

Liberals Condemn Sacrilege Too: The Harmless Desecration of Cerro Torre

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Jeremy A. Frimer¹, Caitlin E. Tell¹, and Jonathan Haidt²

Abstract

Are social conservatives the only ones who use concerns about sacred objects or practices when making moral judgments, such as when they defend the “sanctity of marriage”? Or do liberals condemn sacrilege too? A third possibility is that all talk about sanctity and sacrilege is merely post hoc justification of moral judgments based solely on the perception of harm to sentient or anthropomorphized beings. We present evidence that liberals, like conservatives, morally condemn harmless violations of their own sacred objects. In most cases of liberal sacrilege (e.g., environmental destruction), sentient beings suffer. To deconflate desecration from harm, we examined a context in which someone altered an object that was lifeless yet sacred to a group of liberals—the mountain Cerro Torre. Three studies found that liberals condemned the alteration of the mountain as a harmless desecration. Defending sacred values may bind group members into a cohesive moral community.

Keywords

morality, moral foundations, sacred values, ideology, liberals

Does either side of the American culture war own the concept of sanctity? On its face, the answer appears to be the political right. When arguing over abortion, liberals defend a woman’s right to make decisions about her body, whereas conservatives stand for the “sanctity of life.” Similarly, liberals support same-sex marriage to ensure equal treatment under the law, and conservatives oppose it to preserve the “sanctity of marriage.”

Studies using moral foundations theory have found that social conservative morality relies more heavily on the sanctity foundation than does liberal morality. Conservatives are more likely to endorse questionnaire items such as “People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed” (Graham et al., 2011). These examples and findings raise the possibility—which we will call Hypothesis 1—that liberals simply do not base moral judgments in the sanctity foundation, even if they are capable of feeling intuitions related to it. In Haidt’s early research on moral dumbfounding, he found frequent cases of liberal respondents saying that they felt disgusted by a harmless taboo violation (such as having consensual protected sex with one’s sibling), but these respondents sometimes then added that their own feelings of disgust do not count as sufficient grounds for condemnation (Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993).

A second competing possibility—Hypothesis 2—is that liberals do base some moral judgments on sanctity but sacralize different things than do conservatives. Haidt (2010) raised this possibility:

Conservatives, particularly religious conservatives, live in a more sacralized world. Liberals, particularly secular scientifically-

minded liberals, live in a more materialist, un-magical world. Yet [some evidence of sanctity] can be seen in the way the left treats environmental issues and the natural world as something sacred, to be cared for above and beyond its consequences for human—or even animal—welfare.

A third possibility—Hypothesis 3—is that *nobody* bases their judgment on concepts of sanctity. Gray, Schein, and Ward (2014) argue that all moral judgments ultimately reduce to the perception of harm caused by an intentional “agent” upon a suffering “patient.” In the case of moral violations that appear to be harmless (such as flag desecration), people automatically and subjectively perceive the objectively absent patient in a process called “dyadic completion.” Any rhetorical condemnation using sacredness is mere post hoc fabrication, and the real action driving moral judgment is the perception of a victim who feels pain and an agent who is perceived to be culpable for that suffering.

Empirical Adjudication

Having described three competing accounts of whether liberals and conservatives use sanctity to make moral judgments, we

¹ University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

² New York University, Stern School of Business, New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Jeremy A. Frimer, Department of Psychology, University of Winnipeg,
515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 2E9.
Email: j.frimer@uwinnipeg.ca



Figure 1. Cerro Torre (left panel) and nine of the ~400 bolts that Maestri drilled into its flanks (right panel). Note. Left photo by Jeremy Frimer, and right photo by Kelly Cordes.

now set up an empirical test. Evidence showing that liberals condemn a harmless act as a desecration would be incompatible with Hypothesis 1 (liberals do not use sanctity) and with Hypothesis 3 (nobody uses sanctity), and it would support Hypothesis 2 (liberals use sanctity too, just about different issues than conservatives). Our design will not let us say whether liberals use sanctity thinking as *often* as do conservatives; sanctity could still play a larger role in conservative morality than in liberal morality. But it is important to establish—for it has never been shown directly within a moral foundations framework—that liberals rely upon the sanctity foundation for at least some of their judgments.

Evidence of liberals condemning a harmless desecration may be sparse because desecrations of sacred objects often involve direct physical or emotional harm. To illustrate this problem, consider how those on the left treat the Earth or nature as sacred and vilify industrial polluters. Liberals may in fact condemn pollution because they perceive it to be a desecration or because of its harmful effects on sentient beings (such as oil-soaked pelicans). The fact that desecration and harm usually go together makes it difficult to determine whether such condemnation is driven by a feeling of desecration that is unrelated to harm or suffering—even the suffering of an imagined “Mother Earth.”

