

Sacred vs. Pseudo-Sacred Values:
How People Cope with Taboo Trade-Offs

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Abstract

Psychologists have documented widespread public deference to “sacred values” that communities, formally or informally, exempt from trade-offs with secular limits, like money. This work has, however, been largely confined to low-stakes settings. As the stakes rise, deference must decline because people can’t write blank checks for every “sacred” cause. Shadow pricing is inevitable which sets the stage for political blame-games of varying sophistication. In a rational world, citizens would accept the necessity of such trade-offs, but the attraction to moral absolutes is strong—perhaps even essential for social cohesion.

I. Stated Commitments to Sacred Values

People often insist that commitments to certain values are absolute—sacred—and that trading them against secular imperatives, such as money, is taboo, outrageous. Moreover, the outrage should require no explanation—indeed, asking for an explanation signals that one just does not understand the culture (Malinowsky 1920; Raz 1986). Because they raise doubts about commitment to the sacred, trade-offs are often deemed, even in dispassionate interviews, morally corrosive. And the longer observers think that someone has contemplated an indecent proposal, the harsher their assessments of that person, even if he or she ultimately makes the “right” choice and affirms the sacred value. To compare is, in effect, to destroy (Raz 1986). For most Americans today, being caught calculating the opportunity costs of supporting one’s young children or defending one’s country is to reveal that one just does not “get it.”

Violations of sacred values carry social consequences. People express contempt for taboo violators, imputing negative character traits and ostracizing them. They even direct hostility toward interviewers who have the bad taste to broach the possibility that interviewees might be open to considering the legitimacy of sacred-to-secular value conversions (Tetlock, Peterson and Lerner

1996; Baron and Spranca 1997; Tetlock 2003; McGraw, Tetlock and Kristel 2003; McGraw, Schwartz and Tetlock 2012). People also derive psychological benefits, such as self-esteem and mood enhancement, from reaffirming their solidarity with core societal values. And the social order is strengthened by collective rituals through which individuals express solidarity, as described by sociological theorists such as Durkheim (1925/1976).

II. Hypocrites?

Nevertheless, the depth of commitment to sacred values is unclear. With the intriguing exception of work on religion, martyrdom and suicide terrorism (Atran and Hendrich 2010), psychological studies of taboo trade-offs measure subjects' professed commitment to moral values rather than actual moral behavior, which raises a question of sincerity. How tightly do people actually cling to sacred values and how much is just impression management (Tetlock and Manstead 1985)—i.e., a desire to look “good”? On the one hand, people often insist that certain commitments and bonds are sacred—that even to contemplate comingling them with secular values of money or convenience is anathema (Durkheim 1925/1976). On the other hand, we live in a world of scarce resources, which means that even the well-being of children or the national defense must ultimately take on an implicit price.

This situation, in which the demands of the sacred compete with the demands of the real world, presents risks and challenges whenever parties' moral perceptions are mismatched. Consider an extreme case, in which cynical predators who see sacred values as nothing more than a useful fiction—such as those who score high on the classic Mach (Machiavellianism) personality scale (Christie and Geis 1970; Wilson, Near and Miller 1996)—take advantage of naïve believers who are averse to secular-sacred trade-offs. McGraw et al (2016) have shown how sales staff can profit by subtly or not-so-subtly insinuating that price-

comparison shopping for expensive products for ritualistic events, such as coffins or wedding rings, wrongly monetizes commitments to loved ones, thereby manipulating consumers to stretch budgets to breaking points. At the same time, high-Mach decision-makers can find themselves on the defensive if they have to cover up taboo trade-offs they have made. McGraw, Schwartz and Tetlock (2012) showed that religious institutions and pharmaceutical companies need to be especially adept at cloaking self-interested policies in noble public-good rhetoric. Because they traffic in sacred goods—our lives and souls—they will pay a steeper reputational price when caught trying to maximize profits from life-saving drugs or to enhance the efficiency of spiritual-service delivery (there is a long history here, from Catholic sales of indulgences in the 16th century to 21st century churches in the developed world out-sourcing prayers to less expensive Third-World clergy, a focus of the McGraw et al series of studies).

Often, however, the disjuncture between the sacred and the profane is not so stark, and people may be tempted to test normative boundaries, probing to see which goods and services can be permissibly traded in the marketplace. Building on Fiske's taxonomy of social relations into four core normative templates—communal (sharing/family), authority (ranking/hierarchy), equality-matching (friendship) and market pricing—Fiske and Tetlock (1997) hypothesized that criticism of taboo trade-offs is sparked whenever people see the first three (“particularistic”) types of relationships being corroded by the universal solvent of money, market pricing. In one of several studies testing this idea, McGraw and Tetlock (2005) exploited the imbroglio surrounding claims that President Clinton had “sold” access to the Lincoln bedroom (the market clearing price was supposedly in the vicinity of \$250,000). Clinton deftly reframed the alleged market-pricing violation as equality-matching: “What’s the big deal? Friends do favors for friends.” McGraw and Tetlock (2005) showed how much this reframing tamped down the outrage, especially among Democrats.

In a related study with a less august setting, McGraw and Tetlock (2005) showed how a wealthy college student who disliked doing communal chores in a group-living home could get away with paying a needy student to become his de facto servant, not by directly paying the student (which would be a taboo violation) but by paying the student's share of the electricity bill. "Getting away with it" means less reputational cost to the wealthy student who avoids the chores. Third-party observers make fewer nasty character attributions to the buyer of the service because the buyer has been cognitively repackaged as a friend returning a favor for a friend, which nicely illustrates the rhetorical-reframing power of the reciprocity norm (Gouldner 1960).

