

Moral Outrage: A Theory on Why We're Seeing So Much of It

Why do people express so much moral outrage?

A pair of academic researchers recently asked this question and discovered “that moral outrage at third-party transgressions is sometimes a means of reducing guilt over one’s own moral failings and restoring a moral identity.”

The paper is (appropriately) titled, “A cleansing fire: Moral outrage alleviates guilt and buffers threats to one’s moral identity.” It was written by [Zachary K. Rothschild](#), an assistant professor of psychology at Bowdoin College, and [Lucas A. Keefer](#), an assistant professor of social psychology at Southern Miss.

[Here is an excerpt](#) of their abstract:

We tested this guilt-driven account of outrage in five studies examining outrage at corporate labor exploitation and environmental destruction. Study 1 showed that personal guilt uniquely predicted moral outrage at corporate harm-doing and support for retributive punishment. Ingroup (vs. outgroup) wrongdoing elicited outrage at corporations through increased guilt, while the opportunity to express outrage reduced guilt (Study 2) and restored perceived personal morality (Study 3). Study 4 tested whether effects were due merely to downward social comparison and Study 5 showed that guilt-driven outrage was attenuated by an affirmation of moral identity in an unrelated context.

Readers who really want to dive in can [spend \\$40](#) to read the entire study. *Reason*, however, offers [a summary](#) of Keefer and

Rothschild's key findings (which I abridged):

- 1. Triggering feelings of personal culpability for a problem increases moral outrage at a third-party target.*
- 2. The more guilt over one's own potential complicity, the more desire "to punish a third-party through increased moral outrage at that target."*
- 3. Having the opportunity to express outrage at a third-party decreased guilt in people threatened through "ingroup immorality."*
- 4. "The opportunity to express moral outrage at corporate harm-doers" inflated participants' perception of personal morality.*
- 5. Guilt-induced moral outrage was lessened when people could assert their goodness through alternative means, "even in an unrelated context."*

Interestingly, the findings seem to dovetail with research published last year by several Ivy League scientists whose findings are summarized [in a New York Times article](#) headlined, "What's the Point of Moral Outrage?" In that article, the authors explained that the roots of our human moral outrage "are, in part, self-serving," part of a subconscious signaling mammals of various types engage in.

We've [discussed in the past](#) about how there are essentially three reactions people seem to have to controversial topics: "Non-judgmentalism, furious indignation, or ironic detachment."

Furious indignation seems highly popular today. It certainly stands to reason, as we have speculated, that this stems from an education system that has drifted from parts of its traditional curriculum, including logic, rhetoric, and history.

But could the outrage also stem from—dare I use the phrase?—depravity? Let me explain.

One might be tempted to assume that decadent cultures are tolerant ones. After all, it doesn't seem counter-intuitive to think that people with "moral failings" might be less likely to judge others harshly. But what if people with moral failings are driven by a subconscious urge to self-purify by expressing moral outrage at the behavior of others? Would a deeply immoral culture also be one more inclined to express deep moral outrage? Just a theory.

In any event, hopefully the research of Rothschild and Keefe gets us closer to understanding why people are demonstrating so much outrage.

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