“Doing well by doing good”? Ambivalent moral framing in organizations

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Abstract

Responding to conflicting pressures to justify decisions both in terms of ethical standards and in terms of self-interested rationality, actors in organizations often make the dubious claim that value-driven goals are good for business. Whereas much work has already explored cases where moral and self-interested rationales clash, this review explores situations where they coincide, and discusses the factors that would lead a manager to choose to publicly frame an issue in moral or pragmatic terms. We analyze cases of mismatch between private and public moralization (e.g., moral muteness and moral hypocrisy), illustrating the value of considering these two levels of moral framing separately. Then we identify some of the precursors of moral awareness (moral intuitions, moral template matching and meta-perceptions) that signal the availability of a moral frame for a given issue. Finally, we explore what positive or negative consequences actors expect to result from public moralization, and present what research is available regarding the accuracy of these expectations.

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0191-3085/$ – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
1. Introduction: moral rationales in organizations

1.1. “Doing well by doing good”: the appeal of pragmatic frames for value-driven policies

A recurrent narrative in corporate settings is that acting on seemingly costly ethical principles is actually in a firm’s best interest. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is touted as a win–win proposition, a no-brainer, as if the only reason one would resist implementing onerous ethical practices were the erroneous belief that they are bad for business. This mantra is not a new one. Marvin Bower of McKinsey, one of the fathers of modern management consulting, argued 45 years ago that businesses with high ethical standards are able to generate greater drive and effectiveness, recruit higher caliber employees, and develop better and more profitable relations with customers, competitors, and the general public, thereby gaining an edge over competitors whose standards are lower (Bower, 1966, p. 26).

The current fad for social entrepreneurship also relies on this logic of “both-and—as opposed to either-or,” in that “social entrepreneurs tend to believe that problems can be solved to the benefit of all: In their ideal world, money makers make their money, the poor are rescued from poverty, [and] elites find meaning…” (Giridharadas, New York Times, 7/15/2011). Environmental sustainability, for example, is described in the titles of recent books as a “big competitive advantage” (Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011), “a business imperative” (Stoner & Wankel, n.d.), and as promoting “innovation and business growth” (Lowitt, 2011). General Electric’s 2009 “Citizenship Report” states that “corporate citizenship means business,” and that “green is green and health is wealth”; Exxon Mobil, in its 2009 “Corporate Citizenship Report,” writes that “successful companies are those that see business objectives and sustainability objectives as interlinked,” a linkage that presumably results from the assessment that core partners will reward investment in otherwise costly objectives.

These “win–win” justifications for ethical standards and social entrepreneurship, rather than really describing two equivalent reasons to adopt a policy, often imply a specific hierarchy between values and profit, where the former actually serve the latter. “Doing well by doing good,” for example, is a particularly popular phrasing of the narrative, used in titles for Time Magazine (2009), Business Week (2009), Fast Company (2010), and Huffington Post (2007), among others. An internet search on the phrase yields over 600,000 hits – an impressive number when you know that the much simpler phrase “maximizing profit[-/s]” yields only 1,400,000 hits. This catchphrase does not simply combine doing good (prosocial goal) with doing well (profit goal)—in its use of the preposition “by,” it also

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communicates that doing good is a subordinate goal, one whose desirability is determined by the extent to which it promotes doing well (cf. Goldman, 1970; Knobe, 2010). Similarly, corporate actors, although they publish “citizenship” or “responsibility” reports to comply with the requirements of the current corporate climate, hasten to clarify that they are no dewy-eyed do-gooders. “This is not about charity,” proudly proclaims the Wells Fargo & Co. 2009 Corporate Social Responsibility report; instead, according to Bank of America’s 2010 Annual Report, citizenship is important because “our involvement in our community is important to our customers, clients, shareholders and teammates.” These assertions express both moral and non-moral reasons to undertake the same action, but they also proclaim the superordinate status of the profit motive.

This implicit subordination of ethics to profit is worrisome. First, by justifying ethical actions based on the profit they can generate, it makes profit the ultimate goal, and ethical concerns merely a means to increase profit. This suggests a flimsy commitment to ethical standards, which might disappear the minute the profitability of ethical behavior comes into question. Indeed, despite the touted profitability of Corporate Social Responsibility, little evidence supports that such initiatives are actually good for business – perhaps best summarized by the title of Margolis, Elfenbein, and Walsh’s (2008) Harvard Business Review: “Doing well by doing good? Don’t count on it” (see also Margolis & Walsh, 2001, 2003; Vogel, 2005) – making such a contingent commitment to ethics likely to be disappointing and short-lived. But claims of “doing well by doing good” are problematic for a second reason, one that should concern even those who maintain that profit should be the first priority of business: these “win–win” arguments often rely on poorly quantified, nebulous claims about consumer reactions, brand-image improvement, lawsuits avoided, and the like. Such assertions are more akin to a belief in karmic “what goes around comes around” than to testable arguments. Claims that an investment in ethics today will pay off in the long run cannot stand scrutiny, for example, without stipulating a mutually accepted time horizon. If a diversity training program is “worth it” pragmatically—perhaps because of the drop in lawsuits the company will need to handle, or the quality of the workforce it is likely to be able to attract and retain—does this one-time investment need to cost less than it will save for the next 2, 5, or 20 years? Though the “values pay” rationale is often invoked with no specification of such parameters, and roomfuls of reasonable people nod at the shrewd observation, shareholders might be less enthusiastic about this type of argument if they forced proponents of “doing good” to actually specify in concrete terms when and with which probability this should lead to “doing well.”

Nowhere is the subordination of lofty goals to the profit motive more evident than in the various kinds of novel reports on (Global) Citizenship, Community, Corporate Social Responsibility, or (Global) Sustainability that large companies now feel compelled to make available alongside traditional annual financial reports, and from which we have already sampled above. In fact, the practice has become so commonplace that Berkshire Hathaway turned out to be the only Fortune 20 company in 2009 with no such public statement or report, prompting one shareholder to submit a petition requesting a sustainability report, declaring that Berkshire Hathaway was a “corporate outlier in its lack of sustainability reporting” (April 13, 2009 BH Resolution).

The content of these reports, and in particular the framing chosen by Chief Executive Officers in their opening statements, is intriguing. These reports, by their very existence, proclaim that companies feel accountable to more than the bottom line highlighted in traditional annual financial reports; yet despite their grandiose and idealistic titles, they are prefaced by statements seemingly written to reassure readers that the overarching goal is still profitability. The link between profitability and loftier goals is argued to take the form of a necessary a priori condition (“good corporate citizenship is fundamental to our success” JP Morgan Chase & Co. 2010 Corporate Responsibility Report; “By remaining true to our values . . . we can deliver profitable growth,” Ford Motor 2010/2011 Sustainability Report; “Sustainability continues to make Walmart a better company by reducing waste, lowering costs, driving innovation, increasing productivity . . .”, Walmart 2010 Global Sustainability Report) or a bankable investment into the future (“stronger communities better serve their residents and build a more capable infrastructure that can, in turn, facilitate business”, ConocoPhilips 2008 Sustainable Development Review; “Embedding the highest standards of safety, environmental performance, ethics, economic stewardship, and community engagement in every aspect of our activities is critical to protecting local communities and supporting our company’s long-term success,” Exxon Mobil, 2010 Corporate Citizenship Report). Thus in the spirit of “doing well by doing good,” these practices are justified in that they “lower costs,” “increase productivity,” “facilitate business,” and “support our company’s long-term success.”

Ford Motor’s 2010/2011 Sustainability Report is a perfect example of this frequent effort to show that “environmental and social goals,” rather than being idealistic concerns, are “key elements of [their] business
strategy” – which they credit as an important factor in their recent financial recovery. You might think that “delivering cars that are greener, safer and smarter” would be a worthy goal in itself – but, Ford claims, this effort also paid off in that it “enhanced [their] competitiveness and built stronger relationships with [their] customers.” You might think that joining a UN-sponsored effort promoting human rights, fair labor, and environmental protection would need no justification – but it also ensures that Ford will “be a trusted partner in expanding in markets around the world.” You might think that emphasizing resource efficiency in their products and operations would simply be the right thing to do – but it also “positions [them] well to weather a period of rapidly rising costs for energy and materials.”

Given the aforementioned problems with the “doing well by doing good” mantra, these observations lead to an odd picture of the relation between business and ethics. On one hand, ethical concerns are often subordinated to profit concerns, implying that being ethical matters primarily because it serves the bottom line. This type of argument suggests an order of priorities whereby ethical concerns will be jettisoned the moment they stop making business sense. On the other hand, if self-interested concerns or profit maximization were really the only concerns of decision-makers, why would they even bring up ethics in the first place? And why would they not try to substantiate their “doing well” argument with more concrete and convincing evidence? When deciding how to justify their decisions, corporate actors seem to be attempting to strike an uneasy balance between ethical arguments and ones based on profitability. They seem eager to go beyond the language of profit maximization to motivate their decisions, but not comfortable enough to abandon it altogether, often ending up with the superficially appealing but often vacuous agenda of “doing well by doing good.”

The most cynical interpretation of this tension is that corporate actors are Machiavellian wolves in sheep’s clothing, merely pretending to subscribe to ethical concerns to look good to an ethics-conscious society when their only true goal is the pursuit of profit. A more hopeful interpretation, and the impetus for this paper, is that actors in organizations are conflicted about whether and when to moralize issues. Actors, in other words, often have to decide whether to treat an issue as a ethical one—privately, publicly, or both—and the factors motivating these decisions are many and complex. The “doing well by doing good” discourse may not be a case of blatant venal hypocrisy, but instead a reflection of psychological tensions leading to a deep ambivalence about moral framing in organizations.

