

## **Moral Heroes Are Puppets**

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### **Abstract**

Are moral heroes (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.) masterminds with exceptional moral characters or are they merely symbolic puppets? Exploiting attribution biases in observers, I suggest that followers manufacture moral heroes out of ordinary persons by encouraging charismatic speeches and propagating heroic images.

## Moral Heroes Are Puppets

### Introduction

As the US invaded Iraq and tortured prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, progressive-minded Americans prayed for a champion, a moral hero to save the country's collective soul. A young, charismatic senator from Illinois emerged. With little in the way of executive experience and yet much in the way of oratory prowess, Obama shared a message of change, hope, and compassion that intoxicated and mobilized the political Left. Pundits likened him to John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., two of the great American moral heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Burns, 2008). Obama won the presidency in 2008 and then a Nobel Peace Prize nine months later. The savior had arrived.

Many people quickly praised Obama's moral greatness. Illustratively, the closing date for nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize that Obama went on to win was just *12 days* into his Presidency. Many world leaders congratulated Obama on his award. However, not everyone did. One sober critic and former Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Lech Walesa, noted the baselessness of the award, asking, "So soon? Too early. He has no contribution so far" (Chazan & Macdonald 2009).

Walesa's words were prescient. Soon came Obama's fall—from deity to banality. By most metrics, Obama has been, quite simply, an average president. Seven years into his presidency, Obama's public approval ratings sit at ~45%, which are remarkably unremarkable for US presidents at this point in their tenure (Gallup, 2015). Experts rank Obama 18<sup>th</sup> among the 43 presidents, just behind George H.W. Bush (Rottinghaus & Vaughn 2015). Is it possible that the public, pundits, and even the Nobel Committee mistook a mediocre man for a moral mastermind? If so, how did so many people form an inflated impression of Obama?

This chapter presents the view that Obama's story is representative and illustrative of the ascendance of ordinary persons to moral heroism, and the basic social-cognitive processes underlying these transformations. In the eyes of followers, oratory and visual campaigns can transform an otherwise ordinary person into a moral hero. This view challenges a common notion, both in the population and among some researchers, that moral leaders are innately great persons—intelligent, skilful, wise, and altruistic at heart (Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou 2015). I will present the view that this romanticized notion of moral heroes is overblown, and that much of moral heroism is a social construction. Moral heroes, like Obama, may be charismatic orators who communicate the right message with the right look for their time and place (Bligh & Kohles 2009). The perception of moral heroism may only be skin deep, not extending beyond these superficial characteristics. Simply put, the moral hero may be less like a mastermind and more like a puppet.

### **Historical Context**

For centuries, scholars have debated just how much individual brilliance is responsible for the influence that leaders seem to have. The original “Great Man” theory of leadership proposed that a small number of exceptional individuals (e.g., Napoleon, Martin Luther King, Jr.) is responsible for most of the important changes in history. According to the great man theory, these individuals had that “special something,” which may have included intelligence, altruism, skill, and charisma; these personal qualities allowed the hero to change the course of history (Carlyle 1840; Woods 1913). Contra this dispositional account were theories that attributed the apparent greatness of these figures to their historical context and to a bidirectional relationship with their followers (James 1880; Spencer 1896; Weber 1947).

The debate surfaced in more generalized form in social/personality psychology when

Walter Mischel (1968) critiqued personality psychology. Mischel suggested that everyday intuitions about personality are wrong—behavior is far more a product of situational pressures than it is of enduring dispositions. Personality psychologists (e.g., Bem & Allen 1974; Funder & Ozer 1983) counter argued, leading to a standoff.

All-encompassing generalizations about whether dispositions or situations are responsible for behavior are now rare. Current theories tend to be interactionist in nature—behavior is primarily the result of the dynamic interplay between individuals and situational forces (e.g., Fleeson 2004). That is, moral heroism is likely the product of the right person (disposition) being in the right place and time (situation). Precisely which dispositional characteristics, external forces, and causal processes between them underlie moral heroism remains a point a departure among scholars.

### **Theoretical Stance**

Rooted in trait theory (Allport 1937; Catell 1950; Murray 1938; see Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006 for a review), and heavier on the dispositional side is what I will informally call the “mastermind theory”—moral heroes have a strong moral character, which includes compelling moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1984) and a heart-warming life story (McAdams & Guo 2015; Colby & Damon 1992). Personal development or talent is a necessary pre-requisite for becoming a moral hero.

