

# *The Influence of Perceived Harm on Moral Norms and Judgments*

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the pivotal role of perceived harm in shaping moral norms and judgments, drawing on theories such as Moral Foundations Theory, the moral-conventional distinction, and dyadic morality. Harm is universally recognized as a central component of moral condemnation, yet its perception is deeply influenced by cultural, contextual, and cognitive factors. While physical and emotional harm are often seen as morally unacceptable, abstract, symbolic, and future-based harms also play a significant role in moral reasoning. The essay examines how harm is conceptualized across different moral frameworks, including its intersection with purity, loyalty, and intentionality. Neuroscientific and cross-cultural studies are cited to illustrate the universality and variability of harm-based moral judgments. Ultimately, the essay argues that while harm is a foundational element of morality, its interpretation is shaped by cultural norms, individual differences, and cognitive processes, highlighting the complexity of moral psychology. The interplay between universal cognitive mechanisms and cultural diversity underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how harm influences moral norms and judgments.

## **1. Introduction**

Moral psychology studies the role of reason, emotion, and intuition in forming moral norms and rules. A key issue in moral behavior is the perception of harm. Across cultures, harm to others is widely seen as the most serious moral violation [2]. Behaviors that cause physical or emotional harm are generally considered morally unacceptable.

However, the relationship between harm and morality is complex. Not all harmful acts are deemed immoral, and not all unethical acts involve direct harm [8]. Contextual factors such as intent [3], actor-recipient relationships [7], and cultural norms [10] also influence moral judgments.

This essay explores the role of harm in moral norms and judgments, focusing on the Moral Foundations Theory [7], the moral-conventional distinction [11], and other theories. It argues that harm is central to moral condemnations but is perceived through cultural lenses, encompassing symbolic, abstract, and future-based effects [4].

## 2. Harm as a Moral Foundation

The Care/harm foundation, a key component of Moral Foundations Theory, underpins human morality by motivating care and protection for the vulnerable [5]. This mechanism likely evolved from the need for mammals to care for their offspring [7]. Over time, compassion extended beyond kin to strangers, fostering virtues like kindness and gentleness [9].

Cross-cultural studies using the Moral Foundations Questionnaire [MFQ] show that the Care/harm foundation is more universally accepted than other foundations like Fairness/reciprocity, Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect, and Purity/sanctity [12]. This suggests that harm aversion is a universal aspect of moral systems, serving as a common basis for diverse ethical frameworks [7].

Neuroscientific studies support the role of the Care/harm foundation in moral decision-making. Brain regions associated with empathy and emotion, such as the amygdala and medial prefrontal cortex, are activated during judgments involving harm [4]. Damage to these areas, particularly the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, impairs moral judgment and reduces aversion to harming others [8].

However, the importance of the Care/harm foundation varies across individuals and cultures. Liberals tend to prioritize Care/harm and Fairness/reciprocity, while conservatives emphasize Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect, and Purity/sanctity [4]. Cultural factors also influence the centrality of harm in moral norms [11].

## 3. The Moral-Conventional Distinction

Turiel's moral-conventional distinction posits that people differentiate between moral norms [related to harm, rights, and justice] and conventional norms [culturally specific rules] [11]. Moral violations are seen as more serious and less permissible than conventional ones.

Children as young as three can distinguish between moral and conventional wrongs, viewing moral violations as universally wrong regardless of authority [9]. However, some acts, like flag desecration, are judged as morally wrong despite causing no direct harm, suggesting that abstract or symbolic harm can influence moral judgments [6].

This indicates that moral judgments are not solely based on direct harm but also on abstract or symbolic harm, such as violations of social or spiritual norms [12]. Thus, while moral norms often appear clear, the perception of harm can be complex and culturally contingent.

## 4. Dyadic Morality: Harm as a Continuum

Gray's dyadic morality theory posits that moral judgments are based on a cognitive template involving an intentional agent and a suffering patient [2]. This theory suggests that people perceive moral violations as inherently harmful, even when no actual harm occurs [4].

Harm is not a binary concept but exists on a continuum, ranging from physical harm to abstract or symbolic harm [6]. For example, consensual incest may be seen as harmful due to its potential impact on family integrity, even if no physical harm occurs [9].

Empirical studies support this theory, showing that people perceive immoral actions as harmful even when no direct harm is involved [3]. The severity of a moral violation influences the perceived harm and blameworthiness, aligning with the idea that harm is central to moral cognition [2].

## 5. Harm and Impurity

While harm is a universal moral concern, purity/sanctity is another key moral foundation, focusing on physical and spiritual contamination [1]. Purity violations, such as incest or eating rotten food, are often seen as harmful due to their symbolic or potential physical consequences [5].

Neuroimaging studies show that purity violations activate brain regions associated with disgust, such as the insula, while harm violations activate empathy-related regions like the ventromedial prefrontal cortex [11]. This suggests that harm and purity are processed differently in the brain, though they often intersect in moral judgments.

## 6. Loyalty, Betrayal, and Harm

Loyalty/betrayal is another moral foundation, emphasizing group cohesion and trust [7]. Betrayals are often judged as morally wrong, even if they cause no direct harm, because they threaten group integrity [6]. Loyalty can also justify harm to outgroups, as seen in intergroup conflicts [9].

Intentions play a crucial role in moral judgments. Acts intended to harm are seen as more blameworthy than accidental harm, even if the outcomes are similar [5]. This focus on intentionality reflects the belief that deliberate harm reveals bad moral character [3].

## 7. Harm across Cultures

While harm is universally condemned, cultural norms influence what is considered harmful and how harm is addressed. In small-scale societies, refusing to share resources is seen as a serious moral offense [12]. In honor cultures, verbal insults can provoke violent retribution [5].

Some cultures extend moral consideration to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects, viewing them as sentient beings capable of suffering [4]. These cultural differences highlight the variability in harm perceptions and moral judgments across societies.

## 8. Conclusion

Harm is a central driver of moral norms and judgments, rooted in evolutionary and emotional mechanisms. However, the perception of harm is not limited to direct physical or psychological damage but also includes abstract, symbolic, and culturally contingent forms. Moral judgments are influenced by intentions, cultural norms, and the perceived severity of harm. Understanding the interplay between harm and morality requires considering both universal cognitive mechanisms and cultural diversity.

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