Beyond "Being Good Frees Us to Be Bad:"

Moral Self-Licensing and the Fabrication of Moral Credentials

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People like to feel and appear virtuous, but sometimes they're tempted to act in ways that could call their virtue into question. A person may want to evade taxes, decline a request to make a charitable donation, criticize a colleague who happens to be a member of a minority group, or indulge in "sinful" desserts despite being on a diet. In situations like these, people may hesitate, and ask themselves, "Can I do what I want without feeling or appearing like a bad person?" Can they cheat without feeling unethical, decline to donate without feeling selfish, criticize the colleague without seeming prejudiced, or eat the dessert without feeling gluttonous? One way for people to answer such questions is to look to their behavioral history for evidence of a virtuous character. If they find such evidence – or *moral credentials* – they may feel licensed to act on their desires rather than inhibiting themselves (Monin & Miller, 2001). In other words, evidence that they are virtuous can make people more willing to commit less-than-virtuous behavior – a *moral self-licensing effect* (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Monin & Miller, 2001).

In this chapter, I demonstrate that people are remarkably adept at convincing themselves that they have a license to give into temptations. After briefly reviewing research showing that doing good deeds can increase people's willingness to do bad ones, I offer an expanded view of moral self-licensing effects. Specifically, I discuss new work that reveals how people can feel morally licensed without doing good deeds, and I describe how people actively create and distort evidence of their virtue when they anticipate that they will need a moral license.

Good Deeds as a Source of Moral Credentials

Research shows that doing good deeds can increase people's subsequent willingness to act less-than-virtuously (for reviews, see Effron & Conway, 2015; Merritt et al., 2010;

Miller & Effron, 2010; Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009). For example, recalling a recent

example of their own ethical behavior can reduce people's intentions to donate, give blood,

and volunteer (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011), making environmentally responsible

decisions can license people to lie, cheat, and steal (Mazar & Zhong, 2010), and endorsing a

political candidate who is a member of a stigmatized racial minority group (i.e., Barack

Obama) can increase people's willingness to favor Whites at the expense of Blacks (Effron,

Cameron, & Monin, 2009). In these examples, doing something ethical, prosocial, or

unbiased seems to have made people feel secure about their morality, which allowed them to

act in ways that could call their virtue into question (Merritt et al., 2010). In other words,

good deeds seem to license people by providing them with moral credentials that attest to

their virtuous character (Monin & Miller, 2001).[1] Although a person's moral credentials can

convince others that she has a license to transgress (Effron & Monin, 2010; Krumm &

Corning, 2008), people act licensed even when they seem to have only convinced themselves

that they have such credentials (Monin & Miller, 2001; for a discussion, see Miller & Effron,

2010).

Many other examples of moral self-licensing have been documented in the lab and the

field (e.g., Brañas-Garza, Brucheli, Espinona Alejos, & Garcia-Muñoz, 2013; Brown et al.,

2011; Chiou, Yang, & Wan, 2011; Clot, Grolleau, & Ibanez, 2014; Gneezy, Imas, Brown,

Nelson, & Norton, 2012; Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014; Joosten, van Dijke,

Van Hiel, & De Cremer, 2013; Mann & Kawakami, 2012; Ormiston & Wong, 2013;

Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009; Tiefenbeck, Staake, Roth, & Sachs, 2013; Zhong, Ku,

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[1] Two complementary mechanisms have been proposed to explain moral self-licensing: (a) good deeds could provide *moral credentials* that allow people to construe morally ambiguous behavior more favorably, or (b) good deeds could grant *moral credits* that can "purchase" the right to commit even blatant transgressions (Effron & Monin, 2010; Merritt et al., 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010; Polman, Pettit, & Wiesenfeld, 2013). Determining which mechanism is responsible for which example of licensing is beyond the scope of this chapter; for simplicity, I refer only to the credentials mechanism throughout.

Lount, & Murnighan, 2010; but see Blanken, van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Meijers, 2014).

