

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 WHY ARE PEOPLE VIOLENT?

We, the authors, must make clear at the outset that, prescriptively, we judge most violence to be immoral. But in every culture, some people sometimes feel morally entitled or required to hurt or kill others. Violent initiations, human sacrifice, corporal punishment, revenge, beating spouses, torturing enemies, ethnic cleansing and genocide, honor killing, homicide, martial arts, and many other forms of violence are usually morally motivated. The fact is that people often feel – and explicitly judge – that in many contexts it is *good* to do these kinds of violence to others: people believe that in many cases hurting or killing others is not simply justifiable, it is absolutely, fundamentally *right*. Furthermore, people often regard others' infliction of violence against third parties as morally commendable – and sometimes acknowledge or even appreciate the morality of violence inflicted on themselves. We wish this weren't true – we abhor it. But it is true, so to understand or reduce violence, we must recognize its moral roots. Most violence is *morally motivated*. People do not simply justify or excuse their violent actions after the fact; at the moment they act, people intend to cause harm or death to someone they feel *should* suffer or die. That is, people are impelled to violence when they feel that to regulate certain social relationships, imposing suffering or death is necessary, natural, legitimate, desirable, condoned, admired, and ethically gratifying. In short, most violence is the exercise of moral rights and obligations. Working within the framework of relational models theory (Fiske, 1991, 1992, 2004) and relationship regulation theory (Rai and Fiske, 2011), our thesis is that *people are morally motivated to do violence to create, conduct, protect, redress,*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 / Why are people violent?

terminate, or mourn social relationships with the victim or with others. We call our theory virtuous violence theory.

Virtuous violence theory is not a theory about crazy people. It's about ordinary people trying to create, sustain, modulate, and repair the relationships that matter to them, to terminate relationships that become intolerable, or to mourn the loss of a partner. For the most part, agents of the violence fully appreciate that they are hurting fully human beings, and judge that it is right to hurt them. More specifically, we investigate normative cultural practices in which, in the subculture or reference group that practices violence, "everyone" in the relational situation of the perpetrator does it, everyone should do it, and people assume it's natural and necessary to do it. Virtuous violence theory is based on the observation that *people often judge that to constitute or regulate crucial relationships they are morally required to hurt or kill another person*, and that obligation makes local sociocultural sense. In other cases, violence may not be absolutely required in order to regulate important relationships, but it is condoned, praised, and admired.

What we mean by "violence"

We need some term that encompasses intentional infliction of pain, physical harm, and killing; "violence" seems like the most apt.¹ For the purposes of this book, "violence" *consists of action in which the perpetrator regards inflicting pain, suffering, fear, distress, injury, maiming, disfigurement, or death as the intrinsic, necessary, or desirable means to the intended ends*. To some degree, the perpetrator may perceive the pain, suffering, fear, distress, maiming, disfigurement, or death as ends in themselves – or at least as the appropriate medium for the perpetrator's purposes. This definition thus excludes action where pain or suffering is incidental, or necessary but undesired or irrelevant. For example, it is violence when boys being initiated are made to fear the pain of circumcision and, to prove their manhood, must stoically endure it without flinching; it is not violence when infants are circumcised for religious or

¹ "Aggression" would be a workable synonym, except that it, too, has been used to mean "wrongful or wanton harm," and seems even more evaluative than "violence," which is a bit more directly descriptive. But we intend virtuous violence theory to address essentially the same issues that others have studied under the rubric of "aggression." There is also some overlap with the wider concept of "force."

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

3 / Natural aversion to killing and hurting

health reasons by adults who perceive the pain as unfortunate, or who would prefer to use anesthetics if they could be used. So virtuous violence theory does not explain and is not meant to explain actions whose purpose is not to hurt or kill. We also exclude from consideration here practices such as painful surgery and physical rehabilitation because the distress or injury involved is regarded as undesirable but necessary to achieve the aims *of the sufferer*. The goals of such practices are primarily practical, although people sometimes feel that it is virtuous to overcome the necessary suffering in order to achieve difficult goals. So the primary focus of this book is on actions meant to activate nociceptive neurons, to damage tissue, or to cause death. To maintain focus and to keep this book from being impossibly long, we do not investigate imprisonment, isolation, ostracism, shaming or humiliation, deprivation, and intentional evocation of high levels of fear and anxiety. While we imagine that virtuous violence theory could be directly extrapolated to encompass such practices, we simply could not include them in a book of reasonable length.

