

**Hindering Harm and Preserving Purity:  
How Can Moral Psychology Save the Planet?**

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**Abstract**

The issues of climate change and environmental degradation elicit diverse responses. This paper explores how an understanding of human moral psychology might be used to motivate conservation efforts. Moral concerns for the environment can relate to issues of harm (i.e., causing pain or impinging on another's welfare) or impurity (i.e., engaging in sacrilegious, polluting, or disgusting actions). Aversions to harm are linked to concern for current or future generations, non-human animals, and anthropomorphized aspects of the environment. Concerns for purity are linked to viewing the environment as imbued with sacred value, and therefore worthy of being protected at all costs. While both harm-based and purity-based framings of environmental issues can sometimes backfire, we argue that making these moral concerns salient can nevertheless bring about moral responses to environmental issues. In sum, scientists' emerging knowledge about the moral mind can be used to facilitate the sustainable conservation of the planet.

## 1. Introduction

The earth's climate is undergoing anthropogenic change: natural resources are being quickly depleted, ecosystems are being destroyed, and animal species are rapidly going extinct. The magnitude of these consequences has led many to conclude that one of the most crucial moral issues in modern times is that of environmental conservation (Friedman 2008; Leopold 1949). Notably, the belief that people have a moral obligation to preserve the environment and combat climate change is linked to increased motivation to engage in conservationist behaviors (Markowitz 2012). More generally, holding an attitude with moral conviction leads to increased involvement with the issue (Skitka 2010). Therefore, a key challenge for those concerned about environmental issues is discovering how to frame conservation as a moral imperative as opposed to a prudential or economic issue.

This task may strike some as an uphill battle, including those who have argued that conservationism is fundamentally at odds with our evolved moral psychology. For example, climate change does not automatically activate moral intuitions and emotions due to its abstractness, uncertainty, temporal distance, elicitation of guilt (which leads to motivated self-defensive reactions), and the fact that transgressions against the environment tend to be unintentional omissions (e.g., failures to recycle or conserve energy) rather than intentional commissions (Markowitz and Shariff 2012). However, the recent upswing in moral concern for the environment suggests that there are reasons to be optimistic (Dunlap, Gallup, and Gallup, 1993). This paper explores some available options for moralizing issues related to environmental conservation. Specifically, we examine the efficacy of appealing to the moral concept of harm and the moral concept of purity in the service of increasing concern for the environment and thus promoting sustainable behaviors.

## **2. The Moral Foundations of Harm and Purity**

Moral cognition is multifaceted, with research suggesting that there is a diverse range of distinct moral concerns (Graham et al. 2013; Parkinson et al. 2011; Pizarro, Tannenbaum, and Uhlmann 2012). For example, although many prototypical moral violations (e.g., murder, torture) involve harm to people, other moral violations (e.g., consensual incest, eating taboo foods) may be considered wrong due to concerns about impurity or sacrilege (Haidt, Koller, and Dias 1993; Shweder et al. 1997; Uhlmann and Zhu 2013).

Many morally relevant behaviors are associated with a single moral concern. For example, harm concerns dictate moral beliefs about the death penalty, while purity concerns dictate moral beliefs about premarital intercourse (Koleva et al. 2012). However, other transgressions may violate multiple moral norms. For example, harm concerns and purity concerns are both potentially relevant for moral judgments of suicide, although recent work has demonstrated that purity concerns primarily drive these judgments in spite of participants' explicit reports to the contrary (Rottman, Kelemen, and Young 2014). Crucially, environmentally relevant behaviors may also be framed in terms of harm or purity (Feinberg and Willer 2013). Below we explore the unique advantages of using each of these moral frames.

## **3. Harm-Based Concerns**

One way to increase moral concern for the environment is to raise awareness about the harmful consequences of climate change for humanity, thus framing environmentalism as a threatening public health issue (Maibach et al. 2010; Nisbet, Markowitz, and Kotcher 2012). For example, people report being concerned about leaving a positive legacy for future generations, especially after being instructed to think about the intergenerational burdens created by climate

change (Wade-Benzoni, Sondak, and Galinsky 2010); this feeling of responsibility could motivate people to engage in pro-environmental behaviors (Maibach, Roser-Renouf, and Leiserowitz 2008). In addition, drawing attention to specific victims – the people who will be harmed in the absence of conservation efforts – may also prove effective. Discourse analyses suggest that talking about how climate change disproportionately impacts the poor is a common tactic to engage support for environmental issues (Wardekker, Petersen, and van der Sluijs 2009). Concerns about how environmental damage can cause harm to humans are salient even during childhood; in both the United States and Brazil, they comprise a majority of young children’s justifications for engaging in pro-environmental behaviors (Howe, Kahn, and Friedman 1996; Kahn 1997; but see Hussar and Horvath 2011).

