create a list representing moral “shoulds” (PreM) and “should nots” (ProM). For each “should” item, we attempted to generate a “should not” item that was as close as possible in meaning. Thus an easy case was “lie” and “be honest.” A more difficult instance was “steal,” for which we generated “trustworthy.” In order to control for linguistic differences, we included an equal number of verbs and adjectives in both lists (see below). Given that the list reflected the activities and dispositions deemed important to earlier study participants, we believed that both the proscriptive and prescriptive items would be seen as morally weighty. To what extent, if any, would this judgment and perceived personal preference differ for proscriptive and prescriptive morality? And would proscriptions, as hypothesized, be regarded as more mandatory than prescriptions?

### Method

Participants. A total of 72 undergraduates (72 males, 45 females) participated in the study for experimental credit.

Measures. A 28-item scale was created from the responses provided in Studies 1 and 2. Negative and positive forms of a previously provided behavior or disposition were generated; in some cases, one or the other was provided by respondents, whereas in many others only one side had been provided. Given the results of Study 2, care was taken to

control for verbs and adjectives in each list, such that there were seven verb phrases and seven adjective phrases for both proscriptions and prescriptions. The final 14 ProM items were: lie, sleep around, steal, be selfish, harm others intentionally, discriminate against others, drink to excess, be lazy, be manipulative, be wasteful, cheat, be mean, be aggressive/violent, be conceited; and the 14 PreM items were: be kind/considerate, admit mistakes, donate to charity, save money, be honest, be loyal/faithful, work hard, treat others fairly, stand up for others, be generous, help others in need, be respectful of others, be caring/compassionate, be trustworthy.

After reading a brief explanation (“Some behaviors are ‘up to you’—a matter of personal preference, like choosing a flavor of ice cream. Others are less likely to be matters of personal preference...”), participants rated the extent to which the item listed is a matter of personal preference, from 1 = “not at all a matter of personal preference” to 9 = “completely a matter of personal preference.” Following this task, participants rated the extent to which they believe a person “*should* or *should not* do each of the following,” with 1 = “feel very strongly a person should not” to 9 = “feel very strongly a person should.” The reliabilities for PreM-Preference and ProM-Preference ratings were .92 and .89, and for the the PreM-Weight and ProM-Weight ratings they were .84 and .78.

### Results and Discussion

In order to render the Moral Weight judgments (i.e., “shoulds” and “should nots”) equivalent for statistical comparisons, scores on the ProM-weight items were subtracted from 10. The Personal Preference ratings were directly comparable and did not require this calculation. Analyses were 2 x 2 ANOVAs, with repeated measures on the PreM-ProM and verb-adjective factors. For the Personal Preference ratings, analyses revealed a

main effect for PreM-ProM,  $F(1,71) = 11.15$ ,  $p < .005$ , with “should” (PreM) items rated higher than “should not” (ProM) items ( $M$ 's = 6.52 vs. 6.09, respectively). There was no main effect or interaction for part of speech (adjective or verb).

Regarding Moral Weight ratings, there was no main effect for PreM-ProM ( $F[1, 71] = .505$ , n.s.,  $M$ 's = 7.38 vs. 7.45); that is, overall the “should” ratings for the PreM items were equivalent to the “should not” ratings of ProM items. There was a main effect for part of speech (with adjectives receiving ratings of greater moral weight than verbs,  $F[1, 71] = 5.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ), but this was qualified by an interaction between PreM-ProM and part of speech,  $F(1, 71) = 65.65$ ,  $p < .001$ , which can be seen in Figure 2. PreM items were accorded greater Moral Weight when they were adjectives ( $M$ 's 7.75 vs. 7.17,  $t[71] = 7.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas ProM items were given greater Moral Weight when they were verbs ( $M$ 's, 7.54 vs. 7.20,  $t[71] = 4.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Although this finding could be attributable to the specific items used in this study, it is nevertheless interesting for its support of the linguistic results of Study 2. It appears that prescriptive morality is perceived as more more morally weighty (rated higher on “should”) when framed as adjectives, whereas proscriptive morality is perceived as more morally weighty (rated higher on “should not”) when framed as verbs.

Judgments of personal preference differed for proscriptive and prescriptive morality; as predicted, PreM was regarded as more a matter of personal preference than ProM. This perception of PreM as less mandatory and more discretionary arose in spite of the lack of overall difference in moral weight between the two systems. Participants felt it was equally important, overall, to engage in each—they indicated people *should* do “good things” and *should not* do “bad things” to the same extent—and yet they

nevertheless accorded greater freedom to prescriptive behaviors. In this sense the latter appear to be a combination of “oughts” and “ideals” in Higgins’s (1997, 1998) regulatory focus theory: oughts in the sense of responsibilities regarded as shoulds, but nevertheless somewhat akin to ideals in the sense of behaviors to strive for rather than deemed mandatory (see also, in the domain of moral philosophy, Gert, 2004, on “moral ideals,” Pincoffs, 1986, on “non-mandatory virtues,” and Heyd, 1982, e.g., on supererogation). Prescriptive morality does not seem to fall neatly into the classic moral categories of “obligation,” “permission,” and “prohibition,” but rather appears to function as a crucial guide for morality that should be acted upon, with the recognition that this may not be possible in all cases and therefore requires personal choice and discretion.