Violent action, like all action, varies in the agent's degree and explicit awareness of his intention, as well as others' attributions of the degree and the nature of intent. We exclude from our definition of "violence" action that "accidentally" results in harm to the extent that it was not the agent's intent to harm and the risk of harm was not readily foreseeable. We are aware that the concept of "intent" is extremely complex and problematic, while any doctrine of "due and reasonable care" is also tendentious. But since we cannot resolve the issues involved, pending further philosophical and empirical clarification, we will have to leave the meanings of those constructs to intuition. So let us just say that for the purposes of virtuous violence theory, "violence" is harm, suffering, or killing that people do on purpose. Hence, we do not address "structural violence" and the noxious externalities of everyday actions that result in harm, when the agents are largely oblivious or indifferent to the consequences of their actions. This is a real path to real harm, but it is outside the scope of our theory and our book.

Natural aversion to killing and hurting

[Aunt Polly, speaking of her foster son, Tom Sawyer]

He 'pears to know just how long he can torment me before I get my dander up, and he knows if he can make out to put me off for a minute or make me laugh, it's all down again and I can't hit him a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 / Why are people violent?

lick. I ain't doing my duty by that boy, and that's the Lord's truth, goodness knows. Spare the rod and spile the child, as the Good Book says. I'm a laying up sin and suffering for us both, I know. He's full of the Old Scratch, but laws-a-me! he's my own dead sister's boy, poor thing, and I ain't got the heart to lash him, somehow. Every time I let him off, my conscience does hurt me so, and every time I hit him my old heart most breaks.

(*Mark Twain, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*)

Now, for the most part, people hate hurting others. It is extremely distressing to directly kill or injure another person face-to-face, no matter how socioculturally justified or legally obligatory it is (Baumeister, 1997: 203–12; Chirof and McCauley, 2006: 52–3; Collins, 2008; Grossman, 2009; MacNair, 2002; Milgram, 1974). Like many other moral acts, killing or hurting others can be difficult, requiring training, social support and modeling, effort, practice, and experience before it becomes second nature. Few people become unambivalently dedicated to moral violence or do it easily, *but that is true of many difficult moral practices other than violence* – people often resist or fail to do what is morally required of them, even when they have no doubt about whether they *should* do it. Like many sorts of moral action, most people are able to commit only the moral violence they know they should commit because their moral motives are reinforced by fear of being shamed, fear of failing their loved ones, and fear of punishment (Grossman, 2009; Mathew and Boyd, 2011). When people fail to commit moral violence even though their moral sensibilities tell them they ought to do so, it is because they have countervailing moral or non-moral motives they cannot overcome. Conversely, people may feel guilt, shame, remorse, sadness, nausea, or horror before, during, or even after committing moral violence because of antiviolence motives that operate alongside the moral violence motives. Humans typically have multiple conflicting moral sentiments, derived from distinct aspects of their social relationships (Rai and Fiske, 2011, 2012).

But the fact that people have competing motives to refrain from violence, yet often overcome those motives to achieve virtuous violence, does not make their violence any the less moral. Moral motives may lead a person to jump into icy waves to rescue someone; the rescuer's horror at the waves and abhorrence of cold water do not make his heroic rescue any less moral – indeed, they make it *more* morally laudable, because they demonstrate that the rescuer overcame huge motives impelling him

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

5 / What we mean by “moral”

not to jump in. The fact that sometimes it is very hard to do harm to others, that in some important respect agents are averse to doing it, or that some people are unable to go through with doing what they should do, does not make a violent or harmful act any less virtuous. Violence is virtuous if the agent, her reference group, and her audience truly regard it as the right and moral thing to do, however difficult.