One way to deconfound concerns about harm and sanctity is to find a case of pollution or a change to the environment that causes no harm to any sentient creature and no interference in any ecosystem. In this article, we provide such evidence using a unique data set: moral judgments made by politically liberal mountain climbers about another climber who drilled bolts into a revered mountain.

The legend of Cerro Torre. Cerro Torre is a majestic mountain in the Argentine Andes, “a savage fang of rock, falling away on all sides for thousands of feet, encrusted in a fragile armour of ice, and constantly battered by the winds and storms that sweep across the Patagonian Ice Cap” (Wilson, 1972, p. 21; see Figure 1). For climbers, Cerro Torre is an icon worthy of reverence, great suffering, and the risk of death. Its fame increased in 1959 when Italian Cesare Maestri¹ and Austrian Toni Egger attempted to become the first humans to make the prestigious first ascent to the summit. Maestri returned from the climb and claimed to have succeeded in reaching the top. Some climbers were skeptical, however, and Maestri had no corroborating evidence—in an avalanche, Maestri lost his camera and Egger his life. Over time, most of the climbing community dismissed Maestri’s claims of success.

To set the record straight, Maestri returned to the mountain in 1970, this time with a small army of climbers. He attempted a different route, one with a formidable challenge—a steep headwall near the top of the mountain. To overcome it, he employed an unconventional and unprecedented method. Maestri’s team hauled up a 150-lb gas-powered compressor drill. With it, they installed hundreds of permanent bolts into the mountain’s face. The bolts made Maestri’s climb safer and easier.

Upon learning of Maestri’s tactics, many climbers harshly condemned his method, but why? The bolts—driven into solid rock—harmed no living creature. If all moral judgment stems from harm perception (as in our Hypothesis 3), then climbers may cognitively complete the agent (Maestri)–patient () dyadic template by anthropomorphizing Cerro Torre into a suffering patient who got bolts drilled into its skin. Another possibility

(our Hypothesis 2) is that climbers condemned the bolts because they felt it to be a desecration of the mountain—not because of any perceived pain or suffering. Anecdotal evidence can be seen in a contemporary British headline: “Cerro Torre: A mountain desecrated!” (Wilson, 1972).

The controversy reignited 42 years later when climbers from the United States and Canada made the first “fair means” ascent of the same face *without* using the bolts. They removed many of Maestri’s bolts on their descent to “restore Cerro Torre to a more natural state” (Patagonia, 2012) by “cleansing [it] of Maestri’s ‘garbage’” (Boswell, 2012).

The Current Studies

Anecdotes and headlines aside, an empirical test is needed. Do climbers condemn the bolts because they perceive pain and suffering or because they perceive sacrilege? In two studies, we tested whether present-day climbers (whom we predicted and found to be liberals²) condemn Maestri’s bolting as a harmless desecration. We predicted that they would condemn his approach using the moral foundation of sanctity more than the moral foundation of care, and we predicted that perception of desecration, and not harm perception, would statistically mediate the condemnation. (We were agnostic and curious as to the use of other moral foundations.) Study 1 tested this prediction by examining the explicit open-ended *rhetoric* that climbers use when condemning Maestri’s bolting. Study 2 tested climber’s *perceptions* of Maestri’s approach using more controlled methods. We followed up these correlation studies of climbers with an experimental study of liberals, moderates, and conservatives in the broader population. In a vignette study, we manipulated the nature of some mountain climbers’ behavior to see whether painting an arrow on a mountain or on a flag would trigger condemnation due to the perception of desecration, pain, or both.

Study 1: Rhetoric

Method

Samples and Procedure

We downloaded the text of an online forum thread discussing the removal of the bolts from Cerro Torre and used computer software (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007) to content analyze the text for the density of words belonging to the five moral foundations: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. To estimate the base-rate moral word usage on this forum, we also downloaded and similarly analyzed a set of baseline threads (see the Supplemental Materials for details).

Results

Foundations

Compared to baseline usage, the bolt thread had a higher density of sanctity, authority, and fairness words (see Table 1).

Table 1. Word Densities of Five Moral Foundations in an Online Forum Thread That Generally Condemned the Bolting of a Mountain.