Overall, moral self-licensing effects appear to be modest in size but robust; a recent meta-

analysis found that the average effect size in published and unpublished investigations is d =

.31 (Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015). (As benchmarks, the average effect sizes in

the fields of motivation, social influence, and attribution have been estimated as, respectively,

d = .30, .28, and .26; Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003).[2,3] Moral self-licensing also

occurs in domains that may not always be considered morally relevant but that nonetheless

present choices between virtues and vices (or "wants" vs. "shoulds"; Milkman, Rogers, &

Bazerman, 2008), such as health or consumer purchasing. For example, "virtuously"

following a diet can license people to plan "less virtuous" dieting behavior for the future

(Effron, Monin, & Miller, 2013), and agreeing to help someone can license people to

purchase a relative "vice" for themselves (i.e., a luxury good) instead of a relative "virtue"

(i.e., a practical good; Khan & Dhar, 2006). In short, research indicates that doing good deeds

can license less-virtuous behavior in a diverse array of situations.

Alternative Sources of Moral Credentials

Good deeds, however, are not the only source of moral credentials. To feel morally

licensed, it may be sufficient to reflect on bad deeds that you have *declined* to perform, good

deeds that you *plan* to perform, good deeds that you believe you *would have* performed had

circumstances been different, and good deeds that *others* have performed (see Table 1). I

discuss each of these sources of credentials in turn.

Counterfactual Transgressions: Bad Deeds You Have Declined to Perform

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[2] Richard et al. report *r* statistics for effect sizes; I converted to *d*.
[3] Substantial variance in effect sizes across moral licensing studies (Blanken et al., 2015) may indicate undiscovered moderators. Indeed, as discussed below, doing good deeds can under some circumstances lead people to act more virtuously – a moral self-consistency effect (for a discussion, see Effron & Conway, 2015).

Imagine a White manager who wants to fire a slightly underperforming Black employee, but worries that this decision could make her feel or appear racist. The research reviewed above suggests that she might be more likely to fire him if she could point to an example of how she helped a minority group member in the past – but what if she has never provided such help? Perhaps she would feel comfortable firing him if something reminded her of how she has never actively *harmed* any minority employees. In this example, she derives a license from bad deeds she has avoided rather than good deeds she has performed. To feel secure about one's morality, it may not be necessary to travel on the shining path to virtue; it may be sufficient to reflect on the immoral road not taken.

Research supports the idea that reflecting on foregone bad deeds (i.e., *counterfactual transgressions*) can license less-virtuous behavior (Effron et al., 2013; Effron, Miller, & Monin, 2012). In one study, White undergraduates had to indicate which of two suspects they thought had committed a crime. The evidence clearly pointed to one suspect who was White. For half of the participants, the other, clearly innocent suspect was also White; for the other half, he was Black. As expected, virtually all participants decided to accuse the obviously guilty White suspect, regardless of the innocent suspect's race. However, when the innocent suspect was Black, this decision meant declining an opportunity to make a racist accusation, and thus could make people feel that they had established non-racist credentials. The results showed that when the innocent suspect was Black (vs. White), participants were more likely to favor Whites instead of Blacks in a subsequent hiring decision (Effron et al., 2012). The ability to point to a "racist road not taken" seems to have licensed people to commit behavior that could seem prejudiced.

Reflecting on counterfactual transgressions can also license less-virtuous health decisions. Effron et al. (2013) found that asking dieters to write about the unhealthy things they could have done (but did not do) over the past week led them to formulate less-

ambitious weight-loss plans for the coming week, and report that they had actually engaged in less healthy behavior once that week had passed. Reflecting on the "unhealthy road not taken" thus licensed people to deviate from pursuing their dieting goals (see also Mukhopadhyay, Sengupta, & Ramanathan, 2008; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009).

No matter how bad one's behavior has been, one can usually imagine how it could have been worse. Reflecting on a sinful road not taken seems to make people feel secure about their virtue, which ironically decreases the likelihood that they will select a virtuous road in the future.

Prefactual Virtues: Good Deeds You Plan to Perform

Merely planning to take a virtuous road in the future may also make people feel secure about their morality. In this way, *prefatual virtues* – the good deeds one plans to perform – may have a licensing effect. For example, giving people an opportunity to say they will donate blood in the future increased their likelihood of expressing overtly racist views in the present (Cascio & Plant, 2015). Apparently, intending to do something virtuous later licensed them to do something prejudiced now. A related phenomenon was documented in the domain of dieting: Among people who chronically try to restrain their eating, expecting to begin a "virtuous" diet later increased present indulgence in "sinful" foods (Urbszat, Herman, & Polivy, 2002).