1.2. Analyzing moral framing

We will say that an organizational actor uses a moral frame when considering or discussing an issue, policy, or decision (or, equivalently, that she moralizes that issue) if she justifies it by invoking larger values imbued with moral or ethical content such as respect for the environment, concern about social impact, fairness to individuals from all backgrounds and groups, patriotism, concern for the needy, etc. By contrast, evoking the interests of the organization constitutes a pragmatic frame (for a similar distinction, see Butterfield, Treviño, & Weaver, 2000; Sonenshein, 2006; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999, 2004). We use the terms “moral” and “ethical” loosely: an “ethical” principle, in its substance, is any principle that goes beyond the short- or long-term interest of the organization. In moral framing, a selfless concern of the kind listed above is elevated as the ultimate end-goal, or at least not as a secondary or instrumental goal; if such a concern is mentioned but then subordinated to financial concerns (e.g., Ford’s energy conservation “to weather a period of rapidly rising costs,” implying subordination of the energy conservation goal to the cost-saving goal), then it really is a pragmatic frame. As we will see, moral framing can refer either to how individuals personally view an issue or how they talk about it with others, and private and public moralizations need not align.

To enable our analysis, we restrict our focus to issues or policies that could reasonably fit either a moral or a pragmatic frame, and where both frames would lead to the same recommendation. In other words, we focus on situations where one could argue for the same position either in terms of doing well or of doing good, and we discuss when actors are likely to use either of the two framings available to them. We thus exclude policies that are obviously profit-minded and could not plausibly be framed as ethically motivated, as well as policies that are clearly based on principle and could not reasonably to be presented as profitable. We posit, however, that such policies are in reality relatively rare: individuals are quite adept at justifying any decision or policy in moral terms, fitting most decisions into a moral frame if needed – the extreme being the position that maximizing profit is the ultimate moral good (e.g., Friedman, 1970). Conversely, a loose definition of the “long term” time horizon allows individuals to argue that any principled decision could eventually be beneficial for the bottom line, thus fitting most decisions into a pragmatic frame if needed. This means that “moralized” actions need not be ones that observers or philosophers would agree are
morally good; moral framings can be used not only to justify a priori virtuous actions such as calling attention to gross injustices, but also in more ethically ambiguous situations. Our focus is not on the actual moral goodness of managers’ actions as they would be evaluated objectively or by a third party, but rather on how managers themselves understand and present their actions.

Our choice to consider situations where principles and profit are (or at least could plausibly be argued to be) in alignment leaves out the type of case that has traditionally been the focus of business ethics, where an actor’s eagerness to maximize the profit of an organization or his or her own self-interest conflicts with the tenets of human morality – where, for example, a company could greatly increase its revenue by releasing a product that it knows to be defective and dangerous in a part of the world where it knows the risks of litigation or bad press are negligible. Documenting the factors that guide whether an actor ultimately goes with the demands of her conscience or of her quarterly report is indeed a pressing endeavor, but these psychological processes have been reviewed extensively elsewhere (e.g., Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Here, therefore, we focus instead on factors relevant not to which decision an actor will take but rather to the way an actor understands and communicates the basis for that decision.

At the heart of our analysis are the orthogonal distinctions between moral and pragmatic framing on the one hand, and between public and private framing on the other. In the following section we argue that because private and public moralizations do not always align, it is important to understand how they differ and what unique processes lead to each.

2. Moral frames vs. pragmatic frames

As defined above, the moral framing (or moralization) of an issue links it to moral concerns, either explicitly via the words “moral” or “ethical,” or by emphasizing the alignment of an action or decision with higher order values and principles that themselves are understood to have moral relevance (e.g., reducing one’s carbon footprint, increasing diversity in the workforce, respecting religious proscriptions, supporting decent labor conditions, reducing environmental damage, etc.). We contrast such ethical framings of an issue or decision with pragmatic framings, which privilege cost–benefit analyses of profit maximization, arguing for a position on the basis of self-interest (Miller, 1999) or shareholder value (Friedman, 1970).

Notice that the “framing” of an issue as moral or pragmatic can refer to two different things. On a public level, it can refer to the way an individual communicates about the issue when discussing it with others, and on a more private level, it can refer to the way an individual personally understands what is at stake in a given decision. Although private moralization often leads to public moralization, we propose that important insights can be gained by separating these two processes analytically. The purpose of this section is to define our terms in greater detail, to clarify the distinction between public and private moralization, and to analyze a range of disparate cases, illustrating diverse psychological processes, to give a sense of the types of phenomena we intend our analysis to explain. In Sections 3 and 4 we take this explanatory task further, analyzing the upstream and downstream correlates of moralization. Note that by moral framing we mean something quite different from having a moral mandate (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002), because moralization just means that one treats an issue as a moral one, but not that one necessarily holds a particularly strong attitude about it, a hallmark of moral mandates.

2.1. Public vs. private moralization

The examples cited in Section 1 above—public statements, citizenship reports, and media discussions—all illustrate public moralization (or lack thereof). Public moralization (or public moral framing) refers to the decision to couch an issue or policy in moral or ethical terms when communicating about it to others: shareholders, employees, business partners, consumers, interest groups, or the public at large. The most public of these communications include company websites and brochures, annual reports, CEO speeches at board meetings or on panels at professional meetings, media interviews, press releases, and advertising campaigns. Public moralization can also happen in more restricted settings, from a manager addressing a small team of employees to a salesperson addressing a prospective client.

In contrast to the public level, private moralization (or private moral framing) describes the extent to which an actor within an organization personally imbues an issue with moral content when thinking about it or privately justifying it.
This has been identified by various scholars as the first step in the moral decision process (Butterfield et al., 2000; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986), as a prerequisite of moral judgment and action. But whereas these authors typically focus on whether an actor becomes aware that a moral frame is necessary, we leave as much room in our analysis for features that make a moral frame available. Furthermore, whereas Butterfield et al. (2000) discuss issue framing as an antecedent of moral awareness, our analysis pertains to the antecedents of issue framing. An individual privately moralizes an issue if she considers that her own moral values and principles serve as a guide and motivation in determining how to act or what policy to support, independent of whether she then uses a moral frame when communicating about it to others. Even someone who moralizes an issue privately but decides not to moralize it publicly need not keep her private views completely secret. We can imagine that she discusses it as such outside of the workplace (with her spouse or friends) and even with close colleagues and collaborators. However, this more personal disclosure is different from public moralization, which occurs at the diffusion or implementation phase, when she is convincing others to adopt a policy or address an issue based on moral imperatives, or using values when justifying the organization’s actions as its official representative.

In many cases, the decision whether or not to publicly moralize an issue will follow directly from a person’s degree of private moralization. Take the example of a manager arguing that her company should seek a form of environmental certification. She might privately feel that using sustainable practices is aligned with her moral values and convictions, and she may accordingly decide to frame the certification issue in moralized terms when discussing it with her colleagues and subordinates. Conversely, a manager who personally views the certification issue mostly as a cost-saving measure, and thus as a non-moral issue, may consequently publicly use language that is consistent with this private pragmatic framing. In these straightforward cases, public moralization (or lack thereof) is completely determined by private moralization.

The value of distinguishing public and private moralization, however, lies in the fact that the two levels do not always align. Indeed, at the heart of the present analysis is the assertion that, in many cases, private moralization happens without being followed by public moralization (Bird & Waters, 1989; Sonenschein, 2006), and conversely public moralization can occur despite an absence of private moralization. In the rest of this section, we spell out this argument in greater detail by discussing different combinations of private and public moralization and the psychological processes that underlie them. Table 1 provides the organizing framework for our analysis.

In Table 1, one diagonal corresponds to the two straightforward cases where private moralization is followed by public moralization (full moralization) and no private moralization leads to no public moralization (no moralization); the other diagonal captures the more surprising cases where one type of moralization happens but not the other. We spend the rest of this section exploring these four possible outcomes.

### 2.2. Full moralization

In this straightforward case, an individual moralizes an issue both privately and publicly. This is the prototypical case of issue moralization in organizations. For example, a manager supports green certification, feels that her personal support is based on her moral values, and publicly expresses her support in terms of those moral values. This alignment of public and private moralization can happen in several ways. A first, fairly unambiguous situation is one where the values evoked are both important to the decision-maker and known to be important to the organization. For example, an organization that explicitly includes sustainability among its core values, and where many employees joined the company precisely because they share these values would yield many cases of full moralization. But full moralization can also happen in the absence of such moral clarity. A decision-maker could moralize publicly even when it is unclear whether others moralize the same issue because she projects her own moral perspective onto others (Allport, 1924),

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assuming that they share her view despite lacking supporting evidence. Alternatively, even without harboring any illusions that others share a moralized view of the issue, a manager could believe that a public moral framing is likely to have the greatest positive impact. She may believe that linking a decision to moral values will persuade audience members to see the issue in terms of its ethical meaning and inspire them to work harder on it, or that invoking higher principles will increase her personal influence by revealing her noble motives and heartfelt commitment. Finally, even managers who do not anticipate any positive consequences of public moralization might still use a public moral framing, for the sake of personal integrity, being true to their core principles, and consistency between their public statements and private views (Srivastva, 1989). Managers who moralize privately may feel that using a pragmatic framing would constitute “selling out” or treating the issue with insufficient respect, and research has shown that even merely considering pragmatic tradeoffs in moral situations is felt to be a moral violation (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). People should therefore feel reluctant to desacralize issues they moralize by lowering them to the realm of the instrumental, pushing them to moralize publicly even if they anticipate no positive interpersonal consequences from doing so. Yet another possibility is that one comes to moralize the issue privately as result of framing the issue publicly, as a desire to be truthful and consistent often causes private attitudes to become aligned with public attitudes, in the absence of obvious justifications for the public dissemblance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959).