The finding that prescriptive morality is perceived as more discretionary helps inform the additional finding that prescriptive dispositions (i.e., adjectives) are regarded as more morally weighty than behaviors, whereas proscriptive behaviors (i.e., verbs) are regarded as more morally weighty than dispositions. The more demanding nature of self-regulation in the proscriptive domain suggests greater monitoring for “bad” behavior, which reflects a lack of appropriate inhibition. In contrast, the more discretionary nature of prescriptive morality suggests the importance of dispositional morality in this domain (i.e., generous, fair, kind, respectful), for such people would be most apt to moral choices in a society. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that prescriptive adjectives were rated as more morally weighty than prescriptive verbs, whereas the opposite held true for proscriptive morality. The greater moral weight of verbs in the proscriptive domain is consistent with the more demanding nature of the proscriptive system supports; morality

here involves avoidance of specific behaviors, which are linguistically represented as verbs.

#### **Study 4: Moral Weight, Personal Preference, and Individual Differences in Activation and Inhibition**

In Study 3, proscriptive morality was perceived as more mandatory and less discretionary than prescriptive morality. It appears that when thinking about moral conduct, participants perceived proscriptive behaviors as closer to “perfect duties” than they did prescriptive behaviors. Perfect duties constitute the Categorical Imperative, and according to Kant are absolute and never to be disobeyed (see Kant, 1964/1785; also see Trafimow & Trafimow, 1999). Many of the items generated would be considered perfect duties using the Kantian framework (e.g., not cheating, stealing; being honest). In Study 3, the prescriptions and proscriptions were generated by the participants themselves (in Studies 1 and 2). It is possible that more “perfect duties” were naturally generated for the proscriptive than prescriptive domain; although differences in moral weight might have been expected in this case (but were not found), personal preference differences consistent with such a pattern did emerge. To what extent were the results of Study 3 a function of these self-generated items?

We were interested in determining whether the same differences in perceived personal preference would arise if the stimulus materials were imperfect duties (i.e., not clearly required) in both the proscriptive and prescriptive domains. Further, although there are many ways of both harming others and helping others, it appears that prescriptive morality in the above studies was perceived as more open-ended. We therefore wanted to control for specificity of the stimulus behaviors, such that a readily

doable, specific instance of “good” or “bad” behavior was assessed in each case. We therefore moved away from general prescriptions and proscriptions and stripped-down words to particular, contextualized behavioral scenarios, which would control for any differences in abstraction or construal level (see Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004; Semin et al., 2005; Trope & Liberman, 2003). We sought to create a scale that tapped proscriptive and prescriptive behaviors that were concrete and specific, yet also varied and open to debate regarding their moral force or necessity. With this very different set of behaviors, we again examined perceptions of moral weight and personal preference. Would proscriptions still be judged as more mandatory and prescriptions as more discretionary?

This fourth study provided the opportunity not only to investigate the harshness of the two systems in terms of mandatory-discretionary judgments, but also to further explore the approach-avoidance bases of the moral regulation via the addition of individual differences measures: Carver and White’s (1994) Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) scales. Carver and White devised these scales to assess the sensitivity or strength of respondents’ approach and avoidance systems, representing a differential focus on the pursuit of incentives and positive outcomes versus the possibility of threats and negative outcomes. Regarding use of these scales, Carver (2006) writes, “The application that is of greatest interest to me, however, is the use of these individual differences to investigate whether a given phenomenon pertains to approach or avoidance” (p. 107). This is the question that interested us as well. Would BIS scores be positively associated with responses to the proscriptive items of the

scale and BAS with the prescriptive items, suggesting avoidance-based motives for proscriptive morality and approach-based motives for prescriptive morality?

### Method

Participants. A total of 173 undergraduates (67 women and 106 men) participated in the study for extra course credit.

Procedure. Participants first completed Carver and White's (1994) 13-item BAS and 7-item BIS scales. A sample BAS item is "When I want something, I usually go all-out to get it"; a sample BIS item is "Criticism or scolding hurts me quite a bit." Participants indicated their extent of agreement on 4-point scales (1 = "strongly disagree" and 4 = "strongly agree"). Participants then completed the 20-item Moralisms Scale and a few standard demographic items.

Moralisms Scale. Following considerable pre-testing of numerous items, a 20-item measure was developed for this study, with 10 PreM and 10 ProM items. Each item consisted of a scenario in which the target person is deciding whether or not to engage in a particular behavior. In the case of the PreM items, these were behaviors the person presumably should engage in to be considered moral, whereas in the case of ProM items, these were behaviors the person presumably should not engage in to be considered moral. ProM scenarios represented behaviors involving personal temptations or behaviors that indicated a desire or willingness to disregard social norms. Scale items were informed by the work of Haidt (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004) and Shweder (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997) in broadening the traditional focus of morality (also see Krebs, 2008). Examples included "excessive" gambling, wearing a skimpy dress to a funeral, painting a house bright pink and purple in a modest, well-kept

neighborhood, and going into greater debt to purchase an expensive TV. As a specific example, the latter debt scenario was written as follows: “Sarah is getting more and more into debt with her credit card. She recently bought lots of expensive new clothes and costly furniture for her apartment. She could start saving her money but instead is thinking of buying a very expensive hi-definition TV and going into greater debt.” This instance was intended to draw on moral motives associated with restraint from temptation and self-indulgence.