Good intentions do not always translate into good behavior, but when it comes to assessing how virtuous one is, intentions may count more than actions (Kruger & Gilovich, 2004; White & Plous, 1995). People may thus license themselves with intentions that never come to fruition. For example, gym-goers indicated that they were more interested in eating an unhealthy dinner when they were approached on their way to workout than when they were approached after they had worked out (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). One explanation, supported by additional results, is that people going into the gym felt licensed to eat

unhealthy food based on overly optimistic intentions to have a vigorous workout. In a related study (Khan & Dhar, 2007), women were more likely to choose a "low brow" magazine over a "high brow" magazine only when they expected to face the same choice again in the future. An intention to choose the "more virtuous," high-brow option later seems to have licensed them to choose the "less virtuous," low-brow option now. Results from a follow-up study suggested, however, that the women overestimated how likely they were to make the high-brow choice. Thus, people feel licensed when they reflect on their good intentions – even if those prefactual virtues will never become actual virtues.

Counterfactual Virtues: Good Deeds That You "Would Have Performed"

Another source of moral credentials may be virtuous behaviors that people have not done and may not intend to do, but believe that they *would have done* in the past if circumstances had been different – *counterfactual virtues*. For example, someone who reflects on how he would have made a substantial charitable donation if his investments had performed better might subsequently feel licensed not to give money to a homeless person. Similarly, thinking about how she would have hired a more diverse workforce if the minority job applicants had been more qualified might license a manager to tell a prejudiced joke. Ordering a burger might make a dieter feel guilty, particularly if he could have ordered salad instead; however, if he ordered the burger after learning that the salad was sold out, his belief that he would have ordered the salad if it had been available could later license him to indulge in dessert. Yet just as people overestimate how likely they will be to follow through on their intentions, they may also overestimate how likely they would have been to act more virtuously if they had received an opportunity to do so. Thus, for example, the dieter might overestimate how likely he would have been to order the salad if it had not been sold out. The potential licensing effect of counterfactual virtues awaits an empirical test.

Vicarious Virtues: Good Acts that Others Have Performed

People may also feel licensed to act less virtuously when they have reflected on the good deeds that their group members have performed (i.e., *vicarious virtues*), even if they have not performed these deeds themselves. Consistent with this idea, Kouchaki (2011) found that business students rated a Hispanic job applicant less favorably when they learned that their peers had taken the non-prejudiced action of shortlisting this applicant for the job. This effect only occurred for people who identified strongly with business students as a group, presumably because their identification allowed them to derive non-prejudiced credentials from their group members' behavior.

Summary

As summarized in Table 1, people feel licensed not only when they can point to good deeds they have done (actual virtues), but also when they can point to bad deeds they declined to do (counterfactual transgressions), good deeds they plan to do (prefactual virtues), good deeds that they imagine they would have done if circumstances had been different (counterfactual virtues), and good deeds that their group members have done (vicarious virtues). These findings demonstrate substantial flexibility in the types of moral credentials that people use to license themselves. For example, to feel licensed to express prejudice, it may not be necessary to assure oneself that "one of my best friends is Black;" it may be sufficient to reflect on how "none of my worst enemies is Black," "I intend to make some Black friends," "I would have a Black friend if my neighborhood were more diverse," or even "one of my best friends' friends is Black."

Strategies for Creating Moral Credentials

The research reviewed thus far shows that providing people with salient evidence of their virtue (i.e., moral credentials) licenses them to act less virtuously. However, people are not content to wait around for their moral credentials to accumulate; they actively create evidence of their virtue when they feel insecure about their moral standing. Such feelings of

insecurity arise when people expect to transgress, to face an ethically challenging situation, to do something that could be misconstrued as morally problematic, or in any other situation that could threaten their ability to feel or appear moral. I next consider the variety of strategies people use to credential themselves in such situations (see Table 2).