2.3. No moralization

In the case of no moralization, public and private framings are again aligned, but here the individual does not moralize either privately or publicly. As above, different underlying processes, with different degrees of psychological tension, could lead to this situation.

First, and most straightforwardly, no moralization can happen when it never even occurs to the individual that an issue may have moral relevance, because none of the factors that might flag an issue as a potentially moral one (moral intuitions, moral templates, or meta-perceptions; see Section 3 below) are on hand. Some issues, by their very nature, seem unlikely ever to be moralized, including mundane choices such as which design to use for the organization’s logo or even a more substantial decision about organizational restructuring (assuming no layoffs or salary cuts). In other words, because such issues have extremely low moral intensity (Jones, 1991), they will not be moralized either publicly or privately, simply because it would never occur to anyone to moralize them.

“Low moral intensity” may seem at first blush to characterize a great number of everyday business decisions, but in fact we would like to suggest that such morally irrelevant situations are quite rare. In many of the difficult decisions managers face, some form of moral relevance is often lurking under the surface—often because an individual’s or group’s well-being or interest is at stake. Even if these issues do not end up being moralized, the factors making them candidates for moralization (reviewed in Section 3) are likely to be present, causing actors to at least question whether the issues should be framed morally.

Indeed, no moralization may also occur when a psychological tug to moralize an issue is present but ultimately disregarded, as when an individual feels that an issue could be considered morally relevant but decides to use a pragmatic frame consistent with the prevailing culture. For example, Haidt, Koller, and Dias (1993) found that when presented with disgusting but victimless transgressions (such as eating the family dog after it was hit by a car), respondents on the University of Pennsylvania campus were reluctant to say the behavior should be stopped or that it would be unacceptable in any culture—in other words, to moralize—whereas respondents recruited in front of McDonald’s in a poor area of Philadelphia were much more likely to take a moralized view. Both groups felt offended by the transgressions, but the more-educated respondents seem to have decided that disgust was not a sufficient reason to moralize. Similarly, a manager may feel a sense of moral weight in thinking through a decision, but may decide to ignore this sense, persuading herself to see the issue even privately as non-moralized.

As discussed above in the case of full moralization, concern for personal authenticity and integrity (Srivastva, 1989) can lead to no moralization even when pragmatic framings are not consistent with the prevailing culture. An individual who does not feel that an issue is moral, but who realizes that others do, may nonetheless decide not to moralize publicly, out of concern for authenticity or perhaps fear of being “discovered” as a hypocrite. For example, a manager working in an environmentally conscious organization, who personally does not feel that environmentalism is a moral issue, might feel uncomfortable speaking about an environmental certification proposal in moral terms. Thus, as for
full moralization, cases where pragmatic framings are aligned at the private and public levels can reflect a variety of different psychological experiences.

2.4. Private moralization only: moral muteness

The next set of examples illustrates a mismatch between public and private moralization, capturing cases where a decision-maker unambiguously moralizes an issue privately but uses a pragmatic frame in public. The surprising prevalence of “moral muteness” among managers, as noted by Bird and Waters (1989) and Sonenshein (2006), is one of the primary motivators for distinguishing between private and public moralization in our analysis. Note that moral muteness differs from organizational silence, i.e. failing to make any public statement whatsoever about an issue (e.g. Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000): in the case of moral muteness, the actor does make a public statement consistent with a privately moralized view, but the public statement is framed in pragmatic rather than moral terms.

Given the strong motivation to moralize an issue publicly when it is moralized privately (see Section 2.2 above), the fact that moral muteness nonetheless occurs so often suggests that individuals in organizations experience powerful psychological and social pressures (Asch, 1955) that inhibit public moralization. One source of pressure is a strong norm to act and present oneself as self-interested, which is prevalent in American society (Miller, 1999) and especially in the corporate world. Another source of pressure is the fear that moral talk would jeopardize organizational harmony, organizational efficiency, and managers’ reputation for power and effectiveness (Bird & Waters, 1989; Skitka et al. (2005) show that moralization of a discussion can indeed lead to divisiveness and politicization. We will return to the interpersonal consequences of public moralization in Section 4.) Thus, social pressures can inhibit public moralization even when individuals privately moralize.

2.5. Public moralization only: playing to the moral crowd

In this second type of mismatch between public and private moralization, a decision-maker frames the issue morally in public despite privately thinking of it in purely pragmatic terms. This mismatch is most likely to occur when the audience is perceived to already see the issue as moral. Though, in other situations, a decision-maker would expect backlash for using a moral frame, in this case the audience is expected to be more resistant to a pragmatic frame. Research on issue selling (e.g. Dutton & Ashford, 1993) has documented the sensitivity of middle managers to the perceived effectiveness of framing issues in different ways. The audience may think the individual morally deficient for speaking about moral issues in such a disrespectful way (Tetlock et al., 2000). More generally, classic research in social psychology (Asch, 1955) demonstrates that people experience tremendous pressures to conform, and often change their personal views, when those views do not match the perceived consensus. More recent research (Aramovich, Lytle, & Skitka, submitted for publication) has shown that, in the domain of potentially moralized issues, individuals who do not personally moralize an issue are especially inclined to conform to the consensus.

Conformity to a perceived moralizing consensus may seem duplicitous, but one can also imagine less cynical motivations such as sincere desire not to offend anyone or sensitivity to the needs of an audience. Different groups and cultures vary in what they see as the basis for morality and therefore in the issues they moralize (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999), leading to situations where individuals know that an audience moralizes an issue that they themselves do not. For example, an individual working in a foreign culture, contemplating a decision that she knows to have moral implications in the host culture but not in her own, might decide to use a moralized framing consonant with the local worldview to express respect. Thus, deciding to moralize publicly issues that one does not moralize privately can be motivated by sensitivity and considerateness, not cynical scheming.

2.6. Summary

In this section, we have argued that the relationship between private and public moralization is not an obvious one, and that it is possible to identify situations in which individuals exhibit all four possible combinations of private and public moralization. Public and private framings sometimes align, as when individualize publicly use a moralized
framing when they moralize privately (full moralization) or a pragmatic or instrumental framing if they privately view the issue as a pragmatic one (no moralization)—but in other situations, considerations of audience expectations and interpersonal consequences push private and public into misalignment. When these latter dominate, public communications reflect whatever individuals think will make them look good to their audiences (whether or not it matches their own private views), but it is also possible for individuals to endure relatively negative interpersonal consequences in order to represent their own views accurately. Thus, the relationship between private and public moralization is a complex one, worthy of further analysis.

Though the matched cases (full moralization and no moralization) might seem to reflect “integrity” or “consistency,” we do not see these cases as normatively superior to the mismatched ones. Instead, each of the types we have described could be seen in either a positive or a negative light: the manager who moralizes both publicly and privately (full moralization) could be seen as a conscientious crusader or as a stubborn zealot; the one who moralizes privately but not publicly (private moralization only) could be seen as a coward lacking in integrity or as a savvy pragmatist using culturally acceptable means to advance morally good ends.

In the following sections, we unpack this model in greater depth, reviewing research on the causal antecedents of private moralization, other determinants of public moralization (such as audience perceptions), interpersonal consequences of public moralization, and whether individuals are aware of these consequences and use them in their strategic decision-making. We begin by discussing the cues and psychological processes that lead to the awareness that an issue or decision may possibly have moral relevance: in other words, how decisions become good candidates for moralization.

3. Antecedents of moralization: what makes a decision a good candidate for moralization?

What social and psychological factors lead to the public moralization of an issue or policy? We can assume that one such factor is private moralization – which means that to answer the previous question, we need to also analyze what cues people use to decide privately that an issue is a moral one. Thus, in this section we explore the factors that raise the possibility that an issue could be privately or publicly moralized. On occasion we will draw on the useful analysis of moral intensity provided by Jones (1991), but whereas Jones focused on the aspects of an issue identified by moral philosophers and legal scholars (p. 373) as relevant for morality such as magnitude of consequences or concentration of effect, we pay closer attention to the psychological antecedents of moralization. We will describe three types of triggers of moral awareness (Butterfield et al., 2000), the realization that an issue may have moral relevance or be a candidate for moralization: affect-laden moral intuitions, more cognitive “template matches” with prototypes of the moral domain, and perceptions that other people moralize. We will then discuss two important moderating factors of private moral awareness (the scope of consequences considered and interaction between sources), and finally address questions of control and intentionality.

3.1. Moral intuitions

We start by reviewing research on how moral intuitions impose themselves on decision-makers with the force of moral realism, leading them to see an issue as inherently, objectively morally relevant, and to frame the issue as a moral one at the private level.

3.1.1. Recognizing the moral domain

Psychologists have long argued that most individuals, even with no formal philosophical training, have strong intuitions about what is part of the moral domain and what is not—what falls, instead, in the domain of social convention or personal preferences. For example, schoolchildren say that coming to class in your pajamas and hitting another child to get to use a swing are both wrong, but they also believe that the pajamas case would be acceptable if a teacher said it was okay, whereas hitting a child would not (Nucci & Turiel, 1978). This is taken as evidence that children as young as preschool age are able to distinguish the moral domain from the merely conventional. Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom (2007) have provided evidence of simple moral evaluation in infants as young as 10 months: the infants in their studies preferred a puppet that had “helped” another toy to one that had “hindered,” despite having no personal experience with either character. Interestingly, children scoring high on psychopathic tendencies show less ability to distinguish between social conventions and moral norms (Blair, 1997): though these children may have
learned that hurting others is unacceptable, they give this principle the same normative weight as a convention against belching in public. Thus, the ability to distinguish the moral domain from other realms of human conduct appears to be an important part of normal psychological functioning.