Foundation	Density, Words per Thousand, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		<i>t</i> (186)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	Bolting Thread	Comparison Threads			
Care	2.10 (1.44)	1.96 (2.03)	0.57	.57	0.08
Fairness	1.92 (1.38)	0.45 (0.67)	9.25	<.001	1.35
Loyalty	1.57 (1.43)	1.37 (1.55)	0.93	.35	0.14
Authority	2.62 (1.98)	1.49 (1.48)	4.44	<.001	0.65
Sanctity	1.70 (1.39)	1.05 (1.08)	3.57	<.001	0.52

Care and loyalty words were no more prevalent in the bolting thread than in the comparison thread. A 2 (thread type) × 5 (foundation) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA), predicting word usage, yielded an interaction, $F(4, 183) = 10.55, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$. We also conducted a direct comparison of care and sanctity and found a marginally significant difference: a 2 (thread type) × 2 (foundation) interaction, $F(1, 186) = 2.88, p = .09, \eta_p^2 = .02$.

Illustrative examples³ of sanctity arguments include the following: “The way I see it, some things in this world need to remain sacred and I stand behind that.” “Natural state? There will still be broken bolts and machine gun holes all the way up the route. It is still desecrated.” “. . . their legacy is best honored by the long held tradition of holding their routes as creations of art that must remain forever inviolate as monuments to their passing.”

Other moral foundations are illustrated in these quotes: “we respect mountains by rising to meet their challenges as closely as possible with the minimal amount of gear and artificial means” (authority); “If it’s fair to indiscriminately blast bolts in, shouldn’t it logically be fair to remove them?” (fairness).

Specific Words

To test which words bolting thread posters used more than normal, we content analyzed the same data sets for the density of each of the words in all five dictionaries. Of the 274 words in the dictionaries, 21 were more prevalent (with a $d > .30$ cutoff) in the bolt thread, ranging in prevalence from *fair*, $d = 1.29, p < .001$, to *rights*, $d = 0.30, p = .04$ (see Figure 2). Of these 21 words, 5 were from the sanctity list (e.g., *clean**, *sacred**, and *pure**), 6 from authority (e.g., *disrespect**, *honor**, and *tradition*), 7 from fairness (e.g., *fair**, *honest**, and *justify**).

Discussion

Climbers used more sanctity, authority, and fairness words when discussing the scandalous bolting of a mountain than when discussing other topics. Harm language was not elevated (nor was loyalty). When climbers wrote about this event, made judgments, and justified those judgments using their own words, they chose words indicating that they saw the mountain



Figure 2. Moral words that were more prevalent in a discussion condemning the bolting of Cerro Torre, compared to baseline usage on the same website. The larger the word, the more prevalent it was in the bolting thread. Asterisks capture any text that follows (e.g., *honest** includes *honest*, *honesty*, *honestly*, etc.).

more as a sacred object that had been desecrated than as an innocent (anthropomorphized) victim who had been harmed.

Study 2: Perceptions

After finding elevated sanctity thinking in the open-ended transcripts, we decided to verify our findings using more controlled techniques. We tested how climbers *perceive* the bolting of Cerro Torre using a questionnaire that assessed the relevance of all the pertinent moral foundations. We predicted that once again, sanctity would be more important than care, and we predicted that we would replicate the finding from Study 1 that authority and fairness would also play a role. Finally, we tested whether the population of climbers we had examined in Study 1 really were liberals.

Method

Sample

We aimed to recruit 50 climbers to detect perceived effects that differed from neutrality at $d = 0.40$ with 80% statistical power. To this end, we invited (by e-mail) all 300 people who commented on the forum thread described in Study 1 to complete a survey for a chance to win one of the two US\$50 gift cards; $n = 42$ responded (14% response rate; 74% power). Respondents were on average 47 years old ($SD = 11$). They reported having climbed for an average of 27 years ($SD = 14$) and successfully lead climbs of an advanced level of difficulty (median: 5.11). One third (29%) of them reported having personally climbed Cerro Torre or its surrounding mountains. The sample was predominantly White (90%) and male (93%). Respondents came primarily from Western, industrialized countries (55% American, 21% European, 12% Canadian, 5% Argentinian, and 2% New Zealander). They were educated, with the equivalent of a master's degree ($M = 5.7$ years of post-secondary education, $SD = 2.7$). And they were generally

middle class or above, with a median household income between US\$50,000 and US\$75,000.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey in which they reported their *opinions* of the bolting on Cerro Torre. They then were offered four possible kinds of justifications for condemning the action, each one based on a different foundation. Using Likert-type scales, they reported the *perceived effects* and the *perceived relevance* of each foundation to their opinion. Finally, they reported demographic information.

Opinions. Below an image of Cerro Torre and Cesare Maestri, participants read a preamble (see the Supplemental Materials) and answered the following question: "What is your opinion? Maestri's original installation of the bolt ladder on Cerro Torre was . . ." Participants responded on a slide scale anchored at -100 (*wrong*), 0 (*neutral*), and 100 (*right/OK*).

