HOLIER THAN ME? THREATENING SOCIAL COMPARISON IN THE MORAL DOMAIN

Benoît Monin

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Abstract

This short review analyzes the specificity of upward social comparison in the moral domain, suggesting that it blends Festinger's (1954) distinction between opinions and abilities. We discuss positive outcomes (elevation) and negative ones (resentment), and moderators of this reaction. Then we identify the ways in which moral comparison constitutes a uniquely stinging threat (moral inferiority, moral confusion, and imagined moral reproach). Finally, we explore some of the strategies that people might use to defuse this moral threat (suspicion, trivialization and rejection).

How do we react to others acting more morally than we do? When we find out that our neighbor spends her evening volunteering at the local hospital, how does that make us feel about ourselves, and about her? In the five decades since Festinger presented his theory of social comparison processes (1954), surprisingly little attention has been devoted to unfavorable upward comparison in the moral domain. This short review argues that moral comparison differs in important ways from other forms of social comparison. After sketching out the hybrid nature of moral comparison, we will first describe affective reactions to moral others (elevation, threat, and moderators of those responses). Then we will describe three types of threats that make upward moral comparison particularly irksome (moral

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shame, moral confusion, and imagined moral reproach). Finally we will discuss strategies that people use to deal with these threats, based in part on our own research (suspicion, trivialization and resentment).

After early years focused on how we select comparison targets to attain an accurate self-image (and reliance on the "rank-order paradigm," see Wheeler, 1991), social comparison research broadened its scope to look for instance at the self-enhancing function of social comparison (Wood & Taylor, 1991), its automatic aspects, and determinants of assimilation *vs.* contrast (Mussweiler, 2003). The present discussion builds most directly on the work on defensive attributions in response to unflattering upward comparison (Alicke, 2000), emotional reactions to comparison (Salovey, 1991; Smith, 2000), and the Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model proposed by Tesser and colleagues (Tesser, 1991; Beach & Tesser, 2000). Our analysis is much indebted to these, though we argue that comparison in the moral domain deserves special attention.

A particularity of moral comparison is that it doesn't fit neatly into one of the two classic categories of comparison. Festinger's most ambitious move in his 1954 paper may have been to bring under the same umbrella the processes used to assess one's opinions (e.g., how *right* one is) and the processes used to assess one's abilities (e.g., how *smart* one is). In truth, social comparison research has focused primarily on personal attributes such as traits and abilities (Wills & Suls, 1991; but see Suls, 2000). This original distinction between comparison of opinions and abilities has a unique resonance in the moral domain, because it's not obvious which category morality falls into: Is it more akin to an opinion or an ability?

Kelley's (1971) analysis of moral evaluation provides an important piece of the puzzle. He proposed that when we evaluate the morality of someone else, we distinguish between two components: a *reality system*, which enables the person to determine right from wrong; and an *achievement system*, which enables the person to follow through. Philosophers write at length about failures of this achievement system, under the header of *akrasia*, incontinence, or weakness of the will. This dichotomy is also well established in the morality literature, e.g., in Rest's (1986) distinc-

tion between Components 2 and 4 in his four-component model of morality. We have argued elsewhere that the different emphasis on these distinct aspects of morality provides a central orienting dimension in the moral psychology literature (see Monin, Pizarro & Beer, in press). Kelley's argument, from the perceiver's point of view, is that both elements need to be present for us to perceive someone as moral. The relevance to Festinger's distinction is straightforward: The reality system is undoubtedly of the domain of opinions, while the achievement system is of the domain of abilities.

This makes social comparison in the moral domain an interesting case: When comparing ourselves to others who act morally, are we comparing our choices to what they think is the right course in order to learn what is right (as we tend to do with opinions), or are we focusing on their aptitude at following through with their good intentions to evaluate the relative strength of our own moral will (as we do with abilities)? To take a concrete example, if a friend spends her evenings volunteering at the local soup kitchen, is this information prompting social comparison on opinion ("I suppose it's the morally right thing to do to volunteer") or ability social comparison ("She's able to do a lot and I'm not doing much")? Kelley may have put it best when he described this "recurring dilemma" (1971, p.295) by asking of the moral actor: "Is he to be good by being like others or by being different from others?" As we will see, the hybrid nature of morality makes it a complex and rich domain to study social comparison. The multifaceted aspect of moral comparison really comes to the fore in upward comparison, where a moral other's choices can threaten an observer at these various levels. Because of this, and because threatening comparison yields more (defensive) behavioral responses worth discussing than downward moral comparison, which should only reassure judges in their conviction that they are good people, we focus in the rest of this review on upward comparison in the moral domain.