What we mean by “moral”

A definition is merely a declaration of intentions about the use of a word, but some ways of using words get in the way of understanding the world, while other ways of using words help us delineate and discriminate natural kinds in the world – real entities or processes that interact in consistent ways with other natural kinds. Suppose that, coming from a certain modern Western sensibility, we define polygamy as “immoral cohabitation among three or more persons.” In most cultures throughout history, men or women have commonly had multiple spouses simultaneously – but, empirically, the participants, their kin, and everyone else in those cultures have regarded having multiple spouses as natural, legitimate, and often admirable. So defining polygamy as “immoral cohabitation among three or more persons” would exclude from consideration, a priori, most instances of actual polygamy – and would impede understanding the motives or moral perspectives of the people involved. In short, we have to keep our ethnocentric values out of our scientific definitions; indeed, we have to totally separate ethics from ontology, even when we are defining “morality.”

So we define morality in two ways, which we believe coincide and are indeed two sides of the same psychology. Morality consists of a certain set of evaluative emotions, as well as a certain set of intentions. The motives and emotions concern the feelings that something should or should not be done, while the intentions concern making relationships what they should be. When we posit that most violence is *morally motivated*, we mean that the person doing the violence subjectively feels that what she is doing is right: she believes that she should do the violence, and she is actually moved by moral emotions such as loyalty or outrage. At the same time, *moral* refers to the evaluation of action, attitudes, motives, or intentions with reference to an ideal model of how to relate. In the next chapter, we briefly review relational models

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 / Why are people violent?

theory, which characterizes the four elementary models that people use to generate, understand, coordinate, regulate, and evaluate all social relationships (Fiske, 1991, 1992, 2004). A core tenet of relational models theory is that people experience these four elementary types of relationships as intrinsically desirable, fulfilling, meaningful, and necessary: such relationships are motivating ends in themselves. People seek to create and participate in relationships that realize these four models, and evaluate all social action with reference to them: they are emotionally imbued moral ideals. They are the ways that people *must* relate. *Morality thus concerns the realization of ideal models for relationships*. What is morally good, what is right, what is obligatory is, therefore, relating according to the four ideal relational models (RMs) (Fiske, 1990). *Morality is relationship regulation* (Rai and Fiske, 2011, 2012), and *moral motivation is the motivation to make actual relationships correspond with culturally implemented ideals of the four RMs*.

Contrary to popular opinion, morality is not synonymous with pure altruism; it can be instrumentally rational and self-serving if the intended benefit is consistent with culturally appropriate realization of the right social relationship. Moreover, the social relationships that give rise to moral standards and motives need not be with other living humans: they can be relationships with deceased ancestors, spirits, or deities. Is it not moral if people know they should be peaceful, fair, and giving in their relationships with other people, but they only do so because they fear God's wrath and wish to be sent to heaven and not cast down to hell? Is it not moral if a child strives to be honest and obedient, but only because she wants to avoid ending up on Santa's "naughty" list? If you agree that moral motives can be instrumentally motivated by relationships with supernatural beings, then, logically, you must acknowledge that moral action can be instrumentally motivated by the culturally shaped social relationships among humans. If you don't acknowledge that people are morally motivated when they act in accord with their perceptions of the will of their ancestors, spirits, or god(s), then you are effectively excluding the moral lives of most humans throughout most of history. Actions that are motivated by culturally prescribed models for relationships within a community or culture, including actions intended to avoid being shamed or humiliated, actions that restore honor, and actions that enhance honor, respect, and status within a community, are still *morally* motivated if the actions are aimed toward realizing ideal models for relationships.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

7 / Conflicting moralities and post-hoc justifications

Moral action is also not restricted to thoughtful, reasoned, controlled action. Most of the time, people have strong, intuitive, emotional reactions to moral situations, which they rationalize only later, if ever (Haidt, 2001). In the moment of action, people may have no sense that their actions serve some selfish end; instead, they only feel the moral emotion and they act on it. If people experience intense moral emotions and they act on them in an uncontrolled fashion, such as by lashing out at someone who has insulted them, their actions are still morally motivated, regardless of whether they are acted upon “automatically” in the moment, or planned strategically for years (see Chapter 9).