Enacting Credentialing Behavior

One strategy is to enact credentialing behaviors. Consider a White manager who anticipates that she will need to fire a Black employee, and wants the non-racist credentials that would license her to do so comfortably. Rather than just looking to her past for evidence that she is not racist, she might change her behavior to demonstrate her lack of racism in the present. For example, she might provide a more favorable evaluation of a Black job applicant.

To capture this kind of situation in the lab, Merritt, Effron, Fein, Savitsky, Tuller, & Monin (2012) asked White participants to rank-order several job candidates, one of whom was Black, in order of their qualifications. Participants knew that later, they would take a psychology test that would likely reveal them to have negative associations with Blacks. Half the participants were told that these associations were a valid indicator of racial prejudice; these individuals should have felt threatened by the prospect of taking the test and thus motivated to demonstrate their lack of prejudice on the hiring task. The other half were told that the test was controversial and that such associations did not necessarily indicate prejudice; these individuals should experience little threat. As predicted, participants who expected to take the valid (versus controversial) test ranked the Black candidate more favorably. These participants seem to have sought non-racist credentials by strategically expressing more positive attitudes towards members of a minority group (see also Bradley-Geist, King, Skorinko, Hebl, & McKenna, 2010).

Planning to Act More Virtuously

As noted, intentions to behave well in the future (i.e., prefactual virtues) can license people to act less-virtuously in the present. People may strategically form such intentions when they need a license. For example, being tempted to eat an unhealthy snack led dieters in one study to plan to eat more healthily later, and such plans seem to have licensed them to choose the unhealthy snack in the present (Kronick & Knäuper, 2010). Similarly, a temptation to act unethically could lead people to promise themselves to act more virtuously after giving into the temptation. People may ultimately fulfil these self-promises; indeed making specific, concrete plans to pursue a goal can increase people's likelihood of pursuing it successfully (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). For example, a person would be likely to follow through on an intention to donate $50 on the Red Cross website the next time he is at a computer. On the other hand, ambitions to act virtuously are often overoptimistic (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005), and may be too vague to translate into behavior. For example, an employee might license herself to inflate her expense reports by promising herself that she will "soon start acting more charitably" – a promise that she will later forget or ignore. Strategically formulating prefactual virtues to use as a license, therefore, could be a case of bargaining with oneself in bad faith.

Distorting Memories

Previous research has documented a variety of memory distortions that allow people to perceive themselves favorably (e.g., Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Mather, Shafir, & Johnson, 2000, 2003; Ross & Buehler, 1994; Shu & Gino, 2012). I next discuss three ways in which people may strategically distort their memories to convince themselves that they have a license to give into less-than-virtuous temptations.

Exaggerating past good deeds. One straightforward way that people could license themselves with memory distortion is to exaggerate how virtuously they acted in the past. For example, an employee who is tempted to inflate her expense reports at work may license

herself to do so by overestimating the amount of money she gave to charity last year. Similarly, the temptation to indulge in an unhealthy dessert could lead a dieter to overestimate how many times she went to the gym last week and how vigorously she exercised (cf. Ross, McFarland, & Fletcher, 1981).

Minimizing past bad deeds. When people need a license to sin, they may also minimize how sinfully they have acted in the past. For example, someone who cares about the environment but wants to license himself to buy an SUV might underestimate how many flights he took last year to minimize the apparent size of his carbon footprint. In a recent study examining this idea in the context of dieting (May & Irmak, 2014), participants ate a serving of gumdrops and learned how many calories it contained. Thirty minutes later, they received an opportunity to eat M&Ms candy. Before eating the M&Ms, they had to recall the number of calories in the gumdrops. The results showed that impulsive participants – who should be particularly tempted to overindulge in the M&Ms, and thus most in need of a license – remembered the gumdrops as less caloric than did less-impulsive participants. Importantly, this effect did not emerge in separate conditions in which participants had already eaten the M&Ms or had no opportunity to do so, and thus had no need to license themselves. Thus, requiring a license to indulge can lead people to misremember their previous behavior as less sinful.