PreM items represented behaviors involving benevolence or industriousness, and included volunteering two hours for a local food drive, working especially long and hard to meet a deadline for one’s job, going out to find one’s own place after staying with a friend for many weeks in her small apartment, and giving money to a homeless person on the street. The latter scenario, for example, was written as follows: “Mary walks by a homeless man on the street, and he asks if she can spare some change. There’s a local shelter that costs \$2.00 a night that Mary knows about. Mary could just walk past the homeless man, but considers giving him the \$2.00 instead.”

In each case, participants were presented with a target person who was considering a particular behavior (a “good” behavior in the case of PreM, and a “bad” behavior in the case of ProM) and were asked to rate the extent to which they viewed the decision to be a matter of personal preference (1 = “not at all a matter of personal preference” and 9 = “completely a matter of personal preference”) and the extent to which they believed the person in the scenario should or should not perform the behavior (1 = “feel very strongly he/she should not” to 9 = “feel very strongly he/she should”).

The reliabilities for PreM and ProM Personal Preference ratings were .82 and .76, and for the PreM and ProM Moral Weight ratings they were .68 and .76.

### Results and Discussion

Although the Personal Preference scores for the PreM and ProM items were comparable for analyses, as in Study 3 the Moral Weight scores (should versus should not) were not. To render them comparable, the ProM-Weight scores items were once again subtracted from 10. The Moral Weight scores did not differ for the PreM and ProM scale items; participants indicated that people *should* engage in the prescriptive moral behaviors to the same extent people *should not* engage in the proscriptive behaviors ( $M's = 6.83$  and  $6.94$  respectively,  $t(172) = 1.07$ , n.s.). Nevertheless, participants again regarded PreM behaviors as more discretionary than ProM behaviors,  $M's = 6.85$  and  $6.17$  respectively,  $t(172) = 6.52$ ,  $p < .001$ . Proscriptive system was again perceived as more demanding, in line with predictions based on the negativity bias and the greater potency of negative motivation.

Means for the BIS and SAS scales were 2.86 and 3.14 respectively, and scores on these scales were negatively correlated,  $r(173) = -.17$ ,  $p < .05$ . More interesting, however, were the associations between the BIS and BAS and the two types of morality. As shown in Table 1, BIS and BAS were not correlated with Personal Preference scores for either ProM or PreM items. Regardless of their scores on the BIS/BAS scales, participants judged PreM behaviors as more discretionary. However, BIS scores were significantly associated with the extent to which participants believed people *should not* engage in proscriptive behaviors (ProM Moral Weight), whereas BAS scores were significantly associated with the extent to which participants believed people *should* engage in

proscriptive behaviors (PreM Moral Weight). BIS scores were uncorrelated with Moral Weight for PreM items, and BAS scores were uncorrelated with Moral Weight for ProM items.

This study's findings provide support for a dual-regulation approach to understanding proscriptive and prescriptive morality. Those participants with a strong avoidance orientation, with its increased sensitivity to negative outcomes, ascribed more moral weight to proscriptive morality; they seemed particularly attuned to the significance of "should not's" in the moral realm. In contrast, those with a strong approach orientation, with its increased sensitivity to positive outcomes, ascribed more moral weight to prescriptive morality and the importance of "shoulds." Interestingly, however, these individual differences were not associated with judgments of personal preference and choice. Across all participants, regardless of BIS and BAS score, prescriptive moral behaviors were regarded as more discretionary than proscriptive behaviors, and this was the case even for the specific "imperfect" duties represented in both instances and seen as equivalent in terms of moral weight.

### **Study 5: Moral Disapproval**

The findings regarding moral weight in the above two studies indicate that participants equally valued proscriptive morality—behaviors we should not engage in—and prescriptive morality—behaviors we should engage in—when considering the elements of our moral repertoire. Although proscriptive morality is represented by the inhibition of behavior (i.e., omissions) and prescriptive morality by the activation of behavior (i.e., commissions), both were regarded as equally weighty in the moral realm; there appears to be no omission or commission "bias" in terms of our perceptions of the

“rightness” and “wrongness” of these two types of morality. To be morally valued members of society, presumably we must both inhibit the bad and activate the good.

Yet the way we regulate proscriptive and prescriptive morality is apt to differ, given the approach versus avoidance-based nature of the two systems. The predicted greater harshness of proscriptive moral regulation suggests not only the more mandatory nature of proscriptions, as found in Studies 3 and 4, but relatedly, greater blame in the case of transgressions. The proscriptive system is one that is particularly sensitive to negative outcomes, including social disapproval, rejection, and blame. The prescriptive system, in contrast, is particularly sensitive to positive outcomes, including social approval, credit, and rewards. Thus the negative focus of avoidance-based proscriptive morality compared to approach-based prescriptive morality, suggests greater consequences for proscriptive *immorality*, in the form of blame and disapproval, and greater consequences for prescriptive morality, in the form of credit and approval. This study focused on ascriptions of moral blame and disapproval; the two studies that follow focused on moral credit and approval.