While focusing on the wellbeing of humans is one way to engage moral concern for the environment, a key challenge is that many non-human entities are fundamental components of any environment, and are often harmed much more directly than humans. Many people exclude animals, plants, and other natural kinds from the “moral circle” of care and concern (Opatow 1993) because they construe them as lacking the requisite properties for moral standing. In particular, some philosophers and psychologists have posited that rationality and intelligence are essential for moral standing, and therefore humans are at the pinnacle of moral concern (e.g., Carruthers 1992; Hamlin 2012; Kant 1980; Premack and Premack 1994). Even those who instead argue that more passive capacities for experiencing suffering and other phenomenal states are critical (e.g., Bentham 2007; Bernstein 1998; Blair 1995; Gray and Wegner 2009, 2012; Gray, Young, and Waytz 2012; Jack and Robbins 2012; Singer 1975) typically concede that these mental states are most characteristically found in human beings, even if they may be found to some degree in other animal species as well. Other factors that have additionally been

found to contribute to moral standing, including dispositional traits such as benevolence (Piazza, Landy, and Goodwin 2014), are also most clearly identified in humans. Fundamentally, although the precise criteria for moral standing are debated (and it is likely that more than one of the aforementioned characteristics contributes to moral consideration; see Sytsma and Machery 2012; Theriault and Young 2014), the different views on which capacities are central to moral consideration converge in characterizing humanness as the prototypical feature of moral standing. In sum, being considered a “person” is often necessary in order to achieve unambiguous inclusion in the moral circle (Farah and Heberlein 2007).

The concept of personhood is flexible, however, and attributions of personhood or humanness are extended under certain circumstances (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007; Farah and Heberlein 2007; Guthrie 1993; Johnson 2003). In particular, people engage in anthropomorphism, perceiving non-human entities to be human-like and thus deserving of moral consideration (Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley 2010). Research has shown that perceiving zoo animals as more similar to humans increases the promotion of animal welfare (Clayton, Fraser, and Burgess 2011). Furthermore, simple manipulations that induce people to anthropomorphize dogs (Butterfield, Hill, and Lord 2012) or to think of animals more generally as humanlike (Bastian et al. 2012) can achieve increases in pro-animal attitudes, as well as increases in the number of animal species for which people report moral concern. Finally, being instructed to take the perspective of suffering animals – as compared to viewing these animals objectively – has been demonstrated to increase concerns for non-human life, perhaps because perspective taking leads the animals to be conceptualized as more similar to the self (Schultz 2000). Other mechanisms beyond perspective taking may also facilitate anthropomorphism. For example, attributions of cuteness may have a humanizing effect, which is likely to be a reason why

juvenile animals (e.g., polar bear cubs) often elicit widespread moral concern (Sherman and Haidt 2011).

The positive effects of anthropomorphism extend even beyond sentient beings, such that moral concern for plants and even “Mother Nature” is enhanced when these entities are construed as “persons”. When explaining why trees deserve protection, from a moral standpoint, children frequently anthropomorphize them by referring to the suffering they experience when being chopped down (Gebhard, Nevers, and Billmann-Mahecha 2003). In adults, anthropomorphizing nature enhances feelings of connectedness to nature, which in turn leads to greater conservation behavior (Tam, Lee, and Chao 2013). Additionally, people who possess heightened dispositional tendencies to engage in anthropomorphism are more likely to express concern for plants, forests, and nature as a whole (Waytz et al. 2010).

