

Groups Create Moral Superheroes to Defend Sacred Values**Jeremy A. Frimer**

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Word Count: 4094 (main text only); 5028 (total)**Abstract**

What role do moral heroes (e.g., Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Osama Bin Laden) play in ideological movements? One possibility is that they function as leaders and agents, making key decisions. In this chapter, I examine an alternative possibility—that moralistic groups help *create* moral superheroes out of relatively ordinary individuals to serve as mascots, symbolizing the group's objectives and modeling self-sacrifice. Taking a social functionalist perspective, I describe the motive behind this practice. As symbols of self-sacrifice for the group's sacred values, moral heroes help bind together adherents into powerful collectives. Seemingly nonsensical group practices of sacralizing objects or rituals serve an adaptive function by helping adherents identify one another. Both ideologically right-leaning and left-leaning groups rely on sacredness for this purpose. I then describe a mechanism by which moral heroes come to represent self-sacrifice for these sacred values — the inspiring, prosocial speech. Along with gossip, ingroup favoritism, and altruistic punishment, hero creation may be an evolved moral “technology” that helps humans form large, powerful groups of non-kin.

Groups Create Moral Superheroes to Defend Sacred Values

South Africa was once under racist, Apartheid rule until a small group of dissidents attracted a larger following, which fought for and won universal suffrage in 1994. Decades later, under the perceived threat of western imperialism in the Middle East, a small group of Sunni Muslims joined together, attracted adherents, and seized control of a swathe of land in Iraq and Syria the size of Belgium. The anti-apartheid movement and Islamic State are but two examples of “successful” moralistic groups. Not all moralistic groups succeed, however. Under threat of income inequality, Occupy Wall Street showed a promising start in 2011 then dwindled. What the former movements had that the latter one lacked was a deified moral superhero—Nelson Mandela and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the former cases, respectively.

In this chapter, I explore the possibility that successful moralistic groups make use of a number of evolved “technologies” that bind group members together and to the cause. Among a larger set of social and psychological adaptations is the tendency for moralistic groups to manufacture moral heroes. These heroes serve as mascots, symbolizing the core messages of the group; the effect of their presence is loyalty, obedience, and even self-sacrifice from members of the tribe. I begin by taking a social functionalist perspective to understand how the seemingly nonsensical group practices of sacralizing objects and rituals serves an adaptive, binding function. I then explore one mechanism by which groups transform relatively ordinary persons into self-sacrificial mascots.

Moralistic Groups: A Social Functionalist Perspective

Militaries, social movements, and sports teams are uniquely human (Haidt, 2012). No one has ever heard of anything even resembling the Islamic State of Iguanas, the Giraffe Greenpeace Movement, or the Nurse Shark Yankees because they do not exist. Only humans

managed to form large cooperative groups of genetically unrelated individuals. Humans form these groups simply because they can. Large, cooperative groups are advantageous: Compared to lone individuals and discordant groups, they are better at gaining and defending resources, raising the adaptive fitness of individual members. No other species forms such groups perhaps because they cannot. For a large group to work and remain viable, group members must cooperate with one another. Only humans have figured out how to get non-relatives to cooperate.

The key threat to group cohesion is freeriders. Each group member is tempted to cheat on the group, behaving selfishly while still collecting benefits from group membership. Doing so raises the cost of group membership to other adherents; they too become tempted to cheat. Disintegration becomes inevitable. For the group to succeed, it must find a way of preventing individuals from acting out of selfishness. The key to the formation of large, powerful groups is social glue—a set of operative social mechanisms that turn individuals into team players. A suitable name for the collection of such social and mental mechanisms is “morality” (Haidt 2007). Along with gossip (Feinberg, Willer, & Schultz, 2014), altruistic punishment (Fehr & Gächter, 2002), and ingroup favoritism (Brewer, 2007), sacred values and the moral heroes that defend them help bind together individuals into powerful, cooperative groups.

Sacred values identify group members. For large groups to succeed, members need to know whether a stranger is an ally. Only if the individual is an ally is the stranger worthy of trust and cooperation. Humans may have solved this problem of stranger identity, in part, with sacred values (Durkheim, 1995/1915; Haidt, 2012; Smith, 1976/1759). The heuristic is that only allies share one’s sacred values.