Justifications: perceived effects. Participants indicated the moral effects of Maestri's installing the bolt ladder regarding the foundations of care, fairness, authority, and sanctity on a face valid, modified version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). Table S1 in the Supplemental Materials contains the item wordings and reliability.

Justifications: perceived relevance. Immediately following each effect question (and on the same page), we asked participants "To what degree is this relevant to your opinion about whether the installation of the bolt ladder was right or wrong?" Responses were on a 100-point scale anchored at 0 (*not at all*), 50 (*somewhat*), and 100 (*extremely*). We aggregated relevance judgments for each of the four foundations, $.73 \leq \alpha \leq .88$.

Political ideology. Participants indicated their political ideology (on social issues) on a scale anchored at -4 (*strongly liberal*), 0 (*neutral*), and 4 (*strongly conservative*).

Results

Political Ideology

Participants were social liberals, $M = -2.8$, $SD = 1.2$. The vast majority (88%) identified as liberal, whereas 7% identified as politically neutral and only 5% as conservative.

Opinions

Participants harshly condemned the bolting of Cerro Torre, $M_{\text{opinion}} = -61$ ($SD = 42$), which differed significantly from neutrality, $t(41) = 9.29$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.43$.⁴

Justifications: perceived effects. Participants reported violations of all four foundations (see Figure 3). However, the perceived effects differed across the four foundations, one-way ANOVA, $F(4, 123) = 33.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$. Desecration (sanctity

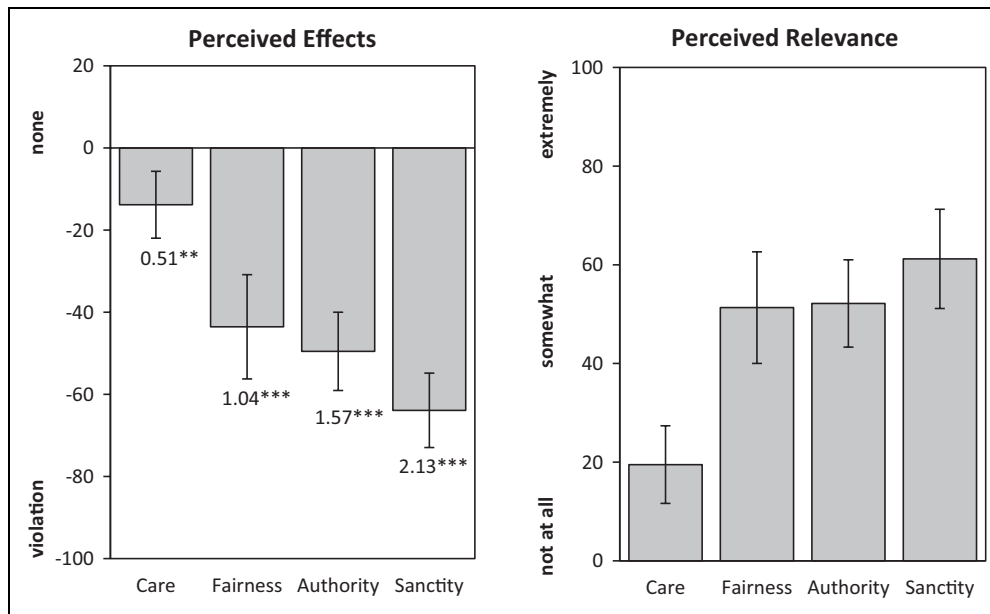


Figure 3. Perceived moral effects and their reported relevance to the condemnation of the bolting of Cerro Torre. *Note.* Numbers represent effect sizes, Cohen's d s, compared to neutrality (0). ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

violation) was the primary grounds for condemnation, exceeding the three other foundations, $t(41) \geq 3.42$, $ps \leq .001$, $ds \geq 0.47$. Harm (care violation) was the weakest grounds for condemnation, $t(41) \leq -4.82$, $ps \leq .001$, $ds \leq -0.84$, but still differed from the scale's neutral point. Desecration was a much stronger concern than was harm, $t(41) = 10.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.76$.

Individual foundation scale reliability was variable (see Table S1), so we examined justifications item by item. Table 2 shows that climbers condemned the bolting as a sanctity violation, as disrespectful, and as a desecration. These concerns also predicted which climbers most harshly condemned the bolting. The lowest ranking concerns were about harm, two of which (*viz.*, emotional suffering and cruelty) differed from neutrality. None of these harm considerations, however, predicted levels of condemnation among climbers.

We examined which foundations distinguish climbers who most condemned the bolting from those who were more permissive (see Table S2 in the Supplemental Materials). Sanctity was the most predictive foundation as a zero-order correlate and in regression analyses.