The stricter requirements of the proscriptive system no doubt are likely both to reflect and produce greater blame for proscriptive versus prescriptive transgressions. We are presumably more apt to ascribe blame for non-compliance with more mandatory (versus more discretionary) moral rules. In addition, however, it is likely that the greater likelihood of blame in this avoidance-based regulatory system will also render proscriptions more mandatory. The more mandatory nature of this system and a more condemnatory social reaction would seem to be interrelated characteristics of proscriptive morality. Is blame, then, greater for proscriptive than prescriptive immorality?

## Method

Participants. Participants were 179 undergraduates (96 females, 83 males) who received experimental credit and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions.

Moralisms Scenarios. The 20-item Moralisms Scale (see Study 4) was used in this study, but the second part of the scenarios was altered so now the target was no longer considering whether to engage in a particular behavior, but rather actually behaved in an “immoral” way—he or she engaged in the negative behavior for the ProM items and failed to engage in the positive behavior for the PreM items. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they approved or disapproved of the target’s behavior (e.g., “Mary walking past the homeless man” or “Sarah buying the TV and going into greater debt”). Ratings were made on 9-point scales with endpoints 1 = “very strongly disapprove” and 9 = “very strongly approve.” Reliabilities for the prescriptive and proscriptive items were .76 and .73 respectively.

## Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants indicated greater disapproval (indicated by lower scores on the scale) of ProM than PreM behaviors,  $t(178) = 12.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M$ 's = 3.55 and 4.36. Thus, despite the equivalence of the scenario behaviors in terms of “should” and “should not” (Study 4), participants were clearly more disapproving when people actually engaged in the proscribed actions.

The prescriptive system, focused on negative outcomes, is concerned with harm-doing and harm-avoidance, and ascriptions of blame are greater here than in the prescriptive system, which is focused on the presence or absence of positive outcomes. This distinction can help inform the “omission bias” in psychology, the finding that

greater blame is attributed for harmful acts (commissions) than omissions. (see, e.g., Haidt & Baron, 1996; Ritov & Baron, 1999; Spranca, Minsk & Baron, 1991; for a review, see Baron & Ritov, 2004). Recent research has challenged the generality of the bias and suggests that the phenomenon may be less robust than initially believed (e.g., Connolly & Reb, 2003; Patt & Zeckhauser, 2000; Tanner & Medin, 2004). Yet the nature of the bias can be understood when we look more closely at the research in support of the effect and realize that in comparing omissions and commissions, researchers have been investigating differences between the prescriptive and proscriptive regulatory systems. In particular, researchers have taken the same outcome and have assessed blame ascriptions in the case of producing harm, a proscriptive transgression, versus not helping (and thereby not mitigating harm), a prescriptive transgression.

This is the difference between physically hurting someone and not relieving another's suffering; or in the case of selling someone an automobile that is known to be a lemon, between lying to the buyer (proscriptive commission) and not telling the buyer about the car's problems (prescriptive omission). The omission bias represents the finding that the proscriptive commission is perceived as more blameworthy than the prescriptive commission (Baron & Ritov, 2004; Haidt & Baron, 1996; Ritov & Baron, 1999; Spranca, Minsk & Baron, 1991). Yet the omissions are not instances of direct harm, for they derive from the prescriptive system, which is about helping or not helping rather than harming or not harming. This is the issue raised at the beginning of this paper and underlying the need to consider two distinct systems of moral regulation: not helping is not the same as hurting, and harm is not equivalent to an absence of good. Providing false information (i.e., lying) is not equivalent to failing to provide help in the form of

information; physically hurting is not equivalent to failing to provide relief from suffering. The omission bias research has relied upon such differences, and thus support for the bias may derive from the nature of proscriptive versus prescriptive morality.

When assessing harm, it is the proscriptive system that is most directly implicated, for morality here specifically involves the inhibition of “bad” behaviors. When assessing moral credit, on the other hand, it is the prescriptive system that is most directly implicated, for morality here specifically involves the activation of “good” behaviors. It is to the ascription of credit and approval that we turned in the next two studies.

### **Study 6: Moral Credit: Duty versus Desire**

Studies 6 and 7 examined the other side of moral judgments—approval for moral behavior rather disapproval for immoral behavior. Are we deemed more moral for engaging in positive behaviors or inhibiting negative behaviors? The focus of approach-based prescriptive morality compared to avoidance-based proscriptive morality suggests greater positive consequences--specifically greater moral credit and approval—for the former. Do we get more moral credit following prescriptive morality than proscriptive morality?

In this research we were also interested in investigating the role of “inclination” or desire in fostering or discounting perceptions of morality. Kant (1964/1785), for example, argued essentially that morality does not involve inclinations; that is, we don’t get moral credit if we actually wanted to engage in the behavior in question. We were interested in whether people are judged differently if they engage in actions or restraint because of “duty” versus “desire,” reflecting the distinction drawn by self-determination theorists between controlled and autonomous behaviors (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985). Do

these autonomous versus controlled motivations play a role in our perceptions of morality? And do they operate differently in the case of proscriptive versus prescriptive morality?