Exaggerating foregone bad deeds. In addition to minimizing the sinfulness of the path they have travelled, people may also try to license themselves by strategically exaggerating the sinfulness of the road not taken. For example, to license herself to eat dessert, a dieter might not only minimize the unhealthiness of the pretzels she snacked on earlier, but also exaggerate the unhealthiness of the low-fat crackers she could have snacked on instead. Moreover, she might come to believe, erroneously, that her cupboard had been

full of other unhealthy snacks that she could have eaten but did not. In other words, she might

overestimate the number and severity of her counterfactual transgressions.

In research supporting this idea (Effron et al., 2013), dieters first chose one of two

snacks to eat (e.g., Cheetos or chips). Next, people in the temptation condition learned that

they would momentarily have to choose between eating either a plate of cookies or two raw

garlic cloves. Pretesting suggested that they would expect to choose the cookies and to feel

guilty about it; thus, they should look for a way to pre-emptively license themselves to make

this choice. People in the control condition were instead told that they would momentarily

examine these foods, but would have no opportunity eat either. After receiving their

instructions about the cookies and garlic but before doing anything with these foods, they

rated the unhealthiness of the snacks they had chosen between earlier (e.g., the Cheetos and

chips). As expected, participants rated the unchosen foods as unhealthier in the temptation

condition than in the control condition. Apparently, dieters who needed a license to indulge

invented one by exaggerating the unhealthiness of the road previously not taken.

People may use a similar strategy to credential themselves as non-racists: They may

invent foregone acts of racism that they actually had no opportunity to perform. Recall the

example of the White manager who needs a license to fire a slightly underperforming Black

employee. Research reviewed above suggests that she might derive non-racist credentials

from the fact that she has never rejected any job applicants simply because of their race. But

what if few members of racial minority groups have ever applied to her company? Through

memory distortion, she might convince herself that plenty of minorities have applied, and that

she thus had (and passed up) numerous opportunities to make racist hiring decisions.

Laboratory studies have documented this kind of memory distortion (Effron et al., 2012). For

example, motivating White participants to prove their racial egalitarianism led them to

overestimate the number of opportunities they had – and passed up – to commit racist actions

during a prior task. In other words, participants who needed non-racist credentials fabricated

them: They invented racist roads not taken that in reality they had no opportunity to travel

down.

Thus, people create evidence of their virtue by exaggerating how sinfully they could

have acted if they had wanted to – that is, by inventing counterfactual transgressions. This

strategy offers greater flexibility than merely overestimating the good deeds that one has

done: It allows people to forge moral credentials for themselves without performing an actual

virtue.

Reinterpreting Past Behavior as Moral Credentials

People rely on surprisingly weak evidence of their virtue to license themselves. For

example, "clicktivism" (i.e., effortlessly expressing support for a cause by clicking a button

on a website) licenses some people to donate less money to charity (Cornelissen, Karelaia, &

Soyer, 2014). One explanation could be that people have chronically low standards for what

constitutes moral behavior. An alternative possibility is that the need for a license leads

people to lower the standards by which they judge their moral track record. For example, a

person might not think that her decision to "like" a charitable cause on Facebook represents

solid moral credentials – until, that is, she wants to license herself to decline a request for a

charitable donation. More generally, when people's ability to feel or appear moral is

threatened by the temptation or expectation of doing something less-than-virtuous, they may

reinterpret their past behavior as moral credentials, effectively lowering the bar for what

counts as virtuous. Because people expect to be perceived similarly to how they perceive

themselves (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993), threats to their moral self-image may also lead them

to overestimate how credentialed they appear to others.

A recent series of studies illustrates this phenomenon (Effron, 2014). People in one

study first chose to play a game to raise $.50 for the American Red Cross instead of doing a

boring visual attention task – a choice that is somewhat charitable but only ambiguously diagnostic of a person's generosity. Then, half the participants were led to believe that they would soon take a test of "implicit moral character" that was likely to reveal that they were less moral than they thought (threat condition); the other half were told instead that they would merely examine another person's scores on this test (control condition). Finally, all participants estimated how diagnostic of a generous disposition their earlier choice of the game would seem to an objective observer. The results showed that, as hypothesized, participants felt threatened about the prospect of taking the morality test, which in turn led them to estimate that having chosen the game would make them seem more generous to an observer. Importantly, this effect only emerged among individuals who cared most about maintaining a generous self-image and who thus felt most threatened by the upcoming task. Apparently, when people were motivated to credential themselves as generous, they came to believe that their small act of generosity would be judged against lower moral standards and would therefore seem to reflect a more generous disposition.