Reactions to upward moral comparison

As other forms of upward social comparison (Buunk *et al.*, 1990; Collins, 1996), being confronted with a morally superior other can have either positive or negative consequences. We review both possibilities, and then identify possible moderators of this reaction.

Pulled towards the sublime: Elevation

We should first acknowledge that upward moral comparison can be, and often is, uplifting. Moral exemplars such as religious leaders, civil rights martyrs, generous philanthropists, or celebrated charity workers seem to reflect the best of human nature, and provide life templates to aspire to. Asked about a specific time when they saw "a manifestation of humanity's 'higher' or 'better' nature," participants readily provide moving and beautiful stories of outright generosity, decency and self-sacrifice (Haidt, 2000). Probing for the emotions accompanying such experiences, Haidt identifies *elevation*, "a warm, uplifting feeling that people experience when they see unexpected acts of human goodness, kindness, and compassion." Elevation (also described as a state related to awe inspired by great virtue, see Keltner & Haidt, 2003) apparently involves a warm or glowing feeling in the chest, makes the moral other socially attractive, and inspires people to do good themselves. Thus morally superior others can bring out the best of human nature, elevating individuals and improving society as a result.

A darker picture

It is undoubtedly important to show people's ability to be on their best behavior, and yet focusing solely on elevation might give us only half the story. By asking people to volunteer cases where they witnessed moral beauty, one runs the risk of obtaining a biased sample of people's reaction to moral others, like asking subjects to describe a romantic interest, and concluding that universal love rules the earth. We think it important to compare these wishful accounts with the actual reaction of participants when they are put in the presence of moral others. We propose here that moral behavior can constitute a threat

when it suggests to the perceiver that she is not as moral as she could be, and that the specific action called for by the self resembles reactions documented in other cases of self-threat (Major, Testa & Bylsma, 1991; Salovey, 1991). The rest of this paper therefore focuses on the sources of threat and reactions to it.

Moderators of elevation vs. resentment

Before we do get to threat and its consequences, it is useful to discuss the reasons why moral upward social comparison sometimes leads to elevation, and sometimes to resentment. This parallels the distinction between assimilation and contrast in the case of abilities and traits, and several authors have tried to elucidate when a superior competitor elicits what Ortony, Clore and Collins (1988) call "resentment emotions" (which include envy and jealousy) and when the same person elicits "appreciation emotions" (e.g., admiration, awe, respect). Smith (2000) similarly distinguished assimilative emotions (inspiration, optimism and admiration) from contrastive emotions (envy, shame/depression and resentment). Alicke (2000) lists as possible moderators the nature of the subject's and the target's relationship, the importance of the comparison dimension for the subject's self-concept, the comparison's ambiguity, and the subject's need for accuracy. In line with Festinger's (1954) Corollary IIIA and Hypothesis VIII, superior others are more threatening when they are similar, whereas dissimilar others can be dismissed as irrelevant (Wheeler, 1991; Mettee & Riskind,1974; Wood, 1989; Salovey, 1991; Major *et al.*, 1991; Tesser, 1991). In the moral domain, comparison others may be deemed irrelevant because their morality is vastly superior to ours, but also because differences in related attributes enable us to explain away moral behavior as due to non-moral causes.