The potential importance of these motivations arose for the first author when reading a *New York Times* interview with a past political figure. His moral views were shaped by his beliefs in original sin, and during the course of the interview he remarked on his absence of drinking, smoking, and other “indulgences.” It was apparent that by viewing himself as a “sinner” who must battle human temptations, he believed he was worthy of moral credit and approbation for his behavior, or perhaps it only seemed so to this reader. Our intent, however, was not to question his respect-worthy behavior or sense of morality. Rather, we became interested in whether moral credit and approbation would be given to people who don’t smoke, drink or engage in other “indulgences” because they simply don’t want to—in other words, because they aren’t tempted to do otherwise. And in moving from the domain of proscriptive to prescriptive behavior, would the reverse be expected as well? That is, in the case of prescriptive behaviors, would people be perceived as more moral when they engaged in moral acts because they wanted to rather than because they felt they should—out of desire rather than duty?

Although “duty” might be regarded as admirable in both systems, *wanting* to engage in a good act or to refrain from a bad act might not be similarly valued. Given the stricter, harsher proscriptive system, which is more likely to engender blame and disapproval (Study 5), the bar for moral credit might be considerably higher than the bar for the prescriptive system; following one’s “inclination” might simply be too easy to warrant credit. This investigation into the role of duty versus desire was largely exploratory. If the basis for ascriptions of moral approval differed across the two

domains, there would be further support for differences in moral regulatory strategies underlying proscriptive and prescriptive morality.

### Method

Participants. A total of 178 UMass undergraduates (126 females and 52 males) participated in this study and received experimental credit.

Moralisms Scenarios. The 20-item Moralisms Scale was used, but now the second part was altered so that the target's behavior reflected doing the moral thing. For PreM, the person engaged in the positive behaviors (i.e., acts), whereas for ProM, the person did not engage in negative behaviors (i.e., omissions). In addition to the 10 PreM and 10 ProM scenarios, a within-subjects factor, there was an additional between-subjects factor, Motivation, represented by three different underlying motivations for "doing the moral thing." These were labeled the Desire, Duty, and Neutral conditions.

In the Desire condition, the target recognizes she could do otherwise, but does the right thing because she wants to (e.g., second part of homeless scenario: "Mary knows she could just walk past the homeless man, but wants to give him the money and hands him \$2.00"; second part of "losing streak" gambling scenario: "Brian just got his paycheck and knows he could gamble, but decides he doesn't want to go to the track"). In the Duty condition there is a recognition that the person would like to do otherwise, but does the right thing because he feels he should (e.g., "Mary would like to walk past the homeless man, but feels she should give him the money and hands him \$2.00"; "Brian just got his paycheck and would like to gamble, but decides he shouldn't go to the track"). Consistent with the differences between prescriptive and proscriptive morality, in the ProM condition the "attractive" alternative is a tempting negative behavior,

whereas in the PreM condition it is a desire not to be put out or troubled (i.e., to maintain things as they are). A third condition was also added; in the Neutral condition, the target also does the right thing because she feels she should, but there is no wish to do otherwise, simply a recognition that one could ; there is neither a desire or an explicit sense of duty. This was a combination of the first phrase from the Desire scenarios and the second phrase from the Duty scenarios.

Participants read that we were interested in the extent to which they regard each person as “moral, ethical, and good” and were asked to provide their perception of each person on a 9-point scale with endpoints 1 = “not at all moral” and 9 = “extremely moral.” Across all motivational conditions, reliabilities for the PreM and ProM scales were .82 and .78 respectively.

### Results and Discussion

A 2 x 3 (PreM/ProM x Desire, Duty, Neutral) repeated measures ANOVA revealed a strong main effect for type morality,  $F(1,171) = 427.25, p < .001$ , with PreM resulting in greater perceptions of morality than ProM ( $M$ 's = 6.76 and 5.36). As expected, engaging in positive behaviors (i.e., prescriptive morality) clearly produced more moral perceptions of the target than refraining from negative behaviors (i.e., proscriptive morality). There was also a main effect for Motivation,  $F(2,171) = 3.87, p < .05$ . Post hoc analyses indicated that the motivation effect was attributable to the overall lower scores in the Neutral condition.

For exploratory purposes (followed up in Study 7), we examined the impact of perceived motivation on reactions to the PreM and ProM separately, with an eye to looking more closely at any differences between the Duty and Desire conditions. A

oneway ANOVA for the ProM items was significant,  $F(2, 171) = 3.27, p < .05$ , and post hoc analyses indicated the Duty condition ( $M = 5.63$ ) was seen as more moral than the Desire ( $M = 5.27$ ) and Neutral ( $M = 5.18$ ) conditions. A oneway ANOVA for the PreM condition was also significant,  $F(2, 171) = 3.77, p < .05$ , and post hoc analyses indicated that the Duty ( $M = 6.84$ ) and Desire ( $M = 6.94$ ) conditions did not differ, but both were rated as more moral than the Neutral condition ( $M = 6.50$ ).