3.1.2. Intuitions and emotions

On what basis, then, do psychologically normal adults come to conclude that a given action has moral relevance? According to Haidt’s (2001) highly influential social intuitionist model of moral judgment, moral judgment originates as a quick burst of affect-laden intuition, an immediate sense that something is right or wrong; if people later need to justify this initial intuition, what they then provide is a post hoc rationale. While critics of Haidt’s perspective (e.g. Pizarro & Bloom, 2003; Saltzstein & Kasachkoff, 2004) have argued that the scope of the social intuitionist theory should be more limited than Haidt seems to have wanted, it is by now well established that affect-laden intuitions are at least an important factor determining moral judgment.

Haidt’s model deals with moral judgment, that is, the way people know whether something is right or wrong. We propose that similar intuitions contribute to moral awareness, alerting people that something could be part of the moral domain. For example, consider a manager in a pharmaceutical company wondering whether to market a drug in developing countries at a cheaper price than in the US. While there may be a financial justification for charging a lower price in a poorer country to ensure sales volume, the manager may also immediately feel a pang of emotion as she imagines people dying just because they cannot afford the drug. The emotional stirrings provoked by the evoked image of bedridden, emaciated bodies suggest, without much need for reflection, that the decision to market the drugs at a lower price may have moral ramifications. Much work has focused on emotions experienced upon witnessing a moral violation, such as contempt, anger, and disgust (e.g. Rozin et al., 1999). However, self-directed emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, or psychological discomfort (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007) could have similar effects, as could positive emotions such as awe and elevation (Haidt, 2000) (see also Haidt, 2009).

Based on research on the social intuitionist model and moral emotions, we posit that one important factor determining moralization is the experience of powerful intuitive processes that impose themselves on individuals with all the force of moral realism. Because intuitions are quick and strong, and require no conscious cognitive effort, it is likely that the moralized reaction will seem to originate in the object of judgment, as if it were an inherent property of the object. In the same way that unconscious visual processes give us the impression that a strawberry is inherently red, our moral intuitions will give us the sense that a decision is inherently morally good or bad—and thus that it has inherent moral relevance and belongs in the moral domain. The situations that provoke these intuitions may differ for different individuals or cultural groups (cf. Graham et al., 2009; Haidt et al., 1993), but for any given individual, whatever violates or supports a personally important moral value or foundation is likely to provoke a strong, immediate, and affectively laden response, signaling that a moral framing would be appropriate.

3.1.3. Neural substrates

The argument that emotions are an essential part of moral awareness is supported by clinical and neuroscientific findings. For example, the inability of psychopaths to distinguish conventional norms from moral ones (Blair, 1997) has been associated with physiological differences in the activation of areas involved in the treatment of emotion. Neuroimaging studies of psychopaths have revealed structural deficits in the prefrontal cortex and reduced activation in limbic regions, as well as in the prefrontal and temporal lobes (see review in Moll, Zahn, de Oliveira-Souza, Krueger, & Grafman, 2005). Lesions to the ventral prefrontal cortex at an early age are particularly damaging for later moral functioning, which suggests that these areas are primarily useful in the acquisition of moral values through “social-emotional contextual knowledge” (Moll et al., 2005). Many of these brain regions, and similar ones whose activation has been found to correlate with moral cognition, are also implicated in the experience of emotions, supporting the view that emotional intuitions are a source of bottom-up moral awareness (though see Huebner, Dwyer, & Hauser, 2009). Neuropsychological findings also suggest that emotions, while necessary, are not sufficient to trigger moral intuitions: when compared to scenes only eliciting basic emotions like disgust and fear, pictures depicting moral violations activate the medial orbital frontal cortex and the superior temporal sulcus region, areas known to play a large role in social perception (Moll et al., 2005). In conclusion, the activation of a specific cortical network seems to result in the experience of moral relevance—“an automatic tagging of ordinary social events with moral values” (p. 803, Moll et al., 2005). For our purposes, we take away that the pattern of brain activation triggered by issues judged to be morally relevant includes regions implicated in emotion and social perception.
3.1.4. From intuition to moralization

Much psychological and neurological evidence suggests that humans have strong intuitions about what issues have moral relevance, that these intuitions develop at an early age, are quick and automatic, and have a significant emotional resonance that can be traced to neurological substrates. To return to our original goal of determining when a decision-maker will moralize an issue, we therefore posit that some decisions (or the foreseen consequences of these decisions) will alert people—as though raising a red flag in their minds, or ringing an emotional bell—that moralization might be in order. This is especially likely to occur with vivid cues, such as seeing the death or physical suffering of innocents or the desecration of pure objects (Bartels, 2008). It is worth emphasizing once again that our focus here is not on the role of intuitions in making a policy appear right or wrong, but instead on their role in signaling to a decision-maker that morality might be involved at all. Affect-laden intuition is a bottom-up factor that immediately makes an issue a likely candidate for moralization.

3.2. Moral templates

Whereas imagining the exhausted face of a child working on an assembly line, or of a river befouled by industrial byproducts can immediately create the emotional twinge typical of bottom-up processes (a moral intuition), other situations can raise ethical eyebrows without turning stomachs. We propose that individuals hold idealized cognitive templates, or prototypes, of what moral issues and ethical violations look like, and that any real-world situation with a passing resemblance to these templates may alert an individual that the issue could or should be moralized. Jones (1991) posits that “issues of greater moral intensity will positively affect the recognition of moral issues and, therefore, will increase the likelihood that moral decision-making schemata will be employed” (p. 383). For example, in American cultural contexts, any situation where one group benefits more than another—especially if that group can be distinguished by a demographic characteristic such as gender or race—makes that situation ripe for moral examination, even if further examination reveals no moral relevance. Similarly, anything that evokes a template of the positive social roles organizations can play—such as patrons of the arts, champions of the environment, promoters of urban renewal, or paternalistic providers to their employees—makes a moral frame available. For example, the CEO of a fast-food chain planning to open a profitable restaurant in an underprivileged neighborhood may see the possibility of moral framing because this decision matches the template of “promoter of urban renewal.”

According to this “template matching” hypothesis, situations that are more prototypical of a value should be more likely to lead to moralization. Maio, Hahn, Frost, and Cheung (2009) show that some situations are more typical than others as instantiations of values, and furthermore that more typical instantiations lead to greater moral awareness: participants who had been exposed to a typical instantiation of egalitarianism (equality between men and women in the workplace) later engaged in more egalitarian behavior, and were more likely to cite equality as a situationally relevant goal, compared to participants exposed to an atypical instantiation (equality between right- and left-handed people). In a situation with ambiguous moral relevance, typicality (in our language, the strength of the “match,” and in Jones’s (1991), moral intensity) could likewise affect the probability that the situation is seen as morally relevant at all.

This matching phenomenon is semantic in the sense that it is likely to depend on superficial differences in framing. The phrasing of one initiative may trigger moralization, while another, even one whose substance is very similar, may not. Organizations often make use of this feature in order to avoid moralizing when they use euphemisms (Bandura, 1999; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Thus bribes are called “facilitating payments,” dead civilians are “collateral damage,” financial fraud is dubbed “creative accounting,” and so forth—all in the attempt to prevent a match with a readily available template and hopefully sidestep the decision of whether to moralize the issue. In other words, euphemisms work by severing the linguistic link with the templates that would bring online the moral examination of the issue or decision. Conversely, people can also use language in a way that encourages template-matching and thus moralization. Whereas using the euphemism “collateral damage” promotes moral disengagement, “Operation Iraqi Freedom” invites moralization, by evoking the moral concepts of freedom and altruism and by deliberately avoiding references to self-interested or pragmatic concerns; similarly, “death taxes” have a clear moral taint whereas “estate taxes” do not. Even non-semantic cues, such as the presence in the environment of religious or moral symbols (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007) or money primes (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2008) can facilitate or inhibit the match between a situation and a moral template.
As noted above, private moralization does not always result in a moral mandate (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002); template matching provides an example of a process likely to result in private moralization but not a moral mandate. Because moral template matching is a relatively cognitive route to moralization, and because it is likely to suggest moral framings that are highly consensual (rather than contentious positions on polarized issues), moralization that arises through template matching seems unlikely to become a personal crusade in the way a moral mandate would.

In summary, when a situation resembles a value-relevant prototype, it will raise a red flag that this situation is a good candidate for moralization, even in the absence of any affect-laden moral intuitions. Moral intuitions and moral template matching can probably lead to equally strong perceptions of moral relevance, but because they rely on different psychological processes and have different consequences, we think it is important to analyze these two upstream routes to moralization separately.

3.3. Metaperceptions and expectations about what others will moralize

In contrast to the personal routes to moral framing sketched above (moral intuitions and moral templates), metaperceptions refer to perceptions of perceptions, or the impression that others may be inclined to moralize the issue. They represent a third important factor in deciding whether to frame an issue morally. Jones (1991) lists social consensus as one determinant of moral intensity, but we prefer to refer to this source of moral awareness as meta-perceptions rather than as social norms or consensus because the moralized framing need not be adopted by a majority (i.e., be descriptively normative) to have an impact – though when this framing is also normative in the organization, moralization via metaperceptions will be particularly likely. The mere awareness that other people, even just one group of people (e.g., activists), see an issue as potentially moralized can be enough to trigger the availability of a moral framing.

When it comes to public moralization, the fact that others see an issue as a good candidate for moralization may matter as much as, if not more than, whether the decision-maker personally sees it as a candidate for moralization. A manager who decides to change all her company’s packaging to recycled plastic may expect to save money by using cheaper materials, though this decision is purely profit-based, the manager may decide to present it in moral terms if she perceives that consumers moralize the domain of recycling.