Justifications: perceived relevance. Relevance differed across the four foundations, one-way ANOVA $F(4, 123) = 34.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .46$ (see Figure 3). Sanctity was the most relevant foundation, exceeding the three others, $t(41) \geq 2.22$, $ps \leq .03$, $ds \geq 0.28$. Care was the least relevant foundation, $t(41) \leq -6.07$, $ps \leq .001$, $ds \leq -0.99$.

Discussion

Climbers—most of whom identified as social liberals—condemned the bolting of a mountain as a desecration. Secondly,

Table 2. Item-Level Justifications for Condemning Maestri's Bolting.

Rank Order	Item	Foundation	M (SD)	$r(40)$
1	Undermined standards of purity	Sanctity	-73 (32)***	.63***
2	Disrespectful	Authority	-66 (42)***	.52***
3	Desecrated the mountain	Sanctity	-62 (37)***	.32*
4	Dishonored tradition	Authority	-60 (39)***	.68***
5	Disgusting	Sanctity	-55 (38)***	.47***
6	Denied the rights of others	Fairness	-44 (43)***	.39*
7	Unfair treatment of others	Fairness	-42 (48)***	.59***
8	Caused chaos	Authority	-22 (50)***	-.05
9	Caused emotional suffering	Harm	-21 (32)***	.24
10	Was an act of cruelty	Harm	-19 (34)**	.24
11	Harmed the weak or vulnerable	Harm	0 (43)	.06

Note. Mean justification levels (M) and correlation with individual differences in condemnation (r) are shown.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

they reported perceptions of unfairness and disrespect. The weakest perception concerned the harm and suffering the bolts caused. Some of these harm perceptions were statistically significant. However, they were among the few concerns that did not predict individual differences among climber condemnation and did not mediate the relationship between perceived desecration and moral condemnation. These results suggest that liberals (like conservatives) condemn harmless violations of their sacred objects.

Study 3: Experiment

In Study 3, we experimentally tested whether liberals condemn sacrilege by asking ordinary Americans to judge a hypothetical scenario in which mountain climbers painted an arrow on a plastic sheet (control condition), on the rock (liberal sacrilege), or on an American flag (conservative sacrilege) to assist their friends in finding their way up a mountain. This experiment allowed us to assess the boundary conditions by comparing liberals' reaction to those of conservatives and to more thoroughly assess whether the perception of pain or desecration explains the condemnation.

Method

Sample

Participants were $N = 371$ Americans recruited from a crowdsourcing website (CrowdFlower). Respondents were on average 36 years old ($SD = 12$), had 4.7 years of postsecondary education ($SD = 2.6$), and had a median household income of US\$50,000–US\$75,000. The sample was 49% male and 80% Caucasian. Each participant received US\$0.50.

Procedure

Participants read about and judged the actions of mountain climbers and provided demographic information, including political ideology.

Scenario. Participants viewed an image (see Figure 4) and read a scenario (see the Supplemental Materials) in which two mountain climbers left directions for their fellow mountain climbers by painting an arrow on a plastic sheet, on the rock itself, or on an American flag (randomly assigned between subjects). The design held constant the action (arrow painting) and the prosocial motive (helping friends). We chose painting rather than bolting (the mountain) or cutting (the flag) to further reduce the possibility of perceiving pain caused to an innocent victim (the anthropomorphized mountain). We wanted to see whether we could elicit moral responses to symbolic insults that were far removed from physical pain.

Moral approval. The question asked, “What do you think about the way they handled this situation? Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?” Participants responded to five randomly ordered statements ($\alpha = .88$) on 100-point slider scales anchored at 0 (*strongly disagree*), 25 (*disagree*), 50 (*neutral*), 75 (*agree*), and 100 (*strongly agree*). The items were “They did the right thing in drawing the arrow,” “They had a moral duty to leave behind some sort of guidance for their friends,” “They had no right to paint the arrow the way they did” (reverse scored), “It bothered me to see the picture of the arrow” (reverse scored), and “Painting the arrow was morally wrong” (reverse scored).