### ***3.2. Downsides to Harm-Based Concerns***

Focusing on harm can aid efforts to increase moral concern for the environment, but this does not appear to be the case across the board. Evidence demonstrates that emphasis on human wellbeing often distracts from direct concerns about the environment (e.g., Severson and Kahn 2010). Compared to their peers, people who limit their environmental focus to considerations of impacts on human welfare tend to be more apathetic about environmental issues and less likely to engage in conservation behaviors (Gagnon Thompson and Barton 1994; Steg and de Groot 2012). Therefore, a harm-based morality that focuses entirely on human victims is unlikely to be entirely effective in motivating moral concern for the environment more broadly.

Furthermore, despite the role that anthropomorphism can play in facilitating extensions of harm-based concerns beyond humans to other aspects of the natural world, its influence is not

always positive. Indeed, in some cases, it can even diminish conservation efforts. This may be the case when anthropomorphism causes the humanized entities to be distanced from their place in the natural world. For example, watching a video of anthropomorphized entertainment chimpanzees reduces donations to wildlife charities, compared to watching a conservation video about wild chimpanzees (Schroepfer et al. 2011). Anthropomorphism can also have negative consequences if animals are characterized as enemies or outgroup members. For example, if an animal species is presented as being in conflict with humans over a scarce resource (e.g., inhabiting a particular area), then anthropomorphism reduces moral concern for that particular species (Opatow 1993).

Even if anthropomorphism leads to a net increase in pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors, anthropomorphism is not a process that is consistently engaged (Epley et al. 2007) and will therefore not always lead to humanlike construals of animals. Furthermore, although non-human animals and even some inanimate aspects of the environment are sometimes construed as “persons” and therefore deserving of certain moral rights, they still remain considerably lower on the moral hierarchy than humans (Brandt and Reyna 2011), such that harm to the environment will consistently be seen as less wrong than harm to individual people (Hussar and Horvath 2011). Although this prioritization of humans may seem to make sense in the short term, it is possible that focusing on harms to the environment could lead to more beneficial long-term effects for humans in addition to a range of other natural kinds.

In sum, while more research needs to be done to determine whether harm-based concerns typically lead to an overall net benefit in motivating pro-environmental behaviors, it is also important to explore other solutions to the moralization of environmental concerns.



#### 4. Purity-Based Concerns

Purity-based concerns have received less attention in moral discourse surrounding environmental issues, as harm-based concerns are generally emphasized instead (Feinberg and Willer 2013). However, in the only published study to date that has directly compared the relative effects of harm-based versus purity-based moral framings on environmentalism, purity emerged as a more powerful influence on participants' attitudes toward the environment. Specifically, priming people with a persuasive message about the need to purify the contaminated environment increased general pro-environmental attitudes of political conservatives (although not political liberals), as well as their feelings of disgust toward environmental degradation and their beliefs in global warming. A similar harm-based prime had no effect on the general environmental attitudes of either liberals or conservatives (Feinberg and Willer 2013). Therefore, purity rhetoric can be effective and even more powerful than harm for enhancing overall attitudes about environmental issues, perhaps because purity-based concerns are especially salient to those whose environmental attitudes are initially relatively weak.

Other evidence also suggests that purity concepts are relevant to the development of pro-environmental moral attitudes. In a rare study of moral acquisition, 7-year-old children were found to rapidly moralize novel environmentally directed actions set on an alien planet (e.g., filling a forest with cotton balls) when they were told that the actions were “unnatural” and/or “disgusting” (Rottman and Kelemen 2012). Concepts related to purity are therefore sufficient to produce moral cognition about the environment such that appeals to harm may not be necessary. This study additionally found that inducing the emotion of disgust – which some studies have found to be highly associated with purity-based concerns (Cannon, Schnall, and White 2011; Horberg et al. 2009; Rozin et al. 1999; Russell, Piazza, and Giner-Sorolla 2013; Seidel and Prinz

2013; but see Chapman and Anderson 2012, 2013; Chapman et al. 2009; Royzman et al. 2014) – can provoke moral concern for the environment. Because disgust is linked to contamination (Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff 1986) and is generally resistant to mitigation (Russell and Giner-Sorolla 2013), such findings suggest that disgust could be leveraged to bring about the enduring stigmatization of environmental degradation.