A sacred value is a special kind of good thing. Most values are amenable to tradeoffs and instrumental sacrifice—people treat them as tools. For example, a person who values money

may sacrifice \$20,000 in hopes of making \$30,000 (e.g., on the stock market) or trade it for another thing (e.g., a car). Knowing that Ingrid values money is a poor method of knowing whether she is a friend or foe — because she values money *instrumentally*. Sacred values are a special kind of goods, ones that are immune to tradeoffs and exchanges (Tetlock, 2003). Sacred values are ones that seem to have *inherent* value (see also Bastian & Crimston, this volume). Life itself is a commonly held sacred value in the West; people who hold life as sacred are repulsed by the thought of sacrificing a child for material gain (e.g., from life insurance) or even to save the lives of five children needing an organ donor. Life is not universally sacred, however. Nazis and ISIS do not treat all human life as sacred.

Other examples of sacralization are Catholics sacralizing traditional marriage, Hindus sacralizing the cow, and Jews sacralizing the Sabbath. Sacred values tend to be outlandish and bizarre (Atran, Axelrod, & Davis, 2007). They imbue individuals with a sense of moral righteousness, wherein “our” cause is good and “theirs” is bad. The ends of defending the integrity of sacred values come to justify the means. This may even occur within social psychology, wherein scholars misinterpret findings to advance a social agenda, such as the advancement of social justice (see Jussim, Crawford, Stevens, Anglin, and Duarte, this volume).

Protecting the “natural” state of sacred entities, even when rational calculus prescribes tradeoffs and revision, is costly. For example, Hindus forgo a readily available food source by sacralizing the cow. Why sacralize then? The seemingly irrational nature of the sacrosanct may serve a social function. No rationally acting individual, operating on simple cost/benefit calculation, would protect the original state of another group’s sacred values. By this logic, anyone who protects a sacred object or practice must be a group member. And anyone who treats the sacrosanct callously, as mere tool, is evil and must be stopped.

Sacred values of the political left. Do only certain groups, namely ones that cling to antiquated, discriminatory dogma, protect their own version of the sacrosanct? The examples of Catholics, Hindus, and Jews sacralizing align with this intuition. And findings from moral foundations theory suggest that political conservatives use sanctity and purity more than do liberals when making moral judgments (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Conservatives are more sensitive to disgust, a reaction to the violation of the sacred (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009). Does this mean that Leftist groups, such as environmentalists and people fighting against the discrimination of minorities, cohere into groups without the use of sacred values?

If sacred values serve an adaptive function, then their application should be universal, applying to ideologically Right-leaning and Left-leaning groups alike. The crux of this culturally universal versus culturally relative issue is whether Left-leaning groups (also) hold certain cherished entities as sacred. Evidence is emerging that they do: the Left condemns changes to the environment (e.g., the Keystone XL Pipeline) as, first and foremost, a desecration of nature and sacrilege of the Earth (Frimer, Tell & Motyl, 2015; see Bastian & Crimston, this volume). In fact, another proposed oil pipeline leaving the Albertan tar sands travels westward to the Pacific Ocean, through a region aptly named the “Sacred Headwaters.” Does this necessarily mean that the Left sacralizes the environment? Perhaps environmentalists understand that environmental destruction causes humans and other animals to suffer; they condemn environmental changes for the harm they cause (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014), and use sanctity/purity/disgust rhetoric merely for dramatic effect in persuading others of their conclusion (Haidt, 2001).

Does the Left condemn environmental destruction merely for the suffering it exacts? If so, then the Left ought not condemn environmental destruction that causes no suffering. This is

a challenging question because most environmental degradation occurs to ecosystems that involve sentient beings. In oil spills, pelicans gasp for air. With climate change, humans are displaced, starve, and go to war; polar bears starve. Environmental desecration and suffering are normally conflated in the real world.

To test whether the environment truly is sacred to the Left, we needed a context in which environmental destruction occurred with no sentient beings present. A recent mountain climbing controversy in Argentina ideally suited this purpose. In 1970, an Italian climber tried to make the first ascent of a majestic peak, backed by a small army of climbers and a gas-powered drill. He installed hundreds of bolts into the side of the lifeless, sterile granite flanks of the mountain Cerro Torre. The international climbing community condemned the bolting as a desecration of the mountain. A systematic analysis of an online forum discussion about the bolting, and a survey of climbers themselves (who identified as social liberals) confirmed that concerns about the sanctity of the mountain—and not pain and suffering—explained their outrage (Frimer, Tell, & Haidt, 2015). Both the political Right and the Left sacralize; they do so because sacred values provide a reliable indicator of group membership.

