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COMMENTARIES

The Full Equation: On the Context-Dependency of Ideological Morality

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> Every psychological event depends upon the state of the person and at the same time on the environment, although their relative importance is different in different cases (Lewin, 1936, p. 12).

The notion that behavior—including moral behavior—depends on the features of the person and the situation is not a new one. In fact, it has been a core principle of the field of Social Psychology ever since Kurt Lewin first formulated his famous equation, quoted in the epigraph, in the founding days of the field. It is thus no surprise that morality, like other psychological phenomena (e.g., emotions, see Pliskin et al., 2020; Pliskin & Halperin, 2021), must be considered in context, as context can dramatically modify individual tendencies. For example, two thirds of respondents (64%) to the European Social Survey Round 10 (European Social Survey, 2020) reported their trust in scientists to be above the midpoint of a 0 ("No trust at all") to 10 ("Complete trust") scale, but only one third of the same respondents (34%) disagreed with the statement that "…scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public" when reporting their views on the Covid19 pandemic. Such seeming inconsistency is not strictly a European phenomenon, nor does it emerge only when looking at populations aggregated across ideological lines. In the United States, where Pinsof et al. (this issue) embed their theorizing, only a minority (32%) of U.S. citizens identifying as Republicans generally believe pregnant women should be allowed to legally abort a fetus in their first trimester, but a clear majority of these respondents believe the same in case that woman had been raped (76%) or there is serious risk to her health (86%) or to that of the fetus (59%) (Perry et al., 2022).

Such seeming contradictions lead Pinsof et al. (this issue) to conclude that ideologies reflect historical processes of alliance formation *rather than* moral beliefs. As such, they partially follow Lewin's reasoning on the importance of taking the situation, or "environment" into account, presenting a compelling account of how a feature of the political situation—namely the necessity for alliance formation with others who may not share the exact same core values—influences the content of ideological belief systems. At the same time, Pinsof et al. (this issue) fully discard Lewin's idea that the features of the person—i.e., the holder of a certain ideology rather than another—are also part of the equation, themselves playing a key role in generating behavior

such as policy support, voting, or any other expression of ideological and moral values.

Indeed, when taking into account the accumulated body of knowledge in social psychology—focusing on concepts such as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2019), and moral inconsistency (Effron & Helgason, 2023; Monin & Merritt, 2012)—the supposed contradictions identified by the authors are neither jarring nor surprising. Accordingly, I propose a more useful application of Alliance Theory and all previously accumulated knowledge on partner selection and alliance formation, e.g., (Coricelli et al., 2004; Harcourt & de Waal, 1992) would be to identify how the space in which alliances are formed and the biases resulting from alliance formation *interact with* individual differences in values and morality to determine political judgment and decision making. Below, I briefly review literature demonstrating why the existence of moral inconsistency cannot justify discarding the explanatory power of morality altogether. I then propose an integrative approach that assumes the motivations featured in Alliance Theory interact with individual and group-based differences to shape the expression and application of morals. Understanding how "the special nature of the particular [political] situation" (Lewin, 1936)—including the necessity for alliance formation within it—shapes the psychology of morality holds the key to understanding *when* ideological differences emerge in morality, rather than *whether* such differences exist more broadly.

Why We Cannot Fully Discount Morality

Research on the psychology of morality has spanned decades (Ellemers et al., 2019; Haidt, 2007; Lapsley, 1996), with moral inconsistency a known feature of this psychology for just as long (Effron & Helgason, 2023; Monin & Merritt, 2012). This may be surprising, as people are known to value consistency in general (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019) and—perhaps even more so—in the moral domain in particular (Effron & Helgason, 2023; Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Monin & Merritt, 2012), which is often valued above all others (Brambilla & Leach, 2014; Leach et al., 2007) and seen as non-negotiable (Skitka, Hanson, et al., 2021). Nevertheless, moral inconsistencies remain so common that

some have argued that the bulk of seminal work in social psychology focuses specifically on this type of behavior (Monin & Merritt, 2012). Does the prevalence of morally-inconsistent behavior undermine the very notion of morality, not to mention the accumulated research on its importance to human psychology? Based on Pinsof et al. (2023), one could conclude the answer to this question to be affirmative, as observing moral inconsistencies among ideologically-aligned individuals has led them to discard the notion of morality-based ideologies altogether. But most scholars (and laypeople) would likely agree that rather than negating the literature on morality, understanding moral inconsistencies in fact enriches and refines our understanding of human morality.