As would be expected from a system focused on positive outcomes, prescriptive morality produced more moral credit than proscriptive morality. And this is in spite of the finding (Study 4) that the behaviors involved were regarded as equally worthy of being activated (shoulds) or inhibited (should nots). Across the scenarios, the Neutral motivation condition was regarded as least moral; engaging in a behavior because one should, but without a temptation to do otherwise, was regarded overall as least worthy of moral credit.

Yet the amount of credit ascribed to targets may in part depend on perceptions of their motivation. Thus exploratory analyses found a difference between the Duty and Desire conditions in the realm of proscriptive morality, with Duty receiving greater moral credit. The perception of overcoming temptation may be particularly important in this domain; people who refrain from “indulging” because they simply do not want to engage in the behaviors may not be credited for their proscriptive morality. Wanting to do the right thing may earn a person less moral approval in the realm of proscriptive morality, but not in the case of prescriptive morality; it appears that Kant’s insights about the discounting effects of inclination may apply to proscriptive morality, but not prescriptive morality. This possibility was followed up in Study 7.

### Study 7: Moral Credit II

This study was a replication and extension of Study 6, in that the focus was the difference in prescriptive versus proscriptive attributions of morality. The role of perceived duty versus desire within each domain was again investigated, although in this case as a forced-choice decision regarding the more moral person. We were interested in further exploring whether wanting to do the right thing partially discounted morality in the stricter, more demanding proscriptive domain, and whether it would afford more credit in the approach-based prescriptive sphere of morality.

#### Method

Participants. Seventy-seven (58 females, 19 males) UMass undergraduates participated in the study and received experimental credit.

Moralisms Scenarios. The scenarios were the same as those used in Study 6, but this time the first part of the scenario was followed by two motivational explanations, Desire and Duty, which were presented in random order. Specifically, the sentences from both the Desire and Duty conditions described in Study 6 were provided. The Neutral condition was omitted in this study. Participants were asked to choose (and check) which of the two options “represents the more moral behavior.”

#### Results and Discussion

Overall, Duty motivations were chosen more than Desire motivations,  $F(1,76) = 12.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $M$ 's = 11.8 and 8.2, but this pattern was largely dependent on the PreM or ProM nature of the scenarios (interaction  $F[1,76] = 136.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As shown in Figure 3, participants showed a clear preference for Duty explanations for the ProM items, such that the proportion of Duty to Desire choices was .74 versus .26,  $t(76) = 9.85$ ,  $p$

< .001. In the case of PreM items, a marginal difference between Duty and Desire preferences emerged, with Desire being chosen slightly more often than Duty; the proportion here was .56 (Wants) to .44 (Should),  $t(76) = 1.90$ ,  $p < .07$ .

Working to overcome temptation seems to be particularly valuable in attributions of morality in the proscriptive domain. If there is a desire to refrain from the behavior, and in particular if there is no desire to be fought, an attribution of morality is far less likely; autonomous desire essentially serves to discount proscriptive moral credit. But in the prescriptive domain, moral attributions follow more generously from positive desires. It appears that here we are granted moral credit for wanting to engage in the behavior; working to overcome inertia and doing something because one should work here as well, but autonomous wants do not discount attributions of morality, and in fact may be marginally more effective in granting moral credit. In the approach-based prescriptive domain, credit is more readily granted, regardless of attribution for the behavior. In the avoidance-based proscriptive system, it is more difficult to be rewarded for successes; it is far easier to be blamed for failures.

## **General Discussion**

### Characterizing the Two Faces of Morality

Overall the results of these seven studies provide support for two faces of morality that reflect distinct regulatory modes. Proscriptive morality is inhibition-based, sensitive to negative outcomes and focused on what we should not do. In contrast, prescriptive morality is activation-based, sensitive to positive outcomes and focused on what we should do. Proscriptive morality reflects an avoidance-based motivational system, whereas prescriptive morality reflects an approach-based motivational system.

These approach-avoidance differences were specifically evident in differences based on approach-avoidance priming, linguistic representations associated with approach and avoidance, and associations with individual differences measures of approach-avoidance sensitivity. More specifically a threat-based avoidance prime resulted in increased moral proscriptions, but not increased moral prescriptions (Study 1); proscriptive morality was more likely to be represented in concrete verb-terms, whereas prescriptive morality was represented in more abstract-adjective terms (Study 2); and BIS scores were positively associated with perceived importance of proscriptive morality, whereas BAS scores were positively associated with perceived importance of prescriptive morality (Study 4).

Additionally, the two types of morality involve important asymmetries that follow from these approach-avoidance differences and have implications for self-regulation and moral judgments. As hypothesized, the current research provided support for a harsher, more demanding proscriptive (versus prescriptive) morality. Overall, as delineated in Figure 1, proscriptive morality can be characterized as condemnatory and strict, whereas prescriptive morality can be described as commendatory and not strict. Proscriptive morality is focused on transgressions and is mandatory, blameworthy and duty-based. Prescriptive morality, in contrast, is focused on “good deeds” and is more discretionary, credit-worthy and based in either duty or desire. Greater blame is attributed for proscriptive *immorality* than prescriptive *immorality*, but greater moral credit is attributed for prescriptive morality than proscriptive morality.