A recent influential approach (Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler, Rüter & Epstude, 2004) suggests that whether social comparison results in assimilation or contrast is a result of the initial 'holistic' assessment of the comparison, and the resulting selective accessibility of features: When people's initial assessment is that they are similar to the target, they seek information confirming this premise, and end up assimilating with the target, and vice-versa. This, however, is moderated by whether the question is about

objective performance (e.g., 'How many sit-ups can you do?') *vs.* more of a subjective assessment (e.g., 'How athletic are you?'). Mussweiler's model of selective accessibility focuses on objective performance, and acknowledges that the effect may go the other way with subjective assessments (Mussweiler, 2003), which is where, we believe, defensiveness stems from. In the moral domain, this means that after considering moral others, instances of our own moral behavior may indeed be more salient because we retrieved them for the comparison (resulting in greater objective estimates of the frequency of moral behavior), and yet our subjective assessment of our morality may still be lower because of the higher reference point.

Causes of resentment: The unique threats of moral comparison

Upward social comparison can often be unpleasant (Alicke, 2000; but see Collins, 1996). We argue here that the sting of unflattering comparisons is greatest in the moral domain, because it can lead to three types of experiences that are especially aversive to individuals: *Moral inferiority*, *moral confusion*, and/or *anticipated moral reproach*. In line with Smith's (2000) analysis, we posit that an important dimension is the focus of the comparison. The first two threats focus on the self (how moral one is and how moral one's behavior was), whereas the third focuses on the other (by assuming he or she is in a position to judge us).

Moral inferiority

The threat of morally superior others can resemble other threats by others who seem better than us, well documented in the domain of ability (e.g., Tesser, 1991; Beach & Tesser, 2000). Similarly, people can feel less moral relative to others whom they see as more moral than themselves. In this view, morality is more like an ability (related to Kelley' achievement system), meaning that it is subject to a "unidirectional pull upward" (Festinger's Hypothesis IV), and one with fairly unambiguous standards: All agree what being moral means, and based on these criteria, this person is clearly more moral than I am. The processes involved in this comparison, as well as the reactions to this threat, most likely resemble those iden-

tified in ability social comparison, albeit on a dimension that might be especially central for most people. Importance or centrality of a trait has been identified by several authors (Tesser, 1991; Beach & Tesser, 2000; Major *et al.*, 1991) as one of the necessary preconditions for upward comparison to represent threat, and morality seems to be central to most people's self-concept. Park, Ybarra, and Stanik (2007) suggest that people's self-enhancement tendencies fall along two dimensions, a sociomoral one (e.g., honesty, kindness, and helpfulness) and a taskability one (e.g., intelligence, creativity, and being knowledgeable), and that the former seems to loom larger for most people. Paulhus & John (1998) similarly discuss the prevalence of moralistic self-serving biases over egoistic ones more centered on competence. Allison, Messick and Goethals (1989) showed that morality seems to have a primary place in maintaining and enhancing one's self-image (the "Mohammed Ali Effect"). These data converge to suggest the centrality of morality in people's self concept (with some interindividual variability, see Aquino & Reed, 2002), making upward moral social comparison especially likely to lead to self-threat and to trigger defense mechanisms.

Moral confusion

Another reason why moral others can be irksome is that people can come to question whether their own behavior is morally appropriate. This is more related to opinion social comparison, but with the added threat that being wrong on moral opinions might be worse than any other opinion. Finding out by polling others that a particular stock is less viable than you think, that a given fashion item has a surprisingly wide appeal, or that a loathed politician might not be as corrupt as you thought might be unsettling in the short run, but it is likely to be less upsetting than if you learn from others that one of your behavioral choices is seen as morally problematic. Being wrong is never pleasant, but suspecting that one is morally wrong is particularly upsetting. And one feature of moral comparison is that moral others can reveal a line of behavior that one did not even ever consider. It's not necessarily just that moral others took the "road less traveled" – it's that we might not have even seen that road when our path bifurcated: Moral others can exemplify a moral response that we didn't even realize existed.