However, it must be noted that there is controversy over whether disgust can play a causal role in moralization. While several studies are highly suggestive (Eskine, Kacirik, and Prinz 2011; Horberg et al. 2009; Rottman and Kelemen 2012; Schnall et al. 2008; Wheatley and Haidt 2005), others have failed to offer support (e.g., Case, Oaten, and Stevenson 2012) and it has been suggested that some supportive results have been over-interpreted (Huebner 2014; May 2014). However, even as questions have been raised as to whether disgust can push actions into the moral domain (Huebner 2014; Huebner, Dwyer, and Hauser 2009; Pizarro, Inbar, and Helion 2011; Royzman, Leeman, and Baron 2009), reasons remain for believing that this emotion could play a facilitative role in moralization, especially in the purity domain (Rottman and Kelemen 2012; Rozin 1999; Rozin and Singh 1999).

Another major advantage of applying a purity-based conceptual framework to environmental issues comes from the relatively minimal role of intent in purity judgments. In particular, while differences due to intent play a large role in harm judgments (e.g., murder is deemed to be considerably worse than manslaughter), differences due to intent matter less for purity judgments such that unintentional violations are still judged harshly (Chakroff, Dungan, and Young 2013; Russell and Giner-Sorolla 2011; Young and Saxe 2011). People rarely *intend* to cause environmental damage and climate change; therefore invoking purity morals that do not

depend heavily on the notion of intent might be especially useful for framing environmental transgressions as immoral.

Beyond being functionally connected to disgust and disconnected from intentionality, the construct of purity has other conceptual properties that increase its relevance to environmental concerns. In particular, purity is often linked to sanctity or sacredness, such that these moral concepts are likely to be highly overlapping (e.g., Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Studies examining these ideas have found evidence that treating the environment as sacred can increase environmental concern (Stern et al. 1999; Tarakeshwar et al. 2001). Furthermore, Christian beliefs about “conservational stewardship,” in which the earth is considered to be a sacred entity that should be preserved in its original, divinely created form, may elevate environmental concern (Wardekker et al. 2009). Buddhist beliefs and spirituality in general may also increase environmentalism (Garfield 2013).

Beliefs about the sanctity of nature may also be connected to beliefs that nature is intrinsically valuable. Research has shown that naturalness is thought to be inherently good, and that people prefer natural entities to their unnatural counterparts (Kellert and Wilson 1993; Rozin et al. 2004). Moral concerns about nature sometimes involve assigning an intrinsic value to the natural world (Kahn 1997), and this construal of nature as having profound non-utilitarian value is common among environmental activists (Horwitz 1994). A sanctity-based framing may thus lead various components of the environment, such as natural forests or plant and animal species, to be viewed as worthy of protection from destruction or extinction at all costs (Baron and Spranca 1997).

In sum, invoking purity-based concerns and closely associated feelings of disgust and beliefs about sacredness can be an effective method for increasing moral concern for the

environment. This may be especially true for issues related to the degradation of local and larger ecosystems, which resist harm-based framings because the individual victims within them are not easily identifiable. Indeed, purity may be most effectively used for these larger-scale, systemic issues because actions resulting in even minor “tainting” of ecosystems may activate the concern while remaining insignificant from a harm-based perspective. Additionally, while harm-based rhetoric arguably marginalizes political conservatives, potentially provoking resistance to “liberal” environmentalism (Feinberg and Willer 2013; Markowitz and Shariff 2012), purity-based rhetoric is especially well suited for appealing to this population.

#### ***4.2. Downsides to Purity-Based Concerns***

The previous section demonstrated that beneficial outcomes are often associated with framing environmental concerns in terms of purity or sanctity. As with harm, however, these benefits are sometimes inconsistent. Additionally, purity concerns are not automatically linked to pro-environmentalism. On the contrary, people who are more generally concerned about issues related to purity (as measured on an independent questionnaire) tend to oppose measures for ameliorating climate change, while people who are more generally concerned about issues related to harm tend to support these measures, even when controlling for political conservatism (Koleva et al. 2012). Therefore, inducing people to care more about purity in a general sense will not help the environment. Instead, nature must itself be framed as a purity concern.