I will call the alternative view, which is consistent with the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner 1979), the “puppet theory”. The puppet theory suggests that groups manufacture moral heroes out of otherwise ordinary persons to symbolize the cause and unite followers. Monty Python’s film, “Life of Brian,” satirized the life of Jesus Christ and captured the essence of the puppet theory. Brian was a Jewish rebel; while running from Roman soldiers,

he stumbled into a line of mystics and prophets. To avoid being detected, Brian mumbled nonsensical blessings, which had the unintended effect of drawing a devoted following. Brian became a living deity, ending with his crucifixion.

In the puppet theory, dispositional prerequisites for moral heroism are only skin deep, limited to impression management functions such as oratory skills and physical appearance. Followers play an often unrecognized and important role in the lives of moral heroes. The puppet theory is also consistent with evolutionary accounts positing that maintaining hierarchy (Fiske 1992) and sacralizing mundane objects or people (Atran & Norenzayan 2004; Tetlock 2003) binds followers into cooperative groups, which tend to out-compete discordant groups and lone individuals for scant resources. The puppet theory suggests that followers romanticize and elevate a person to the status of moral hero because doing so confers upon group members an adaptive advantage.

Sacralizing an object, a practice, or a person binds people together, but it may achieve this end by suppressing rational thought processes (Haidt 2012). Communication surrounding moral heroes exploits the uncritical thinking of star-struck followers, deceiving them into becoming loyal group members. Observers effectively apply the “duck test” when encountering potential moral heroes—if it looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, and walks like a duck, then it is probably a duck. Analogously, if someone talks like a moral hero and looks like a moral hero, then they must be a moral hero. The duck test may be especially likely to fail in the detection of moral heroes because of the incentive structure built into impression formation. To maximize both social and material rewards, people do best when they *appear* moral to others while *behaving* selfishly in private (Batson 2008; Frimer, Schaefer & Oakes 2014; Sharif & Norenzayan 2007; von Hippel & Trivers 2011). The costs associated with sending such an

elaborate signal of their moral virtue (Lyons 2005) may be worth it to the hero: heroes tend to have lots of children (Rusch, Leunissen, & van Vugt 2015).

The perception of moral heroism may also benefit followers by serving a symbolic and motivational function (Allison & Goethals 2010; Pfeffer 1981). Moral heroes tend to emerge during times of crisis (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl 2004; Haslam et al. 2001; Pillai & Meindl 1998; Weber 1947). Even though followers may hold erroneously romanticized impressions of their leaders, these impressions may optimize the performance of followers (de Luque, Washburn, Waldman, & House 2008).

### **Evidence**

Next, I describe evidence that supports the puppet theory, in form of two modes by which followers prop up moral heroes.

**The Hero's Speech.** First, I suggest that followers prop up moral heroes by encouraging them to make emotionally stirring, charismatic, prosocial speeches. These speeches may cause audiences to form an impression that the speaker is a moral hero. To experience this phenomenon, recall Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) that launched him on the world stage:

If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandmother. If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.

Obama and moral heroes tell tear-jerking, morally elevating stories that may seem unique. However, these speeches conform to a pattern. The hero's story begins with a childhood mentor who leads the young hero to witness the suffering of others. Through this experience, the budding moral hero develops a clear moral purpose, and decides to repair the problems through

some altruistic goal pursuit (McAdams & Guo 2015; McNamee & Wesolik 2014; Walker & Frimer 2007).

These stirring remarks tick all the boxes in charismatic speech checklist, which include: a shared history and identity; praise for followers' agency; similarities between followers and the leader; shared moral values, long term goals, faith, and hope. And they avoid pitfalls such as discussing individuals' self-interest, instrumental thinking, and short-term goals (Shamir, Arthur, & House 1994). Communicating a message that resonates with a group's core values and oratory skills are critical component of a charismatic speech (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Frimer, Biesanz, Walker, & MacKinlay 2013).

Evidence is accumulating that these speeches are effective at convincing an audiences of the speaker's greatness, but reveal *surprisingly little* about the speaker's character. Independent of their behavior as leaders, politicians gain approval from the population simply by communicating in a prosocial manner. A recent study found that prosocial language during floor debates of US Congress predicts public approve 6 months later (Frimer, Aquino, Gebauer, Zhu, & Oakes 2015). In fact, prosocial language is the best single explanation for why Americans approve or disapprove of their government—surpassing other explanations like Congressional productivity and conflict, the economy, and world events.

In lab studies, delivering a prosocial speech changes how an audience perceives the speaker, creating expectations that the prosocial speaker will behave generously toward a stranger. However, people who deliver prosocial speeches turn out to be *no more likely* to behave generously toward a stranger than people who use less flowery language (Frimer, Zhu, & Decter-Frain 2016). Ordinary people are surprisingly flexible with their words, able to ramp up the

prosocial language when they like (Frimer et al 2015). Talk seems to be a deceptively poor harbinger of action and personal virtue.