The concrete nature of proscriptive morality suggests not only avoidance motives, but more specifically the need to be clear about and attentive to inhibiting particular behaviors; the more abstract nature of prescriptive morality suggests not only approach

motives, but more general guidance regarding the activation of positive behaviors. The importance of minimizing failures (immoral acts) engenders greater specificity for the former, whereas the importance of maximizing successes (moral acts) engenders greater inclusivity for the latter.

The studies' findings were consistent with the well-supported negativity bias in psychology, because proscriptive morality was regarded as more mandatory, whereas prescriptive morality was perceived as more a matter of personal preference (Studies 3 and 4), and this was the case even when the behaviors involved were clearly "imperfect" duties. The costs of failure in the case of proscriptive morality were apparently greater than the rewards of success in the case of prescriptive morality. Interestingly, the mandatory-personal preference differences were not a matter of perceiving the "should not" as holding more moral sway than the "shoulds," for they were perceived as equally weighty in terms of what we should or should not do. Both are clearly important components of our moral repertoire, but proscriptive morality seems to require greater vigilance and stronger compliance.

In the prescriptive system, behavioral acts are to be activated, and when they are, they are credit-worthy; in the proscriptive system behavioral acts are to be avoided, and when they are not, they are blameworthy. More specifically, in this research greater moral credit was accorded to prescriptive morality, and less moral disapproval to prescriptive *immorality*. In contrast, proscriptive morality resulted in stronger disapproval for *immorality*, but less moral credit for morality, when behaviors were appropriately inhibited (Studies 5 and 6). These differences are consistent not only with the approach-avoidance bases of the two systems, but also with the moral asymmetries

they produce. The harsher, stricter system--the proscriptive system--is associated with greater blame and disapproval, whereas the more discretionary, less condemnatory system is associated with greater credit and approval.

Self-regulation involves effective monitoring, and it is more efficient to monitor for instances rather than absences, acts rather than omissions (see, e.g., Coats, Janoff-Bulman, & Alpert, 1996; Wegner, 1994). The avoidance-based proscriptive system is likely to be particularly attuned to negative behaviors (immorality), whereas the prescriptive system is apt to be particularly attuned to positive behaviors (morality), a difference that may further contribute to their respective characterizations as condemnatory versus commendatory, blameworthy versus credit-worthy.

Proscriptive blame is readily forthcoming, but proscriptive credit is not; the opposite appears to be the case for prescriptive morality. Although moral credit was given for good deeds (prescriptions) based on either duty or personal desire, evidence that a person has worked to overcome temptation appeared to be an important element in providing such approbation for proscriptions (Studies 6 and 7). The moral outcome in this case appears to involve effort and lack of ease. This perspective is consistent with a Kantian view that an action is not moral unless it is done "from duty" rather than "in accord" with duty; the will must be involved, and it must wholly exclude any influence of "inclination" (Kant, 1964/1785). Kant's views are clearly coincident with our perceptions of morality, but seemingly only in the case of proscriptive morality. We also recognize a second type of morality, one that seems to subsume our beliefs in benevolence, kindness, industriousness, self-reliance, and generosity. Here our perspectives diverge from a Kantian view of moral imperative based solely on will.

Although in this domain we can get credit for acting “from duty,” we nevertheless also get credit for acting from “inclination.”

### Implications for Broader Social Regulation

Proscriptive and prescriptive morality involve distinct forms of moral regulation. Although the current research findings are fundamentally about differences in self-regulation in the moral domain, they may nevertheless have implications for broader social regulation of morality as well. Thus at the societal level, proscriptive morality is primarily regulated via legal systems. The mandatory, concrete, restraint-based nature of proscriptive morality readily lends itself to a system of laws that is focused on what we should not do and can apply to all in a society; thus people are punished for “breaking the law.” Interestingly, given the more demanding, stricter nature of proscriptive morality, it is perhaps not surprising that the Ten Commandments, a list of moral imperatives in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is predominantly proscriptive, with eight of the ten commandments in the form of prohibitions.

Societies, however, do not only want to encourage people to inhibit bad behaviors, but also want to promote positive, prescriptive moral behaviors. The mandatory nature of laws render this type of social regulation less conducive to the more discretionary prescriptive morality, which instead appears to be regulated primarily through social norms, and particularly norms that establish role expectations and obligations in a given society.

Thus although caring for others is a positive value, societies typically recognize the more discretionary nature of caring when applied to distant relationships as compared with, for example, the more obligatory nature of parental care for children. Generally

closer relationships are more demanding of “positive obligations,” as are roles defined by particular responsibilities (i.e., teachers taking care of students). In recognition of the reality that it is impossible to help all people in all ways, the scope of positive obligations (i.e., prescriptive morality) is limited in all cultures. However, it appears to be far *less* limited in collectivist than individualist cultures, where the boundaries for such positive obligations are cast more broadly across society (see, e.g., Baron & Miller, 2000, and Miller & Bersoff, 1992, comparing Indians and Americans, Janoff-Bulman & Leggatt, 2002, comparing Latinos/as and Americans). Culture plays a potent role in fostering role obligations and expectations in societies, which essentially reflect differences in the social regulation of prescriptive morality.