Evidence is building that the Left and the Right are more symmetric in their social cognition than previously thought. Both the Left and the Right sacralize their own objects and practices (Frimer et al., 2015), discriminate against the “other team” (Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013; Brandt, Wetherell, & Crawford, this volume), assign blame to perpetrators when the perpetrator is from an outgroup (Morgan, Mullen, & Skitka, 2010). Along with these features of moral judgment, I propose that the Left and the Right also manufacture and worship their own moral heroes.

Moral heroes as mascots

What role did Nelson Mandela play in the anti-apartheid movement, Osama bin Laden in Al Qaeda, Al Gore in the environmental movement? Moral heroes may have been the behind-the-scenes *drivers* of their respective movements. As a “master of puppets”, they may have imagined and designed objectives and strategies, actively recruited and organized followers, and managed internal discord (see von Hippel, this volume). Moral heroes may also fill a *passive* role. As Muppets or mascots, they served as the public face of the movement. To serve as effective mascots, moral heroes must have certain marketable qualities. What are the reputational features that make up a moral hero? Next, I will make the case that at least two features—sacred values and self-sacrifice—are necessary perceived feature of moral heroes.

Moral heroes as symbols of sacred values. Evidence is emerging that moral heroes serve a symbolic function. Both the Left and the Right has its own moral heroes that symbolize the group’s sacred values (Frimer, Biesanz, Walker, & MacKinlay, 2013). American professors judged the legacy—as promoters of social hierarchy (a Right Wing value) versus promoters of social equality (a Left Wing value)—of 40 influential figures of the 20th century from TIME magazine’s lists. The most hierarchy-promoting figures were Pope John Paul II, Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Billy Graham whereas the most equality-promoting icons were Ché Guevara, Rosa Parks, Emmeline Pankhurst (woman’s suffrage in the UK), Margaret Sanger (Planned Parenthood), and Harvey Milk (first openly gay elected representative in the U.S.). Another sample of Left- and Right-leaning professors judged the moral character of the 40 figures; the Right idolized the hierarchy promoters and vilified the equality-promoters. Moral heroes of the Right symbolized religion, nationalism and military might, and free market economics. The Left did the exact opposite; their moral heroes promoted

a society that treated women, racial minorities, the poor, and sexual minorities as equals and their villains promoted social hierarchy.

Moral heroes as models of self-sacrifice. Moral heroes must epitomize goodness. Goodness may have both group-relative features (e.g., sacred values promoting hierarchy vs. equality for ideological groups) but also more universal features. Research from both intergroup and interpersonal research has reliably found that the single most important question that people ask when deciding whether another person is good or bad is whether or not they are warm and prosocial (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Simply put, people like givers and dislike takers. To illustrate how this might influence moral hero perception, imagine learning that, behind the scenes, Nelson Mandela was cold and harsh with his team, and quietly exploited his position within the anti-apartheid movement to become a multi-millionaire. This is counter to the common conception of Mandela because most people think of him as both a social equalizer (symbolic of a Leftist sacred value) and a self-sacrificial giver.

We see this tendency for both the Left and the Right to revere givers in judgments of influential figures. The prosocial dimension nearly perfectly distinguished moral heroes from moral villains for both Left- and Right-leaning judges (Frimer et al., 2013). That is, both leftists and rightists judged the most prosocial figures (Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa) to be more moral than the least prosocial figures (Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, Ayatullah Khomeini, Margaret Thatcher, and Vladimir Lenin).

How do people come to their impressions about whether other people are givers or takers? One possibility is by observing behavior. However, the social intent of a given behavior

can be ambiguous. For example, is setting off bombs purely antisocial? Written or spoken words offer another information source, and can explain the social intent of complex behavior.

Consider the following self-defense by a known and admitted saboteur and bomber

I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Nelson Mandela gave this speech in 1964 while on trial for sabotage (he was found guilty and sentenced to prison). Mandela claimed that the seemingly antisocial behavior means (setting off bombs) may have served a prosocial end. Sacred values (equality) and the ultimate form of giving for the cause are evident in his speech, giving the impression that he is both selfless and symbolizes sacred values of the Left.