Examples are abundant, ranging from Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), mentioned above, to formative work on attribution (Bradley, 1978; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Sahar, 2014), to fundamental theories of values (Schwartz, 2012). In fact, inconsistencies are *assumed* in the main tenets of all of these theories, be it dissonance-creating mismatches, attribution biases, or value priorities, respectively. In other words, inconsistencies are not a bug in human psychology and morality—but a defining feature. As ideologies are, by definition, interrelated frameworks of values, attitudes, and beliefs (Jost et al., 2009), the moral values guiding individuals' ideologies should not be seen as fundamentally different from morals viewed more broadly—inconsistencies and all. It is also important to note that the alliance motives presented as part of Alliance Theory have been known and documented, sometimes for decades (e.g., Harcourt & de Waal, 1992; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Their application to ideological groups is informative and insightful, but there is every reason to assume such motives would apply to ideology, simply because of the moralized nature of many of the beliefs attached to ideological categories. In fact, some of this previous work indicates that shared beliefs underlie partner choice in alliance formation (Efferson et al., 2008; McElreath et al., 2003), which suggests that the moral convictions of ideologues are inherent to many of the alliances they form, rather than being determined by them.

Furthermore, ideologies are not held only by individuals, but also by groups of individuals—an important attribute at the heart of Alliance Theory (Pinsof et al., 2023). Groups are known to implicitly (and explicitly) influence the individuals they comprise in various ways, with normative influence fundamental among these (McDonald & Crandall, 2015). Thus, while group values can reflect the sum of their members' values, they can also normatively reinforce individual values both descriptively (i.e., reflecting the values of others around them) and prescriptively (expressing what the group deems moral and appropriate). Moreover, membership in ideological groups is largely by choice, and ideological groups are prime examples of morality-based groups (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013), meaning their importance to individual identity may further be bolstered. Taken together, this literature indicates that ideological moral values may in fact be a particularly strong form of moral values, an indication that fits well with past research findings

that many ideological beliefs—across the ideological spectrum—are held with moral conviction or as sacred values (Brandt et al., 2015; Skitka, Morgan, et al., 2015; Tetlock, 2003; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

Importantly, the evidence presented to support the idea that alliance motives fully subsume morality in determining political judgment and decision making is entirely derived from only one very unique political context, home to people viewed as "outliers among outliers" (Henrich et al., 2010). Beyond the large documented differences between American participants and those from any other population in the world in various psychological processes, including their moral reasoning (Henrich et al., 2010), the U.S. context provides an insufficient test of the bold claims of Alliance Theory due to the structure of its political system. The U.S. employs a non-parliamentary two-party system, in which it is highly unlikely for any candidate not aligned with one of the two dominating parties to take office (Disch, 2002; Drutman, 2021). Such a system generates higher competition than other political systems, and necessitates more far-reaching alliance formation for any chance at political viability. It thus stands to reason that the alliance motives reviewed by Pinsof et al. (2023) are stronger in the context of such a system than in multi-party systems, which demand less far-reaching compromise of political representatives and their voters. The categorization of the political landscape into only two groups (versus more) also means that greater intergroup bias is generated (Hartstone & Augoustinos, 1995), fueling greater competition and a more binary "us vs. them" mindset that can legitimize compromises with anyone not included in the "them." Indeed, the U.S. constitutes one of the world's most polarized societies (Boxell et al., 2022; Iyengar et al., 2019; Lindqvist & Östling, 2010), with polarization steadily on the rise (Boxell et al., 2022), further cementing this binary adversarial dynamic—a dynamic that likely gives partisanship and alliance motives unique and potentially unparalleled dominance over other motives, including moral consistency. In other words, while the use of any single unique context to support a theory meant to apply more universally is insufficient, the use of the American context as the sole support for Alliance Theory presents even bigger barriers to its generalizability. The application of the theory to only one context also prevents us from gaining insights into the ways in which contextual factors shape the processes it describes. To fully assess the theory's value we thus require an approach that can facilitate an understanding of the context specificity of the theory's main claims.