As noted above, due to its relationship to religious beliefs and commitment, purity can positively influence moral attitudes about the environment via “conservational stewardship” – the belief that humans should uphold the purity of nature as God’s creation. However, religiosity is sometimes also negatively associated with environmentalism (e.g., Guth et al. 1995), and as a

result, the relationship between religion and environmental attitudes is complex (Sherkat and Ellison 2007). Even as conservational stewardship is associated with increases in environmentalist actions, purity-based religious discourses about “developmental stewardship” preach the anti-conservationist idea that mankind is divinely created to have dominion over nature with the sacred purpose of exploiting the earth as a garden (Wardekker et al. 2009; White 1967). This dual nature of purity-based religious framings demonstrates that the same moral concept can be recruited to make diametrically opposed prescriptions, and therefore purity-based framings must be used with care and foresight in order to elevate pro-environmentalism.

Overall, therefore, religion can be leveraged to either aid or deter conservation efforts. However, it is important to keep in mind that religious concerns are multidimensional and can be orthogonal to purity or sanctity concerns. For example, in some cases where religious individuals are found to care less about the environment than non-religious individuals, this link can be traced to comparatively greater anthropocentric concerns among the religious for harming people compared to harming plants and animals (Schultz, Zelezny, and Dalrymple 2000). In short, differences in environmental attitudes due to religion may sometimes be attributable to harm-based concerns rather than purity-based concerns.

## **5. Conclusions**

A crucial task in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to develop effective strategies for increasing moral support for environmentalism. This paper has demonstrated that focusing on harm can often be beneficial, as people are generally motivated to protect others from being hurt or destroyed. Yet focusing on harm-based concerns can be limiting, as this requires individualized victims. Harm-based framings can also backfire, especially if the concerns are restricted to humans.

Additionally, because the extension of harm concerns to non-humans relies on the additional process of anthropomorphism, this form of moral cognition may not always be successfully engaged.

This paper has additionally demonstrated that framing environmental conservation as an issue of purity or sanctity may also prove to be beneficial. Purity violations are linked to the stigmatizing emotion of disgust, and purity-based concerns carry the additional benefit of being activated even in the absence of malicious intent. Furthermore, linking nature to concepts of sanctity and deontological valuation of naturalness can lead the environment to be construed as a sacred or protected value and can help to engage concerns about the environment on a more abstract, systemic level. However, there are also instances in which purity-based framings can lead to negative outcomes, and in general people who are overall more concerned with purity tend to be less concerned with climate change.

Because harm-based and purity-based framings alike can lead to advantages and disadvantages for environmentalism, these different moral concerns may need to be flexibly engaged depending on the person and the context (also see Maibach et al. 2008). For example, harm-based framings of environmental issues may be best deployed in cases where distinct victims are in danger of suffering. However, if these potential victims cannot be sufficiently humanized or individuated, purity-based framings may prove to be more beneficial. Purity frames will also be especially effective for political conservatives or for individuals who lack a dispositional tendency to anthropomorphize non-humans. Further research is needed to determine exactly how to best deploy these different framings to yield an overall net benefit for conserving the planet.

Future investigations should also explore how harm-based and purity-based framings compare to other forms of normative cognition in augmenting pro-environmental actions. For example, emphasizing norms has proven effective in reducing littering behavior (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990) and energy consumption (Schultz et al. 2007). However, for cases where there is a norm to behave in ways that are destructive to the environment (e.g. driving to work instead of biking or taking public transportation), it is likely that considerations of harm or purity will supersede processes of social conformity in enhancing conservation behaviors.

Future research should additionally examine the extent to which particular moral attitudes lead to consistent moral behaviors. Research on moral disengagement (e.g., Bandura 1999), moral hypocrisy (e.g., Batson et al. 1997), and situational pressures (e.g., Milgram 2004) have demonstrated that people do not always act in accordance with their moral beliefs, especially when these beliefs conflict with self interest (also see Smith, Blake, and Harris 2013). This is certainly the case for environmentally relevant behaviors, for which pro-environmental attitudes are often subsumed by consumerist and capitalist tendencies, a lack of motivation, and the commons dilemma involved in sharing natural resources (e.g., Van Vugt 2009). Empirical work is necessary to gain knowledge about the degree to which environmentalist actions are likely to stem from moral proscriptions against harming the environment and moral prescriptions for upholding the purity of the environment.

Ultimately, it is important to probe the positive impacts of harm-based and purity-based concerns for pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. As psychologists continue to gain a better understanding of the moral mind, clearer solutions for engaging mankind in the preservation of the planet may become increasingly apparent.

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