In the next section, I will review evidence that moral heroes have a generalized tendency to talk about giving to the cause, just like Mandela did here. I will then describe how audiences cannot help but use this information to form impressions about the speaker, and how these impressions feed into the process of moral hero manufacturing.

Moral heroes have a selfless glow

Moral heroes tend to talk about helping others. In one study (Walker & Frimer, 2007), each of the moral heroes in the study had received a national award, given to “the unsung heroes who volunteer their time, their efforts and a great deal of their lives to helping others, and who ask for nothing in return.” To name a few of their accomplishments, these moral heroes had raised funds for sick children, helped immigrants adjust to their new home, connected young offenders to role models, or helped young single mothers return to their studies. We sat down with 25 awardees and asked them about their lives. To test whether these moral heroes were

different than the population, we recruited and interviewed a demographically matched comparison group.

The heroes told remarkable stories (Walker & Frimer, 2007). Their stories were rich in self-empowered themes of agency, “helper” figures to whom they recalled having a secure attachment style, optimism, and redemptive turns wherein a bad event gave way to a good outcome. Moreover, caring heroes talked about helping others as if these efforts were intertwined with their own desires for power and achievement (Frimer et al., 2011, 2012). Their stories made it sound as if they were helping others out for a sense of personal fulfillment or meaning, rather than out of obligation. Personality variables coded from verbal measures yielded more pronounced differences between moral heroes and the comparison group than did self-report personality inventories.

To get a sense of how people normally responded to interview questions, consider the following excerpt from an interview with a participant in the comparison group. The interviewer prompted this “ordinary” person for a high point event in his life:

Is there some event that signals a particular high point in your life, for you?

It’s probably easier to signify the low points.

Well, let’s try the high points first. I’m looking for one that stands out.

The highest point of my life probably, other than my marriage, would be the day I won the [local] Drama Festival, as the director. It was my debut as a director, and I brought a play down from [my home town] down here to [the city] to go into the [local] Drama Festival. We drove for twenty-two hours getting here. Bunch of complete amateurs as actors who came up against the best that the rest of [the region] could offer, and... and won. It was one of those things that I had a feeling for. I felt I could do something with this play; I felt I could associate with this play; I felt I could make this play work. I had to teach everybody how to act and teach everybody how to emote, how to interreact, and it became a great teaching experience for me, and in the end it was very rewarding because we won five of the seven awards that were given out in the festival.

This comparison group participant describes a drama festival; the central theme he communicated was pride in a personal achievement and recognition; connecting or helping others seems to merely be a means to an end of winning the drama festival.

By contrast, the moral heroes' stories were extraordinarily prosocial. The following is an excerpt of an interview from Sam (a pseudonym), a Caring Canadian Award recipient. Sam also describes winning a prize, but with importantly different social meaning.

... the first time I received some public acknowledgment was a high point. We were working diligently to raise funds for the Big Brother association in [the city]. Drew and I were the two ... I guess we'd call ourselves the cofounders of it.... We were frantically working away at organizing a boxing match in [the city]. We had fighters lined up; we had a lot of different things going on, a lot of promotion and advertisement.... And Drew, that night ... just before the last fight was on, he said, "Now I have a special recognition." And he said, "The motto of Big Brothers: No man stands so straight as when he stoops to help a fatherless boy." And Drew said, "The man who stands straightest with me right now is Sam, who's helped us put on..." – and he mentioned all the different events ... (Frimer et al. 2011, p.155).

For Sam, achievement and recognition seem to only be valuable insofar as they reflect beneficence toward fatherless children. His story may send shivers down the spine of some readers, giving them a feeling of moral elevation (Vianello, Galliani, & Haidt, 2010) and the impression that Sam is a giver. The story communicates an intrinsic desire to see disadvantaged children flourish, giving the impression that Sam has a kind of glow about him. Systematic analyses found that this glow (the tendency to communicate desires to help others) generalizes across a variety of different stories that moral heroes tell (e.g., early memories, turning point event, future goals; Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; Walker & Frimer, 2007).