Other studies demonstrated a similar phenomenon in the domain of racial prejudice (Effron, 2014). White participants completed a version the criminal identification task described earlier. Everyone accused a clearly guilty White suspect instead of an obviously innocent Black suspect – a non-racist choice, but one that is ambiguously diagnostic of racial attitudes. Then they estimated how non-racist their suspect choice would make them seem to an objective observer. In a control condition, participants showed a slight tendency to underestimate; that is, a real group of objective observers imputed more about participants' racial attitudes than participants had expected (cf. Jones & Nisbett, 1972). By contrast, in a condition in which participants were made to worry that their future behavior could make them seem prejudiced, they overestimated how much their suspect choice would convince an observer of their lack of prejudice. Thus, when participants were motivated to credential

themselves as non-racist, they seem to have lowered their standards for what constituted such credentials, thereby overestimating how non-racist they would seem to observers.

In short, when people are made to feel insecure about their moral character, they may reinterpret past behavior as moral credentials, presumably to reassure themselves that they have already proven their morality. Ironically, this can lead them to overestimate how moral they seem to others. This finding could explain why people will readily license themselves based on seemingly trivial evidence of their virtue: The evidence seems less trivial when they need a license. In short, when people want moral credentials, they are able to make a mountain of morality out of a molehill of virtue.

Summary

When people face temptations, expect to get negative feedback about their moral character, or otherwise are made to feel insecure about their virtuous character, they actively seek to credential themselves as virtuous by changing their behavior, their plans, their memories, or the way they interpret their past (see Table 2). Future research will undoubtedly uncover other strategies for securing a virtuous self-image. For example, people in need of a license might invent vicarious virtues for themselves by exaggerating how virtuously their group members acted. Similarly, people might fabricate counterfactual virtues by selectively remembering all the barriers that prevented them from acting virtuously in the past. Chances are that people have more tricks up their sleeves for creating evidence of their virtue.

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

As earlier work on moral self-licensing demonstrated, being good can give people moral credentials that free them to be bad (Merritt et al., 2010). However, even when people are unable to point to "good deeds" that they have recently performed, they can still feel credentialed because they intend to do good deeds, because they have not done any bad deeds recently, because they would have done good deeds if they could, or because they are

associated with people who have done good deeds (see Table 1). Moreover, people actively

cultivate and even fabricate moral credentials for themselves by strategically enacting

credentialing behaviors and by distorting the way they think about their past, present, and

future (see Table 2). Creating and using moral credentials are complementary processes. For

example, a temptation to do something less-than-virtuous should lead people to create moral

credentials using one of the strategies in Table 2; with these credentials in hand, people can

then feel licensed to succumb to the temptation (see Table 1). When people need a moral

license, they seem to find a way to convince themselves that they have one.

The Role of Impression Management

People feel more comfortable doing something morally questionable when they can

appear moral to others (Lönnqvist, Irlenbusch, & Walkowitz, 2014; Pillutla & Murnighan,

1995), and some evidence suggests that impression-management concerns can play a role in

moral self-licensing (Cornelissen et al., 2014). However, several findings suggest that moral

self-licensing strategies can be aimed primarily at appearing moral to oneself (for a

discussion, see Miller & Effron, 2010). First, establishing non-racist credentials licensed

people to express less racially sensitive views, even in front of an audience who was clearly

unaware of these credentials (Monin & Miller, 2001). Second, the threat of seeming racially

biased in front of one audience led people to strategically seek non-racist credentials in front

of a different audience (Merritt et al., 2012). Third, people induced to want moral credentials

overestimated how credentialed they would appear to an observer to the same degree

regardless of whether they were financially incentivized to estimate accurately (Effron,

2014). This finding suggests that people had really convinced themselves that they had

credentials. Fourth, two studies have shown that whether people used a particular moral

credentialing strategy depended on how much they cared about *feeling* moral, and not on how

much they cared about *appearing* moral (Effron, 2014). Fifth, several features of the studies

on motivated memory distortion are not consistent with an impression-management explanation (see Effron et al., 2012, for a discussion). Finally, people's ratings of their own morality have been shown to mediate moral self-licensing effects (Khan & Dhar, 2006; Kouchaki, 2011). More research is needed to understand when moral self-licensing is driven by a desire to feel moral versus a desire to appear moral, but the current evidence suggests a central role for the motivation to feel moral.

