

God Save Us: A Terror Management Theory Perspective on Morality

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From the perspective of terror management theory (TMT), awareness of the inevitability of death changes the primitive moral intuitions that evolved to facilitate group living into a central means of managing anxiety regarding human vulnerability and mortality. Awareness of death and the emergence of conceptions of deities and afterlives transforms moral behavior from a means of staying in the good graces of others to a strategy for transcending death. Thus the emergence of death awareness is a critical turning point in both the moral evolution of our species and the moral development of children. Research has shown that thoughts of death affect judgments and behavior related to each of the moral intuitions specified by Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Graham, 200x) and demonstrates the important role that the use of morality as a terror management strategy plays in both pro- and anti-social behavior. Recent research using TMT as a tool for exploring attitudes toward war and peace-making, moral disengagement and hyper-engagement, and the long-term consequences of the Holocaust and other atrocities will be discussed.