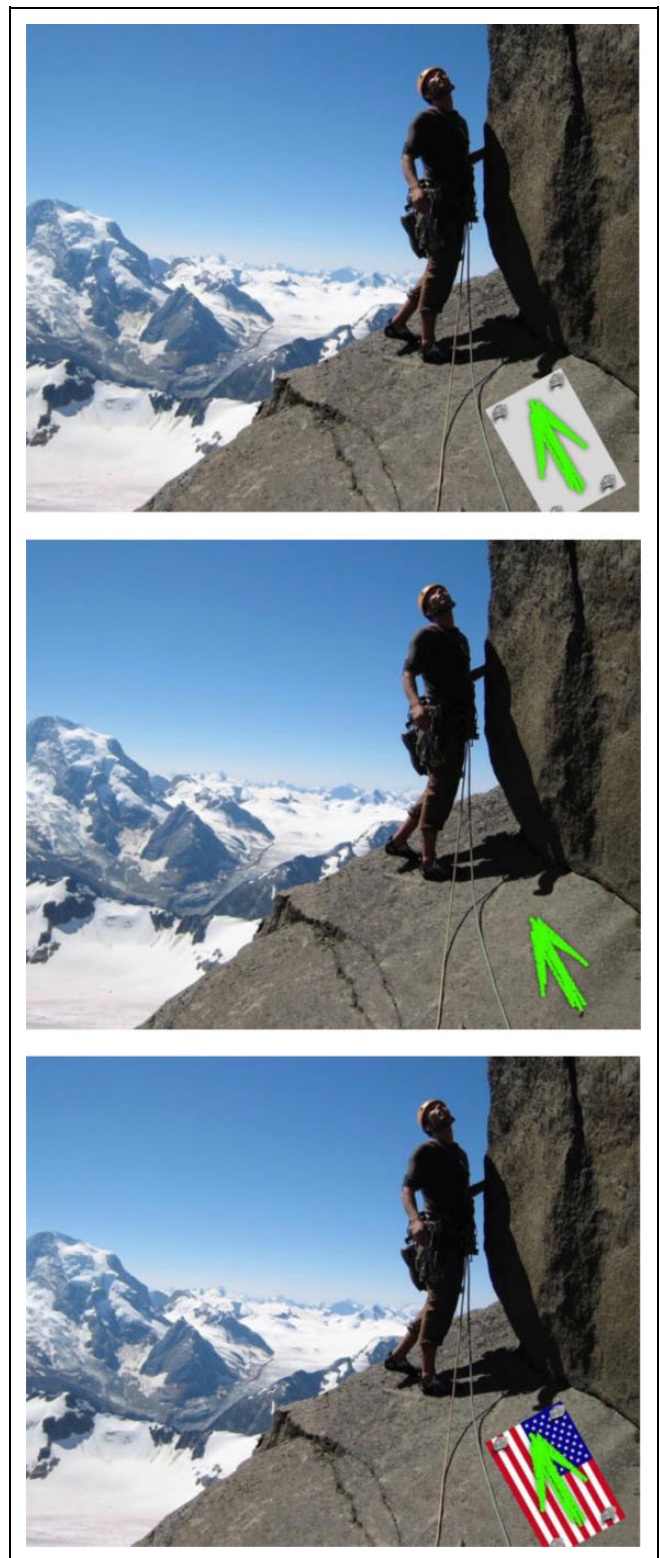


Figure 4. Stimulus images of climbers who painted an arrow on a plastic sheet (control), directly on the rock, or on an American flag to help their friends find their way (Study 3). Photo: Steve Swenson.

Mediators. Participants indicated whether they thought that the arrow caused pain (4 items) and 4 other items intended to capture a sense of sacrilege and offensiveness. The 8 items

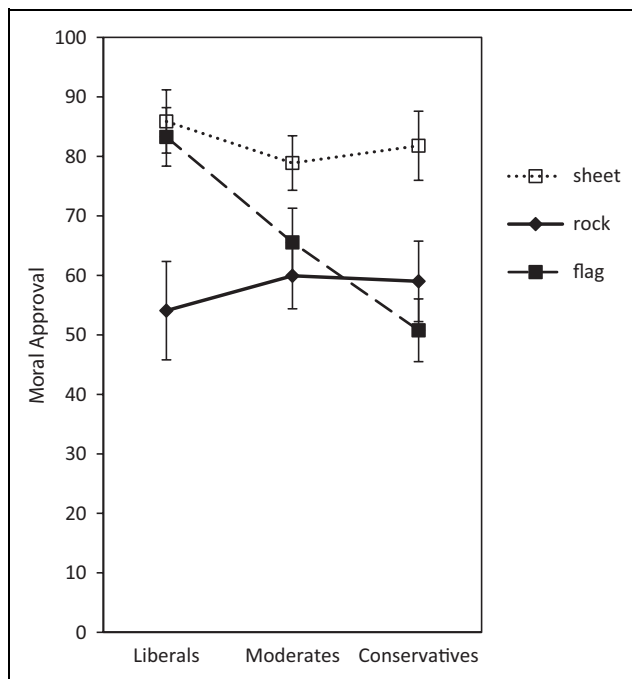


Figure 5. Moral judgments of climbers who painted an arrow on a plastic sheet (control), directly on the rock, or on an American flag to help their friends find their way (Study 3). Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

appeared on the same page, intermixed, and in random order, with the same scale as mentioned earlier. The *pain* items ($\alpha = .85$) were “Painting the arrow caused . . . to feel pain” with the ellipses replaced with “the mountain,” “their plastic sheet,” “their friends,” and “some other people who care about the mountain,” respectively.⁵ The *sacrilege and offense* items ($\alpha = .93$) were as follows,⁶ “Painting the arrow was disgusting,” “Painting the arrow was a desecration,” “Painting the arrow offends me personally,” and “I would never be friends with someone who thought that painting the arrow was ok.”