Implications for Improving Behavior

How can moral self-licensing be prevented? Moral self-licensing can interfere with societal goals to increase environmentalism (Tiefenbeck et al., 2013), to improve health behavior (de Witt Huberts, Evers, & de Ridder, 2012), to reduce the expression of prejudice (Cascio & Plant, 2015; Monin & Miller, 2001), and to create more ethical and efficient organizations (Klotz & Bolino, 2013). Can anything be done to prevent it? Given the variety of credentialing strategies at people's disposal, any intervention designed to block one could simply increase the usage of another. However, research on moderators of moral self-licensing may point towards a solution. People are less likely to use past virtues as a license when they are focused abstractly on who they are and what their moral principles are, as opposed to focused concretely on what they have done and what the moral consequences of their behavior will be (Conway & Peetz, 2012; Cornelissen, Bashshur, & Rode, 2013). For example, framing a past virtue as demonstrating commitment to a virtuous goal ("who I am and what I believe") compels people to act more virtuously, whereas framing it as progress towards that goal ("what I've done") leads to licensing (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Susewind & Hoelzl, 2014). Thus, for example, a CEO who is motivated to increase the organization's diversity might do well to frame its recent hiring of minorities as an affirmation of its commitment to diversity – and a reminder of how much more needs to be done to fulfil that commitment – rather than as progress towards its diversity goal. The CEO should also

consider framing this commitment as being motivated by abstract rules of fairness and equality rather than emphasizing the concrete consequences of failing to diversify.

Can moral self-licensing be harnessed for positive ends? I have highlighted potentially negative consequences of moral self-licensing, but it can have desirable consequences as well (see Merritt et al., 2010 for a discussion), as demonstrated by studies on non-racist credentials. Whites' fear of accidentally seeming prejudiced can inhibit them from discussing race with Blacks, acknowledging race, and interacting with Blacks at all – all of which can ironically make Whites seem more prejudiced (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Johnson, Olson, & Fazio, 2009; Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2003). An opportunity to establish non-racist credentials could thus help facilitate interracial interactions by reducing people's concerns about seeming prejudiced. Supporting this possibility, giving White participants an opportunity to say something positive about Martin Luther King, Jr., and to reject racist statements led them to feel more comfortable in an interracial interaction, which in turn led them to display friendlier non-verbal behaviors. The same manipulation also increased their willingness to discuss issues like affirmative action with a Black person (Effron & Richeson, 2014). Non-racist credentials could also help managers, mentors, and instructors give more appropriately critical feedback to underperforming members of minority groups. Critical feedback is essential for learning, but fears of feeling or appearing prejudiced can lead people to give less critical feedback to minority, compared to non-minority, students or mentees (Crosby & Monin, 2007; Croft & Schmader, 2012; Harber, 1998). However, opportunities to establish non-racist credentials have been shown to reduce this reluctance to give such feedback to minorities (Harber, Stafford, & Kennedy, 2010; Ruscher, Wallace, Walker, & Bell, 2010). Thus, moral self-licensing can be harnessed in the domain of race to promote outcomes that are arguably desirable. Future research should examine whether it can be similarly harnessed in other domains to promote positive ends. For

example, given that concerns about seeming like traitors can inhibit employees from reporting unethical organizational practices (Waytz, Dungan, & Young, 2013), providing opportunities for employees to establish "loyalty credentials" could license them to blow the whistle.

