

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

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Groups of people with a common moral cause *create* moral superheroes (e.g., Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Osama Bin Laden). These heroes serve as mascots, symbolizing the group's objectives and modeling self-sacrifice. Taking a social functionalist perspective, I describe how seemingly nonsensical group practices of sacralizing objects or rituals serve an adaptive function by helping adherents identify one another. Groups with both ideologically right-leaning and left-leaning ideologies rely on sacredness for this purpose. For example, the Right sacralizes traditional marriage whereas the Left sacralizes the environment. I then describe one method by which groups transform relatively ordinary persons into self-sacrificial mascots for these sacred values. In particular, I examine whether moral heroes tend to *talk* about generous self-sacrifice for the group's sacred values, and how this verbal expression feeds into moral hero manufacturing processes. 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 how groups transform relatively ordinary persons into self-sacrificial mascots to represent and rally around these sacred values.

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), I propose that 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 a stranger values money is a poor method of detecting an ally. Sacred values are a special kind of goods, ones that are immune to tradeoffs and exchanges (Tetlock, 2003). Life itself is a commonly held sacred value; 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.

Most sacred values are not as widely embraced as life. More common 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). Moreover, protecting their “natural” state, 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 value must be a group member.

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 Leftists 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, 2015). 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 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 & Tell, 2015), discriminate against the other side (Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013), 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—imagining and designing objectives and strategies, actively recruiting and organizing followers, and managing internal discord. Moral heroes may also fill a *passive* role, serving as mascots and 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 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 as he was tried and found guilty of sabotage. Mandela claims that the seemingly bad behavior of setting off bombs may have a good reason. 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).

False impressions. What do the glowing speeches and stories of moral heroes indicate about what they are like as persons? More generally, do people who talk about helping others tend to actually help other people? Applied to the case of Sam, his decision to talk about helping fatherless boys could be a reliable indicator that he really does help fatherless boys more than most people (context specific indicator). His talk of helping fatherless boys could also be an indicator that he helps his family, donates to charity, and pays his taxes (context general indicator). Talking about giving could be a reliable signal of an inner disposition to help others in one of two ways—within the context specified or in a context-general sense.

For his group to accept him as a moral hero, both would need to be the true—or at least their *belief* that both were true. Groups exalt their heroes for the *persons* they are, not merely for the contextually bound *work* they do. They expect the behavior of their heroes to be pure, simple, unchanging, and prosocial. This is a problem because people are complex and multifaceted; they are sometimes givers and sometimes takers. For a complex person to transform into a simple-minded giving machine, groups must somehow eliminate the person's selfish ambitions (or the perceptions thereof). One way they may do this is by asking moral heroes to speak publicly.

Recent investigations are finding that when people talk about helping others, their audience expects them to behave prosocially toward a stranger in an entirely novel context. That is, talking about giving sends a social signal of a generalized disposition. In one study, participants read the personal goals of another participant (actually a confederate). The goals were either of a prosocial nature (e.g., “to one day have and raise compassionate, responsible children...”) or of a more self-promoting nature (e.g., “to one day become successful and influential...”). The participant and confederate then played the dictator game, with the

confederate assigned to be the dictator and the participant the receiver. The dictator had a fixed sum of money, which he/she was to divide any way between the self and the receiver. Receivers (participants) were to guess how much the dictator would give; they expecting the dictator with prosocial goals to give them more money than the dictators with self-advancing goals (Frimer, Zhu, & Decter-Frain, 2015), suggesting that they interpreted the dictators goals as an indicator of a generalized prosocial disposition.

This expectation that giver talkers are generous can explain common perceptions of famous moral heroes. Participants in a subsequent study guessed how TIME magazine's influential figures of the 20th century would have behaved in the dictator game (anonymously paired with another human alive at the time) while the figures were still alive. Participants guessed that heroic figures like Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa would have given away most (>75%), and figures like Adolf Hitler and Ayatullah Khomeini would have given away much less (<19%) of their money to the receiver. Moreover, the density of prosocial words in a their historical speeches strongly predicted how much money participants expected the figures to give (Frimer et al., 2015).

Audiences read between the lines of what others say, and draw inferences that people who talk about helping others have a general motivation to help others. These inference may be inaccurate. A series of studies that either manipulated or measured whether people talked about helping others found no evidence that talking about helping others in one context causes prosocial behavior in a novel context; and people who spontaneously talk about helping others in one context are not especially likely to help others in a novel context (Frimer et al., 2015). This disconnection between the speaker's talk and action may be due to an attentional blind spot. Specifically, speakers pay attention to their own competence (Abele & Wojciskze, 2014). As the

person communicating, one's limited attention is directed toward successful goal pursuits, and not their social meaning. Meanwhile, audiences pay attention to the speaker's morality (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011). Speakers failure to spontaneously attend to the social meaning of what they say leads to their failure to use that information to activate a moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002); they thus feel no impetus to behave in an identity-consistent manner. Only in a contrived circumstance, wherein speakers are asked to pay attention to whether what they say is prosocial or not, prosocial talk causes generosity toward a stranger (Frimer et al., 2015).

The prosocial verbiage of moral heroes sends a deceptive signal. Such talk is less telling of the speaker's underlying personality than people think. Why, then, do moral heroes give such elevating, prosocial speeches, if these speeches do not reflect their inner dispositions? Perhaps moral heroes are moral heroes simply *because* they give such 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 may illustrate the misperceptions the public has of its moral heroes.

False expectancies of moral heroes and the drama that ensues. Much of what the public knows about moral heroes can be sourced to the words of moral heroes themselves. Moral heroes' prosocial words set up beliefs in their audience that the speaker is generous in a dispositional sense—beliefs that turn out to be false. This impression cements the moral hero's reputation as a giver. However, the falsity of the impression sets the stage for an intriguing drama. If or when the moral hero behaves in a self-serving way (as people tend to do), his/her followers' expectations will be violated, leading to the perception of hypocrisy and a fall from grace.

The symbolic function of heroes—as a bona fide giver—may be particularly dramatic when groups convert a complex human being into a figurative, simplified caricature of the cause. That is, under certain conditions, the expectancies of the audience could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the followers have the opportunity to interact repeatedly and meaningfully with the speaker, the followers could induce the moral hero to behave prosocially through non-verbal and verbal nudges (Rosenthal, 1994). Without these prods from their followers, heroes would remain complex persons, full of generous and selfish tendencies. Heroes influence their followers and followers influence their heroes.

Conclusion: Moral heroes bind together followers

Having described how sacred values help identify group members, how moral heroes personify these sacred values, and how groups stamp out the more self-serving tendencies of their moral heroes, I conclude by describing how heroes help bind together group members. One mechanism by which moral heroes unify adherents is modeling and mimicry. 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).

Groups elevate persons to the realm of angels and saints; these moral heroes symbolize the group’s mission and embody selflessness. Sacred values and moral hero manufacturing may be evolved social processes that confers adaptive benefits to groups by binding members to the

cause. The product of this self-righteous struggle is the separation of good and evil wherein “we” are good and “they” are evil.

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