When we use the term *moral* in this book we always mean “*moral from the perpetrator’s point of view.*”

That is, we use the term descriptively, not prescriptively. Prescriptively, we abhor all violence. But our prescriptive judgments – and the reader’s prescriptive morality – are irrelevant to the scientific explanation we seek. We seek to understand what motivates violence; once we do, we can consider the prescriptive implications of our understanding. Understanding violence will help us to minimize it. To understand violence, it is essential to maintain a clear distinction between our own moral judgments and the motives of perpetrators at the moment they commit violence. Furthermore, for the most part, perpetrators’ moral sentiments are consistent with the sentiments and judgments of their own cultural communities, however much they may differ from those of other cultures, including the writers’ or readers’ cultures.

Conflicting moralities and post-hoc justifications

The most fundamental finding of anthropological research is the descriptive fact that morals are culturally relative (Brandt, 1954; Edel and Edel, 1959; Fiske, 1990). Quite simply, many actions that people judge to be right in any given culture are judged wrong in many others.² A man walks into the yard of his neighbor, who is away, takes an ax, and tells no one that he took it. Is this wrong? Well, if the man and the neighbor are joking partners in West Africa, it’s perfectly appropriate;

² We use the terms “judge” and “judgment” throughout the book without any implication about whether the moral evaluation is based on immediate emotional response or reflectively articulated reasoning; we simply mean “morally evaluate,” in the broad sense of any attitude, value, emotion, or motive.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 / Why are people violent?

he didn't do anything wrong. A man sends a boy to ask another man for two chairs to seat important visitors, and then never returns them. Is this wrong? If the man who sent the boy is the chief of a Moose village in Burkina Faso, he "owns" everything in it and has a perfect right to appropriate whatever he wants within the boundaries of the village. So the chief of the village where I (ApF) lived kept my chairs, and everyone agreed that he was entitled to them. When he visited me and saw some rope lying on my wall, he just took it; it was his, after all. (I learned to keep my movable property out of sight; it would not have been right for the chief to search the house.) As these examples illustrate, an act that's "theft" in one culture, and therefore wrong, is "joking" or "taking what's rightfully his" in another culture, and therefore right. A married man arranges with a 17-year-old girl's parents to have his friends abduct her against her will, and then makes her have sex with him. Kidnapping and rape in one culture. Correct and legitimate polygamous marriage among the Moose and in many other cultures, where all concerned – including the girl – judge that her parents' giving her to the man was a virtuous, generous act of gratitude, requiting his years of generous gifts and service to them. Throughout this book we will describe actions that would be wrong in one culture (say, our own), but are right and even obligatory in others. None of the moral motives for violence we describe here will be intelligible without accepting the empirically irrefutable premise that actions that outsiders perceive as wrong are morally right from the cultural perspective of insiders. What is virtue in one culture is evil from the perspective of some other cultures – but the perpetrator is motivated by the morality of *his* own culture, not the moralities of other cultures he doesn't know or care about, or outsiders' standards that perhaps he may need to take into account pragmatically but that don't motivate *him*.

Diversity of moral perspectives is also common within a culture, a nation, or a community, and among the participants in a particular interaction. Is abortion murder, or a woman's right to choose and to control her own body? Is your partner's joking and dancing with that attractive man disloyalty, or just having innocent fun? If you grew up in an honor culture and feel morally entitled, indeed obligated, to threaten the man with violence and he doesn't back down, when you kill him you may be doing what you feel you had to do. Your conviction is that you just did what any self-respecting man should do. But your partner from a liberal culture may judge your action to be evil, the judicial system of a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

9 / Conflicting moralities and post-hoc justifications

modern Western state may punish you for it, and, of course, we the authors and you the readers judge homicide to be wrong.