Beyond Moral Self-Licensing: Other Sources of License

Moral self-licensing is one example of a *psychological licensing* process, but there are other examples as well. People are psychologically licensed when they feel that they can permit themselves to behave in a way that would otherwise discredit them (Miller & Effron, 2010). The fear of discredit inhibits them from acting how they want, and the source of license removes the inhibition. In moral self-licensing effects, the fear of discredit is specifically a concern about feeling or appearing less-than-virtuous, and the source of license is evidence of a virtuous character. However, the fear of discrediting the self in other ways can also inhibit people from acting; for example, the belief that it is "not their place" to express even a morally non-problematic opinion can prevent people from speaking up (Effron & Miller, 2012; Miller, Effron, & Zak, 2009; Ratner & Miller, 2001; for a discussion, see Miller & Effron, 2010). Likewise, evidence of a virtuous character is not the only source of license to act in ways that could discredit one's virtue; for example, having paid a price for committing a misdeed liberates people to criticize others who commit it (Effron & Miller, 2015), membership in a cohesive group frees people to express their private prejudices against outgroups (Effron & Knowles, 2015), being wronged makes people feel entitled to act on selfish motives (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010), and splitting the spoils of cheating with others licenses people to cheat (Wiltermuth, 2011). When the fear of discredit is not specifically a concern with feeling or appearing less-than-virtuous, *or* when evidence of a virtuous character is not what provides the license, a psychological licensing effect but not a moral self-licensing effect has occurred. Future research should not only seek to expand our

understanding of when and how evidence of a good character licenses bad behavior, but should also investigate other sources of license, when people need them, and how people create them.

Conclusion

Ultimately, most people are not villains who constantly look for excuses to act badly. Instead, the research reviewed in this chapter attests to people's tendency to care deeply about feeling virtuous. Given that morality is a fundamental dimension on which people are evaluated (Goodwin, 2015), may be regarded as a uniquely human characteristic (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014), and is "considered the most essential part of identity, the self, and the soul" (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014), it is no wonder that many people need to see themselves as virtuous in order to preserve a global sense of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). It is this motive to protect a moral self-image that inhibits people from acting in ethically questionable ways without a license – and that drives them to execute a variety of mental gymnastics when they anticipate that they will need a license.

Inevitably, even people who care most about being moral will face temptations to transgress, to relax their pursuit of virtuous goals, or simply to act in an ethically ambiguous way that could call their virtue into question. Confronted with such temptations, people do not always just succumb now and rationalize later; instead, they can be quite self-reflective, asking themselves, "Would taking this action say anything negative about my character?" Research on moral self-licensing suggests that people are remarkably adept at convincing themselves that the answer is no – for better or for worse.

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Tables

Table 1

Sources of Moral Credentials

Source	Example	Citation
Actual virtues: Good deeds you have performed	Hypothetically purchasing environmental products licensed lying, cheating, and stealing	Mazar & Zhong (2010)
Counterfactual transgressions: Bad deeds you declined to perform	Not making a racist choice licensed less racial sensitivity	Effron, Miller, & Monin (2012)
Prefactual virtues: Good deeds you plan to perform	Pledging to donate blood licensed the expression of racist views	Cascio & Plant (2015)
Counterfactual virtues: Good deeds you believe you would have performed	Imagining that you would have donated to charity if money had not been tight could license less prosocial behavior	(Awaiting research)
Vicarious virtues: Good deeds others have performed	A non-prejudiced action by ingroup members licensed individuals to make more prejudiced evaluations	Kouchaki (2011)

Table 2

Strategies for Creating Moral Credentials

Strategy	Example	Citation
Enacting credentialing behaviors	People evaluated a minority candidate more favorably when they anticipated needing non-racist credentials	Merritt, Effron, Fein, Savistsky, Tuller, & Monin (2012)
Planning to act more virtuously	Dieters made healthier plans for the future when they were tempted to make an unhealthy choice in the present	Kronick & Knäper (2010)
Exaggerating the good deeds you have done	People could overestimate the size of their charitable donations when tempted to cheat on expense reports	(Awaiting research, but see Ross, McFarland, & Fletcher, 1981)
Minimizing the bad deeds you have done	People remembered past indulgences as less caloric when tempted by future indulgence	May & Irmak (2014)
Exaggerating the bad deeds you could have done (but did not do)	People overestimated how racist it would have been possible for them to act when they needed non-racist credentials	Effron, Miller, & Monin (2012)
Reinterpreting past behavior as moral credentials	People thought that a prior charitable choice would seem more diagnostic of their generosity when they needed moral credentials	Effron (2014)