Skeptics point to the apparent inconsistency with which sacred values are enforced as evidence that people are merely motivated to feel moral (an intrapsychic function) and look moral (an impression management function), while shirking the costs of behaving morally (Batson, Thompson and Chen 2002). In this view, people are simply hypocrites. An oft-cited laboratory example is the work of Dana, Weber and Kuang (2007), who showed how many people carve out moral "wobble room" that would allow them to behave selfishly while preserving the illusion of fairness in the Dictator game.

Hypocrisy is, however, a harsh judgment. Trade-offs must occur whenever we feel good citizenship requires a declaratory commitment to sacred values, but society lacks the requisite resources—we cannot literally "leave no child behind" or "guarantee top-quality healthcare to all." Given the complex interplay among drivers of choices in lab-based morality studies—and how the same moral judgments can seem principled at one moment and rigid the next, flexible under one condition and flaccid under another (Tetlock and Mitchell 2010)—we propose viewing values as varying along a continuum, wherein every value is coupled to caveats that make it permissible to violate the sacred in favor of the secular. The fewer the caveats, the more resolutely the modal citizen will defend

the sacred cause. And we propose viewing people as varying along a continuum of interest in seeking out caveats: from hard-core Machiavellians for whom nothing is sacred and who do not bother pretending otherwise, to Batson's moral hypocrites, to more altruistic souls who make moderate-to-big sacrifices to uphold the normative order. Most of us are arguably better classified as semi-hypocrites, neither fanatical defenders of deontic principles nor devoid of sentimental attachments to these principles. We just realize, at some level of awareness, that even the most precious things can become too expensive to defend.

Consider a thought experiment that could become a technological reality in a few decades if advances in genomics continue to accelerate. Suppose a major-power rival to the United States developed methods of editing the genomes of fertilized human eggs to raise the IQs, physical strength and beauty of its next generation of citizens. Past work in Western societies has shown grudging willingness to use genomic technology for correcting birth defects, but sharp opposition to enhancements, which carry the historical resonance of Nazism and Aryan supremacy. Our analysis predicts that semi-hypocrites will be slow to acknowledge the looming threat but not fatally so. They will eventually find a sustainable moral equilibrium that distances them from the outrages of the early 20th century but protects them against rivals in the mid-21st century.

III. Tradeoffs and Polarization

When people are not under accountability pressures from their jobs and roles to confront awkward secular–sacred tensions, they tend to look the other way, with the status quo becoming the default option (Lerner and Tetlock 1999). Ultimately, though, the buck must stop somewhere. Someone must set priorities, a process that, however distasteful, requires attaching at least implicit monetary values to sacred values. If elites are to avoid incurring the righteous wrath of the masses, some combination of the following must happen:

(1) Elites need to persuade citizens to abandon the illusion that anything can be infinitely important. There are practical limits on, say, how safe we can make cars or trains or airplanes. In principle, it should be possible to educate people to view taboo trade-offs as routine, consumption-good trade-offs whenever there are no risk-free alternatives given the current state of technology. In this optimistic Enlightenment view, people will gradually grow the cognitive capacity to master the dissonance between our conceptions of ourselves as moral beings and the necessities of life in a world of scarcity.

(2) A complementary rhetorical maneuver is to transform taboo trade-offs into tragic ones. The failure to save a child's life ceases to be a taboo money-vs.-life trade-off and becomes a tragic life-vs.-life trade-off when we can redirect the resources to save more lives elsewhere. People tend to see taboo trade-offs as sleazy: the longer decision makers contemplate the deal, the more morally suspect they become. Tragic trade-offs are not morally contaminating: the longer decision makers dwell on the choice, the wiser they seem (Tetlock et al 2000). Tragic trade-offs can even be ennobling, the raw material of classical tragedy.

However, these efforts to defang taboo trade-offs can be complicated, if not thwarted, by the competitive dynamics of democracy. Thus, political candidates can subtly or not-so-subtly hint that the opposing candidate who favors cuts in military budgets, Social Security, or school spending is monetizing national honor or the lives of the elderly or children, thereby rendering certain topics off-limits for rational debate (Tetlock et al 2000). We should expect the boundaries of the thinkable to ebb and flow rather unpredictably as political partisans try to deflect charges of taboo trade-offs via self-protective rhetorical maneuvers, even as they try to make accusations of taboo trade-offs stick against their rivals, a process that requires delegitimizing the same maneuvers. The result is taboo-driven polarization whereby political camps are separated by competing definitions of the sacred, which makes technocratic compromise nearly

impossible. Of course, elites can try to prevent mutual assured moral destruction by exercising restraint, the rhetorical equivalent of arms control. There is wide variation among democracies in how defamatory debates can become.

On a closing cautionary note, it is a core tenet of Durkheimian sociology that de-sacralization poses its own risks to individual and collective well-being. Humanity needs rituals and a shared sense of sacredness to infuse our otherwise meaningless lives with significance—and, in the language of terror-management theory, ward off existential anxiety. In this view, people are incorrigibly attracted to moral frames and will resist efforts to bring the sacred into the realm of the profane. Homo sociologicus will not surrender without a fight to homo economicus.

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