Our aim in this book is to show that when a person is violent, he is usually morally motivated to do what he does. Often, the victim shares the moral perspective of the perpetrator, and so do third parties from the perpetrator's subcultural reference group. But it's quite common for people to differ in their moral judgments. The person who violently retaliates for an affront to honor generally expects that others share his evaluation of the situation, and hence condone his acts. However, the honor motivation of the perpetrator is the same, regardless of whether or not his victim, his girlfriend, the other people at the party, the police, the prosecutor, the jury, the journalist, the public, or the law professor share his culture of honor perspective. If the potential perpetrator knows (and cares) that some of these other people do not share his sense of honor, he may restrain himself, or simply be more careful in planning to avenge his honor. But his honor is *his* honor, his motivation is *his* motivation, either way. His moral motivation may be more intense if he knows that all concerned will mock and disparage him if he fails to defend his honor, but will hold him in esteem and praise him if he does. Others' moral evaluations do matter to him – their evaluations affect his relationships with them. Moreover, as scientists, we can use the judgments of others from the perpetrator's subculture and reference group as one kind of evidence for *inferring* his motives (as we sometimes do in this book). But *a person may be sincerely and truly morally motivated to do something that many other people involved judge to be wrong*. If he doesn't take others' judgments into account, or his moral motives are so intense that he ignores others' condemnation of his act, he is nonetheless morally motivated. It is specifically the perpetrator's motives and intentions we are trying to explain, not everyone else's.

Of course, people may deploy moral language to justify violence that is actually motivated by amoral ends (Haidt, 2001; Tsang, 2002). However, justification presupposes relevant moral sentiments that others regard as legitimate: the actor seeking to justify his violence and those to whom he appeals take for granted that *if* his violence fits the moral standards to which he is appealing, it is moral. In other words, *justifications reveal the moral standards of those being appealed to* (Austin, 1956). So even if Machiavellian psychopaths are the perpetrators of some mayhem, any acceptance, legitimation, or praise of their violence is based on moral frameworks in which such violence can be construed

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08820-7 - Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships

Alan Page Fiske and Tage Shakti Rai

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 / Why are people violent?

as virtuous. Another way of putting this is that the moral justification in question could only have arisen and would only be accepted if it tapped into a valid framework for judging action and reflected a socially accepted moral motive in the local culture. Thus, even justifications are informative about the conditions under which some people would be morally motivated by culturally legitimate standards for relationships.

Pain and suffering are not intrinsically evil

In the present cultural historical context in which life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the ultimate goals that humans “naturally” pursue, and should pursue, and hence are the most fundamental human rights, virtuous violence theory’s proposition that most violence is morally motivated seems a contradiction in terms. It is axiomatic to contemporary Western folk psychology and folk ethics that the core of morality, reciprocity, and social reason consists of minimizing harm, especially to others. For example, Mikhail (2007) suggests that humans have a universal moral grammar, one of whose principles is a prohibition against “intentional battery.” Gray *et al.* (2012) go further, arguing that *all* moral judgments derive from a cognitive template that involves a prohibition against one person intentionally harming another person.

Pain and suffering are aversive, by definition. But being aversive does not logically or empirically imply that experiencing them is evil. Pain and suffering can be morally commendable. In certain cultures in certain periods of history, and in certain contexts in a great many cultures, it is good to accept naturally occurring pain and suffering, to seek them out, or even to inflict pain and suffering on oneself. And throughout most of history people *expected* suffering – it was taken for granted as a natural, intrinsic, inevitable aspect of life.

Late medieval European culture, for example, was notable for the tremendous *positive* significance identified in pain. Suffering was not to be dismissed, vanquished, or transcended: suffering was to be felt with an ever-deepening intensity. . . . The use and application of pain . . . were considered aspects of a teleological, all-embracing civilizing process. By approaching what one wished to avoid, argued medieval thinkers, one could perfect one’s self.

(Cohen, 2010: 4)