Even minority groups can provide clues that an issue could or should be moralized. One such case is the special relevance of a decision to a well-defined social group. For example, a drug company thinking of discontinuing a line of contraceptives, because it is no longer profitable, may recognize the opportunity to make a moral appeal to strict Catholic consumers who are opposed to the use of contraceptives for moral reasons. Another case is when an activist group loudly suggests a moral reading of a particular issue. A fast food company may close control the processes used in the farms that provide its meat because of the savings afforded by economies of scale—but, being aware of the existence of groups such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), the company may choose to explain the decision by emphasizing the moral responsibility to ensure the proper treatment and slaughter of animals.

Our point here is not simply that organizations engage in strategic and cynical window dressing to pander to stakeholders. Rather, toward the goal of identifying factors that make issues seem like good candidates for moralization, we suggest that being aware of a group of activists, constituents, or stakeholders who moralize the issue gives decision-makers the opportunity to use a moral frame if they so choose in their public pronouncements—even without an affective intuition or a match with their own templates—and do so in perfectly good faith. Metaperceptions, however, go beyond small interest groups, and expectations about whether one’s own group members are likely (or not) to use a moral frame should also be a large factor in making an issue a candidate for moralization.

Individuals are sometimes mistaken in their perception of norms, feeling that they are alone in their views about an issue’s moral relevance when in reality others share those views. It is not uncommon for a majority of people in a group to feel that they are alone in holding opinions that they in reality all share, and as a result to avoid expressing these opinions, starting a vicious circle of pluralistic ignorance (Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000). Thus a majority of group members could be tempted to moralize an issue but keep this position to themselves, assuming that a majority of others would see the issue as a purely pragmatic one; or, conversely, a majority of actors in an organization could approach an issue primarily in pragmatic terms, but erroneously believe that a majority of their peers are likely to moralize the issue. A manager may feel that the decision to pull out of a country with a history of human rights abuse is a moral imperative because of the principled stance that it represents, but may imagine that his colleagues care only about the interests of the company—even when in fact they would all appreciate the moral relevance. Conversely, a majority of
actors may feel that pulling out of the dictatorship is primarily good business given political instability, but be fooled
(maybe by previous instances of public moralization by a visible few) into thinking that it is primarily an ethical issue
for others. Thus in guiding public moralization, perceptions about other people’s framing matter more than other
people’s actual framing, and the two do not necessarily line up.

As we have suggested, actors who use metaperceptions about whether others will moralize an issue need not be
seen as overly strategic. In fact, sometimes responding to perceptions of others’ likelihood of moralizing an issue is not
cynical at all, but more a matter of deference to the groups that care the most about the issue. For example, from 1930
to 1972 the Stanford University athletic teams were called the Indians. This team name was offensive to Native
Americans, and non-Native-American students who would not otherwise have seen the name as a moral issue may
have come to moralize it out of respect for this group. Similarly, imagine a vendor of Stanford University themed
clothing who retired “Stanford Indians” gear. The decision to stop selling Indians clothing may have been spurred by
low sales or boycotts, but in justifying the decision, the vendor may have still decided to assert that the mascot was an
unacceptable insult to the dignity of a group, not necessarily to wrap herself dishonestly in a blanket of political
correctness but rather out of sensitivity and the realization that giving a self-interested rationale in this case would
seem inappropriate to many.

The fact that individuals, especially those from mainstream or privileged groups, look to potential victims to
decide how to react to situations was captured in a study by Crosby, Monin, and Richardson (2008) that used eye-
tracking technology to follow the gaze of non-African-American participants watching four actors on a video
screen. When one of the three white actors disparaged affirmative action in college admissions, participants stared
at the lone African-American bystander, but only in the condition when they were told that he could hear the
potentially offensive comment (because his audio headphones were on). In a follow-up study (Crosby & Monin,
submitted for publication), non-African-American participants asked if a number of actions (e.g., a store staying
open on Martin Luther King Jr. day) constituted discrimination were more influenced by the responses of a
previous participant when he was African-American than when he was Caucasian. These studies suggest that
individuals sometimes defer to members of other groups, especially when they feel that these groups have a self-
interested standing because they are the most directly affected by the matter (Effron & Miller, submitted for
publication; Miller & Ratner, 1998).

If individuals expect that their own perceptions of what is morally relevant differ from the perceptions of others in
their organization, and those of interest groups and identity groups in their society, they will likely expect an even
greater discrepancy (often with good reason) when they cross cultural, regional, or national boundaries. In a global
economy, decision-makers often operate outside of their culture of origin and may have to take into consideration
cultural mores that differ greatly from their own. Of course, the desire not to clash with moral norms can affect the
decisions themselves. But more subtly, we argue that—with the decision already made—local moral norms also affect
whether the rationale is framed morally or not. For example, a non-Muslim expatriate working in a conservative
Muslim country must not only take into account his own intuitions and templates, but also keep track of the moral rules
that govern local customs. He may decide to frame a decision to end a ban on female supervisors solely in pragmatic
terms, knowing that invoking gender equality may have a lesser impact in this context or even elicit resistance.
Conversely, after deciding to invest in a local technical school to increase the availability of skilled workers (a
pragmatic framing), he might realize that this gesture readily fits the template of Zakat or charitable giving, one of the
five pillars of Islam, and thus emphasize the moral dimension to ensure greater buy-in from local collaborators and
investors.

In summary, in addition to more personal factors, including moral intuitions and moral template matching, we
propose that perceptions of others’ moralization can also lead to moral availability, alerting decision-makers that a
particular issue could be (and maybe should be) presented as a moral one. The mere awareness that others moralize
seems unlikely to be enough to lead to private moralization. However, metaperceptions alone are enough to lead to
moral availability, causing decision-makers to at least consider presenting an issue publicly in moral terms, and over
time they could lead to private moralization by becoming internalized.

3.4. Moderating factors of moralization

We have discussed the various processes that could make an issue or decision a good candidate for moralization,
that is, that would prompt a decision-maker to choose whether to use a moral frame. Knowing about these different
processes is not enough to predict in every situation whether a person would moralize or not; each of the processes is moderated by a host of other factors. In the present section we address two types of moderating factors that seem especially important and likely to be relevant in many situations: the size of the tree of consequences, and the way different processes interact with one another.

3.4.1. How far to look: the size of the tree of consequences

Each of the three types of processes discussed above—moral intuitions, templates, and metaperceptions—could come into play at any level of what we term the tree of consequences. Any new action starts a branching series of events with a number of consequences, which themselves are likely to have consequences, and so on. Decision-makers likely are aware of the most causally proximate consequences, but, after a certain causal distance, they stop taking additional consequences into account. For example, the decision to open a new plant in an impoverished area may have obvious short-term benefits for a firm; a longer term view reveals that it is likely to lead to the development of a local economy and raise the standard of living of locals significantly. This in turn is likely to decrease the rate of deaths due to current poor living conditions, and allow the emergence of a middle class that could play a large role in moving the local political landscape toward greater transparency and democracy. In this case, the manager who considers these long-term consequences would consequently have far greater moral awareness about the decision than the one who stops at the short-term view. Conversely, a decision justified by moral concern in the short term could turn out to have pragmatic advantages in the long-term. Thus, how far a decision-maker decides to look down the tree of consequences branching from a given action out into the future will determine the availability of moral and pragmatic framings.

We propose that an action may become moralized when either that action itself or a downstream consequence of that action triggers moral awareness (through intuition, template matching, or metaperception). Similarly, an action may be justified on the basis of self-interest either when the action itself is transparently self-serving or when it can be linked to a self-serving consequence. Thus, the distance outward along the tree of consequences that a decision-maker is willing to look defines the different types of justifications available to that person, and in particular, being aware of at least one consequence that is a candidate for moralization is a precondition for moralizing the decision itself.

What determines how far a person is willing to look? Given the possibly infinite series of events, it makes sense for a decision-maker to stop somewhere, restricting the consequences considered to be relevant or manageable. One relevant determinant of this ending point is likely to be how quickly the consequences recede into the geographic, temporal, or probabilistic distance (Reed & Aquino, 2003; Singer, 2009). Jones (1991) identifies this set of factors in predicting moral intensity under the headings of temporal immediacy, probability of effect, and proximity (social, cultural, psychological or physical). People are less likely to care about consequences that would play out on the other side of the globe or decades in the future, or that have only a small likelihood of being realized. Thus intuitions, template matches, and meta-perceptions are primarily likely to be triggered by proximal consequences.

Situational factors, including ones determining construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010), likely play a role in the size of the tree of consequences an individual considers. Individuals and organizations may also vary in their chronic tendencies to think through consequences: for example, some people feel closer to their future selves (Ehrnsperger-Hershfield, Wimmer, & Knutson, 2009) or show less of a general tendency to discount future outcomes relative to present ones (Green, Fristoe, & Myerson, 1994). Organizations whose mission statements place an emphasis on global business may be more attentive to geographically distal consequences. Cultural factors also play a role, such that people from East Asian cultures are more likely to consider indirect and distal consequences compared to people from Western cultures (Maddux & Yuki, 2006) and political conservatives consider a broader range of consequences, including violations of loyalty, authority, and purity than do political liberals, who focus mostly on harm and fairness (Graham et al., 2009). Neuropsychologists have also documented individual differences in the capacity to represent possible outcomes as they branch out into the future; intriguingly, psychopaths, who also show deficits in moral reasoning, tend to perform poorly in this area (Moll et al., 2005), supporting the idea that moral awareness depends on the representation of a moralized consequence, which is more likely the greater number of consequences a decision-maker considers.