Underlying this misattribution is a generic psychological process. Prosocial speeches may build false impressions because of the correspondence bias, whereby audiences make dispositional inferences from small verbal displays, even when the audience is aware of the situational forces that led to the speech (Jones & Harris, 1967). Audiences default to making dispositional inferences because the speaker is in plain view (perceptually salient), whereas the forces that coaxed the speaker into saying what he/she did are invisible (Gilbert & Malone 1995). The present findings suggest that speeches serve a distinctly *social* function—to persuade others (Fiske 1992). Future research should investigate whether people can intentionally manipulate an audience’s perceptions of them, and rally cause-promoting behavior, merely by delivering a charismatic speech.

**The Hero Pose.** Portraiture is a second mode by which followers manufacture moral heroes. Once again, the story of Barack Obama is illustrative. As Obama ran for the presidency in 2008, an image symbolizing his message and his campaign went viral. Above the words “hope”, “change”, or “progress” was a stylized blue-and-red portrait of Obama, gazing pensively upwards and to his left (the viewer’s right).

This gaze turns out to be the quintessential posture of the moral hero. Images of other moral heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela also depict them with this posture more often than one would expect merely by chance, and more often than celebrities like Elvis Presley, Brad Pitt, and Marilyn Monroe do (Frimer & Sinclair 2016). This curious tendency for images to depict heroes gazing up and to the viewer’s right may be the result of their ideologically minded followers selecting and propagating these specific images to

promote the common cause. When tasked with selecting a single image of a leader to go on a poster to represent the social cause, people tend to select the up-and-right posture (Frimer & Sinclair 2015).

What do these followers perceive in these up-and-right poses that make the depicted individual seem so heroic? One possibility is that these poses make the subject seem calm and rational. The left cerebral hemisphere, which is more responsible for voluntary emotional displays, controls the muscles on the left side of the face (Rinn 1984). Stemming from this basic left-right asymmetry in neurological functioning, the right side of the face may be less emotionally expressive than the left (e.g., Sackeim, Gur, & Saucy, 1978). Perhaps followers select up-and-right posed images of their leaders to portray the subject as rational and calm, and thus ready to make good decisions as a leader.

At a semantic level, the hero's gaze (up and to the viewer's right) may also activate a system of conceptual metaphors that link intrinsically meaningless directions to personal virtue (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The horizontal dimension is steeped in metaphor, with the right being superior to the left. This is evident in terms like "righteous" and the term "right" meaning "correct", and the Latin word "sinister" meaning "left". Moreover, the vertical dimension also carries evaluative tones, with the up being better than down. This is evident in terms like "uplifting," "reach for the skies," and "heaven above" (Haidt & Algoe 2004). The term "upright" neatly summarizes the metaphorically superior direction. Resultantly, looking upwards and looking rightwards (in the viewer's reference) makes a person look warm, competent, proud, and optimistic (but not more attractive; Frimer & Sinclair 2015).

The hero gaze may also communicate a sense of agency—that the moral hero has the capacity to make things happen. People conceive of agents as being on the left. When asked to

draw an event in which a circle pushes a square, people tend to draw the circle (the agent) to the left of the square (the patient; Chatterjee, Southwood, & Basilico, 1999). By depicting the hero facing toward the viewer's right, the viewer may perceive the hero as agentic. Future research should investigate the underlying perceptual mechanisms responsible for the hero pose, and test whether seeing the hero pose can mobilize cause-promoting behavior from followers.

### **Extension/Expansion**

What evidence would falsify the puppet theory? A finding that budding moral heroes have character strengths that are unrelated to impression management, such as unobtrusive measures of altruism, honesty, and empathy would constitute falsifying evidence.

An expansion of the theory is to investigate other mechanisms by which groups create the perception of moral heroism. One promising avenue is the giving of awards (e.g., the Nobel Peace Prize, the Carnegie Medal). A second expansion is to work out how critical followers select and prop up moral heroes. In the case of Obama, these active followers may have been people like Jack Corrigan and Mary Beth Cahill who selected Obama to give the 2004 DNC speech, and Shepard Fairey, the artist behind the stylized red-and-blue portrait of an inspirationally gazing Obama. How the larger group also plays a causal role also remains unclear. A final extension is to devise and test procedures for minimizing the persuasive effects endemic in moral heroism, to facilitate leadership selection based on substantive action (e.g., track record) and less so on baseless persuasive tactics.

When asked to name famous moral heroes of recent years, Americans list Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, and John F. Kennedy—but rarely Obama (Frimer & Sinclair 2015). What did the former individuals do that Obama did not? Perhaps Obama did something that the others did not, which caused his fall from grace. Whereas the classic

moral heroes died at by an assassin's bullet or were incarcerated, Obama actually had to show his character—he took office.

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