Anticipated moral reproach

A third, and maybe most important source of threat is that we may suspect that moral others are passing judgment on our own morality, and this imagined moral reproach (seen as implicit in their behavioral choice) triggers resentment. Sabini and Silver (1982) describe how difficult it is to express moral reproach, in large part because of the accompanying claim to moral superiority. Whereas it seems perfectly legitimate for sports fans to note the poor performance of a star athlete even if they personally rarely leave the couch, in the moral domain it seems less acceptable to comment on others' choices unless one's choices are at least as moral. This is illustrated in the Christian tradition by Jesus' admonition about the speck and the log (Luke 6:42): "How can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." Sabini and Silver observe that one requirement for moral reproach is that one "stands in a proper relationship to the wrongdoer" (1982, pp.39-40). Conversely, this implies that when others are perceived to engage in moral reproach, they are also perceived to believe that they are in a position to do so, and to claim that they are, to use the Gospel metaphor, log-free. Independently of how moral others make individuals feel about their own morality, they can be resented if they are perceived as judgmental and conceited. Note that in this third explanation, it is not even necessary for individuals to acknowledge the morality of the moral other's choice. We submit that people resent being reproached by others even when they don't agree that the domain of judgment is of moral relevance (e.g., dietary choices). Whereas the two explanations above involved participants resenting what they realized about themselves, this one is entirely focused on the interpersonal experience. One implication is that this process should apply to more cases than the other two, because it also includes cases where one doesn't recognize the morality of the would-be moral other: A person may have no qualms about driving a large SUV, for example, seeing fuel consumption as utterly outside of the moral domain, but still resent the perceived sanctimoniousness of hybrid car drivers.

Defensive strategies to defuse threatening upward moral comparison

In cases where potentially greater virtue is experienced as a threat to the self, individuals may take one of three main courses of action to defuse this threat. Alicke (2000) describes how most social comparison theories assume that people deal defensively with unfavorable upward comparison by distorting their meaning, derogating the target, or avoiding them. In the moral domain, this triad will take the form of suspicion (denying moral meaning), trivialization (derogating the target on the potency dimension) or resentment (avoiding association with the threatening other). We describe each in turn.

Suspicion: Denying virtue

One first approach is to deny the virtue altogether, and to give little moral credit for the behavior. Research suggests that a typical reaction might be suspicion and skepticism as to the actor's real intentions. Ybarra (2002) reviewed how the social psychological literature consistently suggests that whereas we see negative behavior as reflective of people's true personality, we are quick to ascribe agreeable actions to social demands. This may play a defensive role, because morality is such a central and desirable trait in most people's self-concept that they should be especially sensitive to threats (see above). This is similar to other kinds of defensive attributions typically observed in social comparison research in the case of unfavorable upward comparison (Alicke, 2000). Whereas a typical defensive attribution in ability comparison might be to ascribe an unfair advantage to the superior other, in the case of moral comparison we predict that it takes the form of suspicion, ascribing hypocrisy and ulterior motives instead of recognizing virtue as the true cause of behavior. Intentions are the crux of the argument in moral comparison, and one does not need to ignore the behavior (which may be difficult) as long as one can cast doubts on the purity of the intentions (much easier). Thus I might freely admit that my neighbor spends her weekends helping children with disabilities, but discount her volunteering as self-righteous posturing, as resulting form pressure from an overbearing

church, or as a craving for human contact in an otherwise lonely life, rather than ascribing it to her greater human kindness and decency.

Trivialization: Do-gooder derogation

When the virtuous nature of the behavior is too self-evident and cannot be easily brushed off, and the direct route is therefore blocked, a second approach is to remove the threat indirectly by putting down moral others on other traits implying a lack of competence, trivializing their moral gesture, patronizing would-be saints as well-intentioned but naïve fools, weak, unintelligent, with poor common sense and little awareness of the realities of the real world. With this infantilizing and emasculating move, potential threats are rendered into deluded idealists. This is apparent in common derogatory monikers like "do-gooder" and "goody-two-shoes." It is also reflected in the work on the "might over morality" hypothesis (Liebrand, Jansen, Rijken, & Suhre, 1986), showing that individuals who defect in social dilemmas tend to see cooperators as moral but weak, recasting the situation as one that requires willpower rather than ethical clarity. Mainstream reactions to vegetarians typically exhibit this pattern, and the puzzling mild hostility that they report experiencing (Adams, 2003) can best be understood as defensiveness against an irksome moral claim. Surveys of omnivores reveal that they indeed will readily put down vegetarians, though they do so indirectly (see Monin & Minson, 2007), seeing them as good people (as reflected by higher ratings on Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum's 1957 *evaluation* dimension), while defusing their threat by calling them weak (as reflected by significantly lower ratings on Osgood *et al.*'s *potency* dimension). This derogation seems to be associated with anticipated moral reproach: We found that omnivores indeed think that they are seen as morally inferior by vegetarians, and that the extent of this anticipated moral reproach correlates with the negative valence of words associated with vegetarians. Furthermore, priming the reproach by asking omnivores to estimate it before rating vegetarians leads to vegetarians being rated significantly less intelligent and less moral. Interestingly, this anticipated moral reproach seems largely exaggerated, as shown by the fact that we found a signifi-