The causality we have discussed could also work in reverse: the size of the tree of consequences of which a decision-maker is aware could also be influenced by a prior desire to frame that decision as a moral one or not, such that decision-makers deliberately search for the types of consequences they want and stop as soon as they find them. For example, a morally mute manager, who is uncomfortable publicly moralizing an issue that she privately moralizes,
may intentionally search for a pragmatic consequence that could be interpreted as contributing to the success of the organization in order to make a self-interested case, even if doing so involves searching across a much greater causal distance than that person would normally consider. Similarly, an individual concerned that her pragmatic rationale will not play well with audiences may search along the tree of consequences for something to elicit an intuition, a template match, or a meta-perception in the hope that it would license her to use a moral framing.

3.4.2. When different processes clash

Thus far, we have discussed these various processes as if they were independent or even exclusive, but of course they can co-occur, either converging or clashing. Moral psychologists have discussed cases where automatic, intuitive processes and controlled, cognitive processes reach opposite conclusions about what is right in a given situation (e.g., Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008). Similarly, we suggest that different processes can also reach different conclusions, not about what ought to be done, but rather about whether the issue is a moral one or not. Such cases where different determinants clash can be especially interesting. Imagine a person who has a quick moral intuition but no notion that others would also moralize the same issue. Such a person might be a prime candidate for moral muteness (Bird & Waters, 1989)—expressing a view she privately moralizes using non-moral arguments—unless she also has a template match, making her confident that others could be brought to share her moralizing standpoint even in the absence of current metaperception.

Mismatches could also have interesting consequences not only for the way a person views the issue under consideration, but also for feelings toward others and toward the self. For example, a person who feels strongly that others would moralize an issue, but who feels no personal pull to moralize via either intuition or template match, may feel alienated from those others or perhaps personally inadequate for being unable to relate to their strong feelings. A similar sense of discomfort could result from experiencing a strong template match but no moral intuition. To capture the latter, Merritt and Monin (2011) asked individuals to consider the same incest scenario used by Haidt (2001)—where a brother and sister decide to have protected, consensual sex—under conditions designed to reduce the ability to rely on quick intuitions, i.e., under direct instructions to reason abstractly, or with the scenario presented in a hard-to-read font designed to slow down the fluency of intuitions (see Novemsky, Dhar, Schwarz, & Simonson, 2007). As predicted, reducing reliance on quick intuitions caused individuals with strong taboos against the dilemma (i.e., who have an opposite-sex sibling) to feel disturbed and uncomfortable. This finding suggests that, in some circumstances, quick intuitions may seem like the normative or best path toward moralization, causing discomfort when they do not match more deliberative routes.

In most cases, however, discrepant responses from the three channels analyzed in this section should be relatively uneventful, and any one of the three should be able to independently raise the possibility of moralization without much psychological conflict. When they converge, their effect is likely to be stronger, but when they do not, the suggestion of moralization by any of the three sources should be enough to raise moral awareness and to trigger further thinking about whether or not to moralize publicly.

3.5. Control and intentionality: how automatic is moralization?

Throughout Section 3, we have been describing processes that make an issue or decision a candidate for moralization—suggesting that the last step, from moral awareness to actual moral framing, is ultimately the actors’ decision. How accurate is this picture, and what are the roles of control and intentionality in moral framing?

At the level of public moralization, our analysis suggests that there is certainly room for choice. People have control over what they say publicly, and since at the public level they are trying to make a persuasive statement, they are likely—or, at least, certainly able—to pause and consider whether or not a moralized statement would best serve their goals. While potentially moralized issues may sometimes stir up such strong emotions that people are unwilling or unable to think rationally about the consequences of different types of statements, in most situations people are likely to devote at least some thought to potential downstream effects of public pronouncements.

At the level of private moralization, it seems less likely that intentionality plays an important role: while actors probably have the capacity to exercise choice in their private framings, it is hard to imagine when they would have the motivation to do so. Research on moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996) has documented the ways in which people can downplay the moral dimension of a decision in order to feel better about the choices they have made. Conversely, people can also play up the moral relevance of their behavior in order to
make their own decisions look better (Jordan & Monin, 2008). These findings demonstrate that motivated processes can come between moral awareness and moralization (see also Pizarro & Bloom, 2003).

Though such motivated processes are possible, however, it is hard to imagine why they would occur in “doing well by doing good” situations where a potential moral justification would be consistent with the action a person wishes to take (unlike the situations studied by Bandura and colleagues, where the moral justification is inconsistent with the action). Given that people generally like to see themselves as moral (Monin, 2007), it seems unlikely that they would be motivated to question their moral awareness and persuade themselves not to think of the issue as moral. Such an overriding process is conceivable for people extremely low on moral self-importance (Aquino & Reed, 2002) who much prefer to think of themselves in terms of a different dimension, such as competence (see Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994); however, such people are presumably rare (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Monin, 2007).

Thus, we argue that, while intentionality has an important role in public moralization, private moralization probably happens in a fairly automatic way, though it could theoretically be intentionally overridden if an individual were sufficiently motivated. Only when choosing whether to use a public frame to discuss an issue publicly are individuals likely to be more discriminating and exercise conscious intentionality – both because this control is more available, and because they may have more motivation to use it given the possible pitfalls of public moralization, which we discuss next.

4. The real and expected consequences of public moralization

Having discussed the upstream consequences of moral framing, we now turn to the downstream consequences of public moralization, both real and expected. Understanding the actual downstream consequences of moralization has obvious practical implications, but it is also important to understand expectations, which feed directly into the cost–benefit calculations that individuals often use in deciding whether to moralize an issue. Because expected consequences and actual consequences can differ, our analysis distinguishes the two conceptually. Unfortunately, relatively little work has directly compared the expected and actual consequences of moralization, so we are not able to perform a systematic analysis of possible prediction gaps. Still, we hope that, by reviewing documented predicted and actual consequences side by side, our analysis can provide a sense of the role of consequences in public moralization.

Note that perceived interpersonal consequences are but one factor actors consider in deciding whether to moralize publicly; in some cases, actors may not generate predictions about consequences at all, either because they express a strong feeling without thinking much at all, or because they decide deliberately that they do not care how others react. However, in most cases, actors are likely sensitive to considerations of audience reactions, just as they would be when making any sort of public utterance.

4.1. Negative consequences of public moralization

As revealed by the existence of moral muteness, organizational actors who privately moralize an issue often anticipate negative consequences of public moralization, and this expectation reduces their inclination to moralize publicly. In this section, we review evidence of the negative consequences managers anticipate, and, where available, evidence of the accuracy of these perceptions.

4.1.1. Costs in projected competence

Social psychologists have identified two primary dimensions on which people evaluate one another, broadly defined as warmth/communality and competence/agency (Cuddy and Glick, this volume; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Wiggins, 1991; Ybarra et al., 2008). Warm traits relate to perceived intent, including friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and, most central to our analysis, morality; competence traits relate to perceived ability, including intelligence, skill, creativity and efficacy (Fiske et al., 2007, p. 77). Though these two dimensions are theoretically distinct, research suggests that, due to implicit theories and stereotypes (Fiske et al., 2007) as well as compensatory defensive processes (Kervyn, Yzerbyt, Judd, & Nunes, 2009; Kay & Jost, 2003), they are often negatively correlated empirically, with communal targets seeming less competent and vice versa.

Because of this observed negative relationship between appearing moral and appearing competent, managers in organizational settings may fear that taking a public moral stance will cause others to see them as less competent, powerful, efficacious, or dominant. Bird and Waters (1989) speculate that managers “seek to present themselves as
powerful and effective,” and therefore avoid framing issues morally because “moral arguments appear to be too idealistic and utopian” (p. 78) and lack “force” (p. 79) to bring about concrete accomplishments. Thus, even managers whose intentions are good may fear that they will be perceived as less effective if they admit to having been motivated by ethical principles (see also Waters, Bird, & Chant, 1986). In other words, on the dimension of competence, managers believe that public moralization will make them look bad. They may therefore decide not to moralize publicly, particularly in situations where they are sensitive to threats to competence or agency.

Is this belief accurate? A number of studies indeed suggest that presenting oneself as driven by communal concerns makes one appear less competent. Kervyn et al. (2009), for example, showed participants sentences describing individual group members as high and low on competence and warmth, and found that keeping the competence information constant, information suggesting warmth made a group appear less competent than information suggesting coldness. Monin and Norton (2003) found that non-vegetarians rated vegetarians, who moralize their dietary choices, as higher on the warmth dimension, but lower on competence, than fellow non-vegetarians. Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner (2010) found that non-profit companies were rated as warmer but less competent than for-profit companies, to the point where the perception of a company’s competence could be altered by simply manipulating whether its website URL ended in .org (non-profit) or .com (for profit). Such effects should be particularly likely in environments where the culture emphasizes individualistic or competitive values such as autonomy (Kram, Yeager, & Reed, 1989), or with audiences whose world outlook is especially competitive or individualistic, as such audiences tend to interpret cooperative behavior as a sign of weakness or stupidity rather than a high degree of kindness or warmth – the “might over morality” effect (Liebrand, Jansen, Rijken, & Suhre, 1986; Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994). Thus, there is some empirical basis to the fear that associating oneself with morality (as one would by moralizing an issue) may cause managers to appear less competent.

4.1.2. Costs in likability

Another reason actors may be afraid to moralize is that they expect that moralizing will make others like them less. They may feel that moralizing will make them seem judgmental or holier-than-thou, and that audience members will resent them for implicitly claiming moral superiority. Bird and Waters (1989) noted that managers believe that moral confrontations are seen as more “judgmental,” involving more “finger-pointing,” and therefore more difficult than non-moralized ones (p. 76). Actors may fear that by moralizing they will appear more rigid and less open to discussion, and that evoking moral arguments will put an end to constructive discussion (see Section 4.1.3 below). We are not aware of any other research that directly examines whether people anticipate that they will be liked less or seen as less open-minded if they moralize an issue; more research is necessary here.