Political ideology. Participants indicated their political ideology (on social issues) on a scale anchored at -4 (*strongly liberal*), 0 (*neutral*), and 4 (*strongly conservative*). The average participant was politically moderate, $M = -0.5$, $SD = 2.4$, range = -4 to 4 . We trisected the sample into three groups, comprised of 129 liberals (ideology ≤ -2), 161 moderates (ideology -1 to 1), and 81 conservatives (ideology ≥ 2).

Results

Figure 5 shows the moral judgments of liberals and conservatives toward sheet-, rock-, and flag-sheet painting. Compared to baseline (painting a plastic sheet), liberals condemned rock painting, $t(82) = -6.21$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.37$, but not flag painting, $t(83) = -0.70$, $p = .49$, $d = -0.15$. Moderates and conservative condemned both rock and flag paintings, $t_s \leq -3.61$, $ps < .001$, $d \leq -0.68$, and did not distinguish between the two, $|t_s| \leq 1.57$, $ps \geq .12$, $|d_s| \leq 0.41$. A 3 (group) \times 3

(condition) ANOVA yielded two main effects and an interaction, $F_s \geq 7.67$, $ps \leq .001$, $\eta_p^2 \geq .04$.

Next, we tested whether the perception that a victim felt pain or the perception of sacrilege and offense explains why liberals condemned rock painting (compared to sheet-painting control). Using the aggregate mediators, rock painting elicited more pain perception, $M_{\text{sheet}} = 8$, $M_{\text{rock}} = 28$, on the 0–100 scale, $t(82) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.18$, as well as more perceived sacrilege and offense, $M_{\text{sheet}} = 9$, $M_{\text{rock}} = 41$, $t(82) = 6.08$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.34$, from liberals. However, a mediation analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, with the two mediators entered simultaneously) found that sacrilege and offense did, $B = 30$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [20, 41], and pain perception did not, $B = -3$, 95% CI [–10, 2], explain why liberals condemned rock painting. Contrasting the indirect effects, we found that sacrilege/offense was the stronger of the two mechanisms, $B = 33$, 95% CI [21, 50]. Repeating the analysis using all eight elemental mediators revealed that just two mediators—feelings of desecration and disgust—explained why liberals condemned rock painting (see Table 3). Pain perception was present but, importantly, did not help explain the condemnation.

Symmetrically, when conservatives judged the flag painters (compared to the sheet painters), a mediation analysis found that the perception of sacrilege and offense did, $B = 5.0$, 95% CI [0.4, 10.1], and pain perception did not, $B = -0.7$, 95% CI [–2.7, 0.1], explain the condemnation. Again, sacrilege/offense was the stronger of the two mediators, $B = 5.7$, 95% CI [0.0, 11.7].

Discussion

An experiment found that liberals condemned alterations to a mountain but not to an American flag, whereas moderates and conservatives condemned both. Perceptions of pain to the mountain or to others were reported, but these did not statistically explain liberals’ condemnation of mountain alteration. Reports of pain may have been post hoc justifications offered by some liberals. In contrast, references to desecration and feelings of disgust were both present and explanatory. These findings establish boundary conditions: Liberals treated a natural object—but not a nationalist object—as sacred, consistent with the idea that liberals unite around the defense of nature but not their country.

General Discussion

We began this article by considering three hypotheses about the use of sanctity thinking in moral psychology:

Hypothesis 1: Only conservatives use sanctity to make moral judgments.

Hypothesis 2: Liberals and conservatives use sanctity thinking about different issues.

Hypothesis 3: Nobody uses sanctity thinking—sanctity is just post hoc rhetoric used to justify what is, fundamentally, a perception of unjustified harm by an agent to a patient.

Table 3. Tests of Two Explanations for Liberals' Condemnation of Painting the Rock (vs. a Plastic Sheet).