cant gap between the morality ratings that omnivores expected from vegetarians and the actual ratings of omnivores given by vegetarians.

Resentment: Disliking and distancing

When the behavior is clearly moral and it is hard to call into question the fortitude of the moral other (as in cases of moral rebellion where others take a principled stance against a problematic situation), the previous two routes to self-protection are unavailable. One last resort may be to distance oneself from the threatening other, and to profess little desire to affiliate with him or her (as predicted by the SEM model, Tesser, 1991). This should be reflected in low rankings on sociometric choices, and low rating on liking scales (as in other types of social comparison jealousy, see Salovey, 1991), or other forms of distancing (such as physically moving away from the threatening other, e.g., Pleban & Tesser, 1981). We may realize that it's difficult (without appearing petty) to question the other's morality and potency, but still entitled to our preferences (*De gustibus non est disputandum)*, we can decide that we just don't like the person. This can take the form of outright hostility, rejection, or glee at the superior other's fall (*Schadenfreude*, see Smith *et al.*, 1996). In our laboratory (Monin, Sawyer & Marquez, 2007), we have shown that liking for moral rebels depends on the perceiver's own involvement in the situation. Participants who just saw a confederate refuse to perform a decision task because of its racist undertones liked that rebel, respected him more, and saw him as more moral than a compliant confederate. However, participants randomly assigned to complete the racist task first (which nearly all of them did) actually liked the rebel *less* than a compliant other. For the latter "actor" participants, the rebel's stance was an indictment of their own choice, whereas the former "observer" participants had the luxury of appreciating the moral exemplarity of the rebel's refusal. The fact that this rejection of the rebel involves social comparison was suggested in another study showing that the actor-observer difference was strongest for individuals who scored high on Gibbons & Buunk's ability subscale of the social comparison orientation scale (INCOM, 1999). The moral nature of the process was reinforced by the finding that the same differ-

ence was greatest for individuals who signaled that morality was important to their self-concept in Aquino & Reed's moral internalization subscale (2002). As with do-gooders, anticipated moral reproach did play a role, as suggested in yet another study showing that the fear of being rejected by the moral rebel mediated the effect of role condition (actor *vs.* observer) on embracing the rebel. Again we interpret this effect in line with moral social comparison: When faced with a moral other, participants admired him as long as the moral other did not make them look bad, or had the opportunity to look down upon their morality. But as soon as moral others could cast doubt on their own morality, participants denied moral credit, put down others on competence-related dimensions, or simply expressed disliking of the comparison other.

Conclusion

We have come a long way since Festinger's depiction of social comparison as the selection of standards to understand one's place in the world. Along the years, the 1954 *Human Relations* paper sparked vast amounts of research located at the core of the social psychological enterprise to understand the human experience in a social world. We hope that the present paper will make a modest contribution to this literature, by sketching possible specificities of social comparison in the moral domain, and by starting to document the way people react to threatening moral standards. Nadler & Fischer (1986) suggest a possible disjunction in upward social comparison, where negative affective consequences can apparently be accompanied by positive behavioral ones – where the more threatening the other, the unhappier we are, but the better we strive to be. By identifying pettier reactions to moral exemplarity, we are not trying to paint a dark picture of the human soul, but rather we hope in the long run to develop strategies that will help people to stop gnawing their teeth at saints and to be instead inspired to work on their own halos.

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