On the other hand, research is accumulating on the actual consequences of taking a moral stance, and one potential negative outcome is that people resent those who implicitly claim to be morally superior simply by taking a moral stance (see Monin, 2007). This resentment occurs partly because seeing someone take the high road prevents people from being able to feel as virtuous themselves, which can be painful given the importance of moral self-regard as a source of positive self-image (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Paulhus & John, 1998). Another source of resentment is that those who take a moral stance are perceived to be looking down on those who do not, and therefore appear judgmental and self-righteous. Sabini and Silver (1982) observe that moral reproach always seems to imply moral superiority, even when no claim of superiority is explicitly stated. Indeed, Monin, Sawyer, and Marquez (2008) found that the resentment of a person who took a moral stance was mediated by perceptions that this person would judge those who did not, while Minson and Monin (in press) found that non-vegetarians rated vegetarians less positively after reflecting on how vegetarians would rate the morality of non-vegetarians. Thus, people who publicly moralize an issue risk being liked less and being socially rejected by audience members, because they seem judgmental, sanctimonious, and rigid, and because audience members may feel badly about themselves by comparison.

4.1.3. Interpersonal harmony and firm functioning

Managers may be aware that their decision whether to moralize publicly will also affect others’ subsequent moralization decisions and comfort level in facing up to morally relevant issues. In other words, by publicly moralizing, a manager is contributing to an overall environment where moralization and moral talk are normative and welcome, which may increase the likelihood that other organizational members will step forward with their own moral statements.
This may sound like a positive consequence of moralizing (and, in fact, we review evidence of its positive aspects in Section 4.2.3 below), but Bird and Waters (1989) suggest that managers often view it as a threat to the smooth functioning of the organization. Particularly when managers’ own moralized view involves confronting an organizational precedent, or forcefully disagreeing with another group within the organization, managers believe that confrontation will beget confrontation, and that their statements will be “likely to initiate cycles of mutual finger-pointing and recrimination” and start an “avalanche” (pp. 76–77). In particular, Bird and Waters argue, managers believe that making it acceptable to confront wrongs will threaten to destroy the sometimes morally shaky foundation on which organizational practices are built, the “deceits which are pervasive in organizations, e.g., juggling budget lines to cover expenditures, minor abuses of organizational perks, favoritism, nepotism” (pp. 76–77). Part of this worry may come from a fear of personally being perceived as hypocritical (Barden, Rucker, & Petty, 2005) to the extent that managers themselves have engaged in ethically questionable practices, but Bird and Waters also seem to be describing a slightly different – and novel – type of worry: that when it becomes okay to make moral statements, the functioning of the organization as a whole is imperiled. Some amount of obedience is fundamental to the functioning of organizations (Fiske, 1992; Simon, 1976; see Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000), and managers may fear that welcoming moral framings may ultimately undermine these essential authority relations by empowering subordinates to disobey based on sometimes dubious principles.

This is a provocative claim in a literature where encouraging whistle-blowing and the airing of scruples (as in McKinsey’s famous “obligation to dissent” principle) is often presented as an unambiguous good (see Section 4.2.3 below). However, managers may be right to fear an increase in interpersonal tension following moralization: Skitka et al. (2005), for example, found that groups discussing a (privately) moralized issue experienced lower cooperativeness and good will and higher group tension compared to groups whose members did not moralize the same issue. There is also some evidence that “ethical leaders” – who make fair decisions but also frame them morally – do indeed inspire subordinates to report more problems and bad news (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), which Bird and Waters’ (1989) managers fear might be unnecessarily disruptive. For the purposes of our argument, these findings are suggestive but not conclusive, because in both papers just cited we cannot tease apart the roles of private and public moralization because they are potentially both at work. Thus, more work is needed to isolate the unique effect of moralized framings on group harmony and insubordination. On a side note, Bird and Waters (1989), in chronicling managers’ belief that organizations would crumble if members constantly questioned each other, also raise the possibility that organizations could become too moralized to perform effectively, an intriguing hypothesis that deserves further study.

4.1.4. Vulnerability to seeming hypocritical

Finally, organizational actors may believe that public moralization will impose unwanted constraints on their own future behavior, committing them to following the same principles in the future lest they run the risk of appearing hypocritical—a threatening outcome in the face of ever-changing demands. Bird and Waters (1989) observe that managers believe that “flexibility is likely to be reduced” (p. 78) if they express a decision in moral terms, and that moralizing feels “too binding” to allow them to “adapt to changes in their organizations and environments” (p. 77).

Why might managers feel this way—what is it about moralized statements that makes them more committing? Bird and Waters note that the moralized statements are often explicitly more binding than non-moralized ones, and propose that “moral talk” is almost by definition “formally articulated in terms of explicit promises, obligations, and rights” (p. 78). In support of this definition, Kreps and Monin (2011) have found that the prototypical expressions of moralization are principle-based, deontological ones, invoking specific principles or rules that ought to be followed universally (see Kant, 1785/1964). Thus, managers may fear that moralizing will constrain their behavior because such statements are more likely to contain explicit commitments to universalized rules or principles.

Still, the constraints that these statements create are not formal ones, so what exactly are the penalties individuals believe they face if they go back on their word? Bird and Waters are silent on this point, but research on the penalties people actually face in these situations suggests an answer: perceived hypocrisy. Several studies (e.g. Barden et al., 2005; Effron & Monin, 2010; Smith, Powell, Combs, & Schultz, 2009) have documented the perceptions of hypocrisy and feelings of rejection that people feel toward those who have stated their values and then failed to live up to them (see Monin & Merritt, 2011, for a review). Similarly, Staw and Ross (1980) found that consistent managers were rated more highly than managers who changed their course of action, independent of the success or failure of these actions; using a moral frame may thus exacerbate the penalties for inconsistent action since it implies a stronger degree of
commitment. Consistent with this logic, Cha and Edmondson (2006) propose that even when leaders are well-intentioned, touting values in an organization can over time lead to disenchantment and the attribution of hypocrisy to an initially charismatic leader.

However, none of this research has specifically examined whether individuals pay a larger penalty if they expressed their earlier stance in a more or less moralized way. Thus, the link between hypocrisy research and the decision about how to frame a statement that an individual has already decided to make anyway has not been directly established. Given that moralized statements involve more explicit commitments than non-moralized ones, as well as research showing greater resentment of people who take a moral stance reviewed above, it seems likely that moralizers face harsher penalties for inconsistency than non-moralizers. Thus, if individuals deciding whether to moralize can anticipate this effect, they may feel that moralizing would limit their flexibility because it would expose them to the threat of seeming hypocritical. It is easier to reverse an earlier “green” policy that was justified by its predicted probability than one based on respect for the environment – and a manager wanting to keep all her options open in the future might therefore choose to avoid the latter (moralized) framing.

4.2. Positive consequences of public moralization

While widespread perceptions of the danger or ineffectiveness of moralized messages may prevent some managers who moralize privately from doing so publicly, research also suggests several positive consequences that managers can expect from public moralization. Anticipating these effects may cause individuals who do not moralize privately to choose nonetheless to use a moral framing publicly, and, similarly, should embolden private moralizers to communicate their moral perspective publicly.

4.2.1. Persuasiveness

Though managers may take into account many factors when choosing a public moral frame, their main task-related goal is presumably to convince others in their organization that the course of action they are proposing is the right one. Thus, in deciding whether or not to use a moral framing, people are likely to consider which approach would be the most effective at getting their message across. We know of no research that directly addresses whether and when people believe that a moralized framing will be more effective, but there is a growing amount of research documenting when moralization is actually effective.

The literature on attitude change and marketing has documented myriad ways in which a message’s framing affects its persuasiveness (for a review, see Maio & Haddock, 2007). One type of message framing that has received extensive attention is the extent to which a message is framed affectively or cognitively. Messages differ in the degree to which they convey information about affect (feelings) versus cognition (thoughts). The intuition that moralized messages fall toward the affective side of the spectrum is supported by the finding that values often lack cognitive support, instead drawing their strength and psychological importance from their affective basis (Maio & Olson, 1998). Consistent with a more general pattern of matching effects, affectively framed messages have been found to be especially persuasive for audience members who have a general affective (as opposed to cognitive) orientation (Haddock, Maio, Arnold, & Huskinson, 2008; Mayer & Tormala, 2010) and for those whose own attitude on the issue is primarily affectively based (e.g. Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). Thus, contexts in which affectively framed messages are especially effective are likely to be favorable contexts for moralized messages as well. Moralized messages should be more persuasive for audiences who already believe the issue to be a moral one. Thus, the extent to which others are thought to moralize the issue under consideration should be an important factor for those deciding whether to use moralized framings.

In addition to being affective, moralized messages are likely to make a communicator appear more confident or certain, another variable whose effects on persuasion have been well documented. Moralized messages express a high degree of confidence, both because they invoke principles or rules that are supposed to apply universally (Kreps & Monin, 2011) and because they are rooted in “core moral values,” central to personal identity (Skitka & Mullen, 2002). Thus, when someone expresses a moral view, we propose that audience members believe that the person feels a high degree of certainty and is unlikely to change that view. Research suggests that this sense of confidence may increase persuasiveness (Price & Stone, 2004), especially—counter-intuitively—when the source is not considered an expert (Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010).

None of this research, however, looks at situations where the opinion being expressed involves a moralized issue (such as environmentalism or abortion), so it is possible that confidence works differently when expressed together with or as a
byproduct of moralization. Note, for example, that one reason why confidence has been thought to lead to persuasion is because it signals dominance and therefore competence (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). In light of evidence that moralization may be interpreted to reflect low competence (see Section 4.1.1 above), these different mechanisms may interact, with the overall effect on the effectiveness of the message being hard to predict. Conversely, one could also speculate that, if confidence helps in straightforward and quantitative contexts such as financial advice (Price & Stone, 2004), it could make an even bigger difference in a more ambiguous domain such as the ones open to moralization.