	Descriptives M (SD)		Contrasts			Mediation	
	Sheet	Rock	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	95% CI
Caused pain in							
Mountain	4 (10)	17 (25)	3.05	0.68	.003	-0.6	[-3.8, +3.3]
Sheet	4 (12)	11 (22)	1.59	0.35	.12	-0.4	[-5.3, +1.2]
Friends	6 (11)	30 (27)	5.35	1.19	<.001	-2.2	[-8.5, +7.4]
Others	16 (24)	55 (33)	5.91	1.30	<.001	3.1	[-1.1, +9.5]
Sacrilege							
Disgusting	9 (17)	41 (33)	5.49	1.22	<.001	11.3	[+0.2, +22.3]
Desecration	10 (19)	53 (37)	6.70	1.48	<.001	14.4	[+6.2, +28.7]
Personal offense	7 (16)	39 (34)	5.49	1.22	<.001	-1.9	[-12.6, +9.8]
Not friends	8 (18)	30 (27)	4.17	0.92	<.001	4.9	[-1.0, +13.0]

Note. Bolded statistics are significant. The exact item wording is found in the main text.

We believe that our results are incompatible with Hypothesis 1. In the very liberal sample of passionate climbers (Studies 1 and 2), many individuals clearly thought about mountains using moral intuitions related to the sanctity foundation (Haidt, 2012). It is not possible to understand the sport of rock climbing and the moral judgments of rock climbers without understanding what climbers hold sacred.

We believe that our results are also incompatible with Hypothesis 3. Our participants hardly ever talked about the mountain as though it had been injured, harmed, or made to suffer. Of the few care/harm words that they did use more often than usual (*defend*, *destroy*, and *care*), climbers were generally not referring to suffering of the mountain or anyone else (e.g., “those who *defend* the existence of the bolts,” “if you *care* about things like facts,” and “. . . the right to *destroy* history”). Rather, they talked about desecration.

In Studies 2 and 3, some participants did report that mountain alterations cause pain and suffering. This may have been due to dyadic completion and anthropomorphization of the mountain. However, the post hoc *presence* of harm perception does not mean that harm perception was *responsible* for the judgments. In mediation analyses, we repeatedly found that the perception of pain and suffering failed to account for liberals' condemnation, and the perception of sacrilege repeatedly did explain their opposition. Climbers primarily showed their disapproval using high ratings on sanctity items asking about “standards of purity” and “desecration of the mountain” as well as drawing from the authority foundation (with items about being “disrespectful” and “dishonoring the tradition”). In sum, our results favor Hypothesis 2—liberals condemn sacrilege too.

What Exactly Is Sanctity? A Social Functionalist View

Haidt (2012) drew on Durkheim (1995/1915), Smith (1976/1759), and others (Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Tetlock, 2003) to argue that “morality binds and blinds.” Groups, teams, and movements elevate a person, a book, a river, or even a mountain as their sacred object. Worshipping it together and

treating it as inviolable binds the group into a cohesive moral community. Punishing deviants and desecrators is a shared obligation. But all this moral passion blinds members to nuance and prevents them from thinking rationally or making what would appear to be practical trade-offs that would enhance overall welfare. The mark of sanctity is thinking that it “transcends the utilitarian or rational” (Nisbet, 1993/1966, p. 121).

Moral psychology has not examined liberal sanctity as much as conservative sanctity, perhaps because liberal sanctity is so often tied up with protecting victims of oppression. To many, it may seem that liberal morality (or all of morality) can therefore be reduced to concerns about pain and suffering. This is why we think the case of Cerro Torre is so important—it is a special case in which perceptions of harm and desecration come apart. Cerro Torre is a sacred object for the community of climbers that was harmlessly altered in 1970, and the response from liberal climbers was moral outrage. Whether liberals and conservatives use sacred thinking to equal degrees remain a question for future research. However, our results indicate that if you tell people—on the left or on the right—that something they hold sacred has been desecrated, they will condemn it, and that condemnation does not seem to be driven by the perception of suffering.

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Notes

1. Pronounced Chay-sah-ree Ma-ey-stree.
2. We predicted that climbers would be liberal because climbing draws for openness to experience (e.g., curiosity, imagination, aesthetics, and variety) and because the roots of North American climbing are linked to the counterculture.
3. We corrected any clear spelling and grammatical errors.
4. Individual differences in climbers' political ideology did not predict their opinions, $r(39) = -.05$, $p = .76$.
5. We also included an item about the American flag feeling pain.
6. A factor analysis with these 4 items yielded a one-factor solution.

Supplemental Material

The online data supplements are available at <http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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Author Biographies

Jeremy A. Frimer is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Winnipeg. He studies the moral psychology of follower and leaders within ideologically minded groups.

Caitlin E. Tell completed her bachelor's degree, with honors, at the University of Winnipeg. She is currently pursuing interests outside of academia.

Jonathan Haidt is a professor in the Business and Society Program at New York University Stern School of Business. He studies the intuitive basis of morality and political ideology.