In a given society, then, prescriptive but not proscriptive morality is likely to be role-contingent. This difference helps account for the results of interesting research by Haidt and Baron (1996), who found that harmful acts and omissions were differentially affected by information about social roles. Although in their studies harmful acts were generally rated as more blameworthy than harmful omissions, this difference was most marked in instances of low-responsibility roles (i.e., strangers versus friends). As noted above, harmful acts are actually cases of proscriptive immorality, whereas harmful omissions represent cases of prescriptive immorality (also see discussion following Study 5). Thus, the Haidt and Baron (1996) research provides empirical support for the differences in sensitivity to social roles expected for proscriptive (i.e., low sensitivity, typically applies to all) versus prescriptive (i.e., high sensitivity) morality. Given that prescriptive morality is more discretionary, societies tie our positive obligations to social roles in an attempt to proactively regulate and promote these beneficial acts.

Our interest in the broader implications of the two types of morality led us to explore the relevance of the proscriptive-prescriptive distinction to another side of social regulation: how people themselves choose to regulate society. This is largely the realm of politics. In recent exploratory work we found that the two types of moral regulation were differentially associated with positions on contemporary social issues. As in past research (Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, & Baldacci, 2008), two independent social issues factors emerged in this research. We labeled one factor “Lifestyles Issues” (i.e., legal abortion, stem cell research, gay marriage) and the other “Equity Issues” (e.g., affirmative action, government welfare programs for the poor, environmental tax on SUV’s and luxury cars). Based on the 20-item Moralisms Scale used in the above studies, the Lifestyle Issues were related to proscriptive morality ( $-.27, p < .01$ ; all issues were scored in the liberal direction) and not with prescriptive morality (.13), whereas the Equity Issues were associated with prescriptive morality (.21,  $p < .01$ ) but not proscriptive morality (-.06).

The Lifestyle Issues, and in particular support of prohibition or *inhibition* in these Lifestyle domains, appear largely to represent the political agenda of social conservatives; in contrast, the Equity Issues, and in particular positive obligations and *activation* in these Equity domain, appear to represent the political agenda of political liberals. These findings, then, suggest the potential relevance of proscriptive and prescriptive morality for understanding broader political orientations. Indeed, social conservatives seem to focus on the restraint of undesired behaviors in the interest of social order and liberals on the activation of desired behaviors in the interest of social justice (see, e.g., Janoff-

Bulman et al., 2008), suggesting differential emphases on proscriptive and prescriptive morality respectively.

Clearly a great deal remains to be known about these two types of morality, for this research is only a first step towards delineating their differences. What factors are most apt to increase regulation in one or the other domain? And do differences translate into behavior? Future research on neural substrates of inhibition and activation in the moral domain will be important, and given that emotions are powerful sources of motivation, the role of distinct emotions (see, e.g., Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999) will be critical for fully understanding the two forms of moral regulation. It will also be instructive to consider distinct routes for advancing morality, given that lack of motivation (e.g., apathy, inertia) is an obstacle to prescriptive morality, whereas the temptation to engage in negative behaviors is a major barrier in the case of proscriptive morality. The distinction between prescriptive and proscriptive morality, which appear to reflect differences in approach and avoidance motivation, will hopefully provide a fruitful avenue for further exploring the nature of moral regulation from the micro to the macro levels of human behavior.

## Endnotes

1. Carver (2006; Carver & Scheier, 2008) emphasizes that approach and avoidance are distinct systems, but nevertheless may act in concert. He insightfully notes that “acts of avoidance” sometimes lead to “acts of approach.” More specifically, “What begins as purely avoidance often leads to approach. An avoidance loop tries to increase distance from the anti-goal; at some point an incentive becomes identified and an approach loop begins to engage. Once this happens, the person (with both loops active) is simultaneously trying to avoid the anti-goal and approach the goal. Thus, many case of active avoidance of a threat also involve approach of an incentive” (Carver, 2006, p. 106).

2. There were no gender main effects or interactions on the should/should not or preference ratings. Analyses reported throughout the remainder of the paper do not include gender. All analyses for the seven studies were re-run to find gender main effects or interactions. Across all of the analyses in all seven studies, only two gender main effects were found, and there were no gender interactions with any variable in any of the studies. It appears that gender was not a strong contributing factor in this research and will therefore not be further discussed.

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Table 1: Correlations among BIS, BAS Scores and Moral Judgments (Study 4)

|     | <u>Moral Weight</u>      |                          | <u>Personal Preference</u> |                          |
|-----|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
|     | proscriptive<br>morality | prescriptive<br>morality | proscriptive<br>morality   | prescriptive<br>morality |
| BIS | .22**                    | .04                      | .05                        | .04                      |
| BAS | .07                      | .31**                    | .01                        | .03                      |

\*\* < .005

Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Asymmetry of Proscriptive and Prescriptive Moral Regulation

*Figure 2.* Proportion of Verbs and Adjectives in Linguistic Coding (Study 2)

*Figure 3.* Ratings of Moral Weight (Study 3)

*Figure 4.* Proportion of Moral Credit Responses Based on Duty versus Desire (Study 7)