Thus, although it is unclear whether communicators expect this effect, there is plenty of evidence suggesting that moralized messages can be persuasive—especially when moralization provides affective content, or when it communicates confidence on the part of the communicator. Moralized arguments are likely to be especially effective with audiences who already share the same moralized view, but part of the effectiveness of charismatic leaders comes from their ability to articulate a compelling vision and to impart core values that group members are eager to embrace (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Thus, we propose that effective leaders can derive the persuasive benefits of moralizing an issue even when their audience initially did not moralize that issue. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which communicators are aware of the potential strength of moralized arguments; incorporating findings and models from the attitudes and persuasion literature will provide an especially fruitful approach.

4.2.2. Increased likability

While it may be difficult to use moralization to one’s benefit in projecting higher competence or potency (see Section 4.1.1 above), managers may believe that taking a moral stance will make them appear higher on the warmth dimension, or that failing to moralize an issue that others moralize would make them appear uncultured or inappropriate (Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Research suggests that this expectation may be fulfilled: individuals or groups who take a moral stance are indeed seen as higher in warmth (Aaker et al., 2010; Monin & Norton, 2003). Because warmth judgments are often closely related to liking (Fiske et al., 2007), managers may therefore believe that taking a moral stance will make them seem more likable. Managers may even speculate that their moralized messages will inspire a sense of moral uplift and elevation. Haidt (2000) has described the feeling of elevation, which involves a warm glowing feeling, the inspiration to do good oneself, and, notably, a high degree of liking for the moral other (see also Keltner & Haidt, 2003). However, while this feeling of elevation is elicited when people recall instances where they saw “a manifestation of humanity’s ‘higher’ or ‘better’ nature” (Haidt, 2000), being confronted with a highly moral person—rather than recalling the instance that best fits this rosy description—may be more likely to make people feel threatened and resentful than it is to elicit elevation (see Section 4.1.2 above and Monin, 2007). Thus, individuals whose primary motivation in publicly moralizing is to seem more likable and attractive to others should proceed with caution; given the by now well-documented social rejection of people who moralize, this approach runs the risk of backfiring.

4.2.3. Organizational moralization and trickle-down effects

Managers may also choose to use a moral frame not because it makes them more persuasive and likable, but instead because they expect more diffuse benefits to result from taking such a stance. Though we have reviewed evidence (see Section 4.1.3 above) that managers sometimes anticipate negative consequences (i.e., disruptive disharmony) at this diffuse cultural level, research suggests that managers who believe that the balance will be mostly negative may be overly pessimistic. In fact, research on ethical leadership suggests that the trickle-down effects of public moralization may be more positive than those feared by Bird and Waters’ (1989) defensive managers. Though, as we have discussed, ethical leadership has been found to increase subordinates’ willingness to point out problems and bad news (Brown et al., 2005), this behavior does not necessarily spell the downfall of the organization. To the contrary, subordinates of ethical leaders are also more likely to put in extra effort, are more satisfied with their managers, and believe them to be more effective (Brown et al., 2005). Similarly, O’Reilly and Chatman (1986) argue that commitment based on the perceived alignment of one’s values with an organization leads to behaviors that are especially positive for the organization, and Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, and Salvador (2009) found that ethical leadership at the level of top management predicts less deviant behavior and more organizational citizenship throughout the organization, mediated by the ethical leadership of mid-level supervisors. Particularly for individuals in influential and highly visible positions, public moralization may be a powerful means for affecting the overall values and culture of their organizations.

This research suggests that the concerns expressed by Bird and Waters’ managers regarding the perils of organizational moralization may be unfounded, and that using moral framings may have benefits for the organization.
However, note the same caveat as in Section 4.1.3 above: because the construct of “ethical leadership” consists of more than simply using moralized framings—including acting in a way that subordinates find ethical and moral—the effect of public moralization per se on subordinate behavior needs to be isolated and examined directly. Some of the effects documented above may result from actual ethical behavior rather than mere moral framing. At the same time, note that moral framing should not be confused with toothless moral posturing; by framing a behavior as ethical, actors are in effect making a claim of ethically good behavior. The manager who justifies her decision to develop locally rather than overseas by invoking patriotism rather than convenience or brand image is not merely invoking in-group loyalty – she’s also establishing her and her firm’s credentials as patriotic.

4.2.4. Avoiding guilt and regret

Finally, we propose an additional, relatively unexplored consequence of public moralization: the way individuals feel after they have chosen to moralize or not. Individuals who moralize an issue privately may feel badly if they do not express their views in moral terms publicly; conversely, a positive consequence of public moralization may be the avoidance of these negative feelings, and a sense of authenticity and personal integrity. There is increasing evidence that people who privately moralize a view, compared to those who do not moralize it, feel more inclined to take public action in support of that view (Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, & McKimnie, 2003; Skitka, 2011). Indeed, the assertion that people with moral mandates feel almost forced to act on them has been central to the moral mandate literature. One possible reason for this effect is that people who moralize an issue anticipate feeling ashamed or guilty if they do not speak out, a prediction that has been suggested (Skitka, 2011) but never, to our knowledge, tested directly. Note that existing theory focuses on how people feel after not taking action on a moralized issue (Skitka, 2011), which is different from how a given action is discussed and framed. However, it is possible that private moralization leads to a guilty conscience not just when one fails to act but also when one misrepresents a privately moralized view publicly as non-moralized, pragmatic one. Consistent with this argument, Waters and Bird (1987) propose that managers experience “moral stress” when social pressures prevent them from being able to understand and express their justifications in terms of the underlying moral principles.

Whether or not private moralizers who do not moralize publicly actually experience stress or guilt, they would need to be able to anticipate this (consciously or not) for it to affect their decision to moralize. Bird and Waters (1989) speculate that managers are not sufficiently aware of this consequence of moral muteness to use it as a consideration in their decision-making. One could even argue that the internal pressure to act on a view that is based on moral conviction should increase people’s motivation to present it in whatever way is likely to be the most effective, even if that means adopting a completely pragmatic (non-moralized) framing. Such inauthenticity may be experienced not as self-betrayal but rather as a necessary sacrifice in service of a noble end. In short, more research is needed to investigate whether people do in fact feel guilty for failing to take action that supports their moral values; whether, if so, expressing a privately moralized view as non-moralized is sufficient to cause this type of guilt; and finally whether people are able to predict their guilty reaction and plan accordingly. This issue could be one where people are systematically mistaken about the consequences of moralizing publicly, such that, after failing to moralize publicly, they bear psychological costs they did not foresee.

4.3. Summary

In this section, we have reviewed potential downstream consequences of public moralization, some negative and others positive. Though the picture we painted may appear rationalistic, we merely propose to add these inputs to the long list of concerns that individuals seem able to process rapidly before making a public utterance (e.g. Leary, 1995), and our efforts to make them explicit for analytical purposes should not be taken for a description of a necessarily conscious or systematic thought process individuals go through when encountering such situations. In some cases, moralization was found to potentially lead to both positive and negative consequences along the very same dimensions (e.g. likability), – this suggests that an exciting next empirical step will be the identification of moderating variables (e.g., Monin & O’Connor, 2010). Furthermore, given the dearth of evidence on pure moralization rather than related concepts, our analysis has relied on proxies such as ethical leadership, affective framing, and moral mandates, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the unique role of moralization. Future research should investigate the real and imagined consequences of moralization while better controlling other factors to identify the unique contribution of using a moral framing.
Despite these limitations, we hope that our analysis has suggested areas where research efforts are likely to prove valuable.

5. Conclusion

We began this paper by marveling at the pervasiveness of morally ambivalent framings provided by actors in organizations, noting the striking simultaneous prevalence in corporate discourse of both selfless principles and hard-nosed profit-seeking. Rather than tackle situations in which the two motives clash, which we feel have received a good amount of attention in the literature already, our analysis focused instead on corporate actors’ apparent ability to switch from a moral frame to a pragmatic frame, and vice versa, to justify the same decision, and the factors determining the position of this “ethical switch.” The many examples of public justifications cited in Section 1 illustrate this dual framing, with decisions justified as Corporate Social Responsibility in the same breath as they are described as serving the bottom line. In Section 2 we delved into this phenomenon by defining and describing moralization at the private and public levels, and by exploring the various combinations of private and public moralization than can occur for organizational actors. In Section 3 we identified upstream antecedents of moralization (moral intuitions, moral template matching, and meta-perceptions), while in Section 4 we explored downstream consequences, real and imagined, of moralization, which can affect (consciously or not) actors’ framing decisions.

The picture that emerges from our analysis is a complicated one, with intuitions, affect, cognitions, social perceptions, norms, and cultural factors all playing interactive roles to determine how an issue is framed. Indeed, the main contribution of this paper is perhaps to demonstrate that the road to public moralization has been described in overly simplistic terms, and to show how future exploration could address this topic more rigorously. Many different factors can lead a corporate actor to consider an issue a candidate for moral framing, and if the actor does choose to justify a decision using a moral frame, she often reaps some benefits for doing so, at the same time as she pays some real social costs. Much work remains to be done to identify the optimal conditions under which moralizing leads to positive effects. Still, our analysis illuminates why corporate actors show such ambivalence in their public pronouncements, allowing us to see moral frames as often more than mere window-dressing and to appreciate the psychological complexities and multiple factors that determine whether an organizational actor couches a decision in moral terms. Much exciting work remains to be done, and we hope that our analytical framework and the insights and open questions we have highlighted will inspire our colleagues to undertake this task.

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