The function of prosocial rhetoric. The glowing speeches and stories of moral heroes could be a symptom of an underlying disposition to put others' needs ahead of their own. If so, then people who talk about helping others would actually tend to help other people. Applied to the case of Sam, his speech about helping fatherless boys would be a reliable indicator that he really is a giver. Ongoing, systematic tests are finding that this is not the case.

In one study, participants described their personal goals, which naturally vary in how much they were about helping others. We measured this variability with validated computerized

content analysis called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007) and a set dictionary of prosocial words (Frimer et al. 2014). Naïve judges read the goals and guessed how prosocially each person would behave in an economic game. The judges guessed that people who described prosocial goals would behave prosocially. But they were mistaken. People who described prosocial goals were no more likely to behave prosocially to a stranger in than people who described self-serving goals. Even with a large sample ($N > 3500$), meta-analyzed, prosocial talk remained undiagnostic of prosocial action (Frimer, Zhu, & Decter-Frain, 2015).

To illustrate, a participant who described goals like “I would like to have a legacy of being a charitable person. It means a lot because some close to me have died of cancer and I would like to help those in need.” behaved totally selfishly in the economic game. And another participant who said that he wanted “to save enough money to pay for my own car. I need to pinch a few pennies to make this happen. This will enable me to be independent and to go where I want” behaved extremely generously. A person’s words make a poor indicator of a person’s constitution. The correspondence bias may explain this discrepancy (Jones & Harris 1967). Audiences mistakenly interpret a speaker’s words as being a reflection of the speaker’s internal disposition because audiences fail to recognize and correct for the force of situational demands on the speaker. A person’s words seem to be a product of a person’s context and motivation, but not their enduring qualities.

Why, then, do moral heroes give such elevating, prosocial speeches, if these speeches do not reflect their inner dispositions? The simple answer is because it works. That is, prosocial, cooperative language impresses an audience and leads to social approval. Moral heroes may even have implicit knowledge of this, and craft their speeches to impress. Lab studies are

finding that assigning a speaker to write down their goals that are about helping others (vs. any goals) then read them out loud to an audience reliably enhances the impression of the audience of the speaker.

This effect of prosocial language as a tool for impression management scales up to explain how governments gain the confidence of the governed (Frimer, Aquino, Gebauer, Zhu, & Oakes, 2015). A text analysis of all ~124 million words spoken during floor debates in U.S. Congress found that prosocial language strongly predicted public approval ratings by the American public 6 months into the future, suggesting that the language of Congress may *influence* public sentiment. In 1996, when transcription of Congress began, public approval was modest (~30%). It climbed over the next few years to peak around 50% in 2002, before undergoing a precipitous decline to record-low levels of approval (10%) by 2014. The trend in prosocial language followed the same trend, beginning at 2.3% in 1996, climbing to 2.6% in 2002, and dropping to 2.0% by 2014. Even controlling for a raft of alternative factors (e.g., the economy, the efficacy of Congress at passing bills, conflict within Congress, exogenous world events), prosocial language remained the strongest unique predictor. Congressional language may sway the public directly (a surprisingly large segment of the public watches floor debates on the C-SPAN channel) and through the media.

Together, these findings suggest that the inspiring, prosocial language of moral heroes is not reflective of who they are as persons. Rather, their language serves to persuade others and galvanize support for the cause. That is, perhaps individuals become moral heroes as a *consequence* of giving uplifting, prosocial speeches. Groups may select inspiring speakers to become their moral heroes, regardless of their private shortcomings. Nelson Mandela's marital infidelity and lackluster presidency aside, he was a moving and charismatic public speaker.

Conclusion

Sacred values help identify group members. By giving uplifting speeches, moral heroes come to personify self-sacrifice for these sacred values. These heroes help bind together group members in their common moral cause. Adherents may simply copy the group-centric, self-sacrificial behavior of moral heroes. Group members may also follow the instructions, demands, and even orders of their moral heroes. And when other group members fail to follow orders, adherents may demand obedience. Both the Left and the Right demand obedience when the authority represents their own ideology (Frimer, Gaucher, and Schaefer, 2014). More generally, re-analyses of the original Milgram shock experiments suggest that obedience to authority is more about a sense of collusion between commander and commanded and less about blind deference to the “man in charge” (Reicher & Haslam, 2011). Moral heroes create a sense of “we”, which invites adherents to willingly self-sacrifice for the cause.

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