An Integrative Approach: Alliance Motivations and Morality, in Context

As stated above, alliance motives are well established in the literature (Efferson et al., 2008; Harcourt & de Waal, 1992; McElreath et al., 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 2010), and their relevance to political alliances and resulting political judgements is well presented in Alliance Theory (Pinsof et al., 2023). In fact, it stands to reason that the more essential alliances

are for political viability and influence, the more weight alliance motives will have on individual judgements. In Lewinian terms, this means the importance of the environment in determining behavior grows in such situations relative to that of the person (Lewin, 1936). But are all people equally motivated to build alliances, in the same way, across situations? To account for the person in Lewin's equation, we need to better understand *when* and *to what extent* individual differences in factors such as ideology, morality, and political allegiance interact with alliance motives (and other relevant situational factors) to shape political judgment and decision making. Mapping which contextual factors increase or decrease (or even fully eliminate) the impact of individual differences in such constructs is crucial to this end, and the elements of Alliance Theory (Pinsof et al., 2023) can help identify some of these.

First, as mentioned above, the political system in place in any given geographical context may impact how strong alliance formation motives are in relation to ideological or moral motives. The more opportunities political candidates have to be elected in small groups or on their own, the less they should rely on alliances and, accordingly, the more refined their political platform can be. If this assumption is true, we should observe more political *idealism* in multiparty parliamentary political systems with low or no minimal vote threshold to enter parliament, or in which individual candidates can be elected regionally without major party support. Conversely, two-party systems or contexts with less individual freedom would necessitate more political *realism* to achieve influence. In other words, the strength of alliance formation motives should depend on the value—or subjective utility—of alliance formation within a given political system. This assumption resonates with models of rational ideological choice and conviction (e.g., Gries et al., 2022; Zmigrod, 2022), which examine how individual inclinations work in tandem with subjective utility to determine political preferences and behavior. In these models, subjective utilities are both shaped and moderated by individual differences such as elective affinities (Gries et al., 2022) or the strength of ideological commitment (Zmigrod, 2022), making political preferences impossible to predict in the absence of information on such differences.

The strength of ideological commitment—or relevance—may also vary depending on the specific issues at hand. Ideologies typically cover a wide range of values and beliefs, allowing individuals to efficiently orient themselves on a wide range of issues that vary in personal relevance of priority (Downs, 1957). Accordingly, individuals may attach greater moral value to certain beliefs than to others, at times even holding them with moral conviction (Skitka, Hanson, et al., 2021). Because moral convictions pertain to attitudes reflecting a distinction between absolute right and wrong, alliance motives may have less sway over these beliefs. At the other end of the spectrum are beliefs that are more incidental to one's ideology, held because ideological allies view them as important coupled with the efficiency that ideological heuristics afford—and such beliefs may be fully superseded by external instrumental motives when the latter

become relevant. For example, in our past research we found that right-leaning Israelis were unmotivated by their fear when their ideology delineated the "correct" response to the threat at hand (i.e., jointly facing a threat from the adversary in a violent conflict), whereas an equivalent threat that was, at the time, not core to their ideology (i.e., a pre-Covid19 approaching pandemic) did motivate them to consider leaving the country (Pliskin et al., 2015). In other words, the ideological belief in the importance of patriotism and loyalty in facing threats together subsumed self-protective motivations stemming from fear only when the context placed core ideological considerations in the foreground. Similar findings emerge for other political outcomes, such as how much concern is shown for the suffering of others depending on the political relevance of their group membership (Pliskin et al., 2018), in line with research demonstrating how the stimuli used in research can account for whether or not ideological differences emerge in moral and political judgements (Brandt & Crawford, 2019a; Fiagbenu et al., 2021; Kessler et al., 2015).

Both of the above factors may play an even greater role in more polarized contexts and with regard to more polarized policy topics. Indeed, greater polarization should lead to greater allegiance to one's political camp, broadly defined, as its strengthens "us" vs. "them" perceptions (Hartstone & Augoustinos, 1995; also see above). In addition to giving greater weight to instrumental concerns in alliance formation or, conversely, to the idealism attached to certain issues, polarization can strengthen various motives related to group membership, including the propagandistic biases reviewed by Pinsof et al. (2023), such as perpetrator biases. Indeed, with greater polarization, dyadic cues may increase the perceived distance between ingroup and outgroup, while decreasing the perceived distance among subgroups contained in the ingroup. Recent research has even demonstrated how increases in perceived polarization feed into perceptions of dyadic harm from the outgroup, thus stimulating the moralization of attitudes under dispute between the polarized political camps (D'Amore et al., 2022). In other words, more polarized contexts not only increase the subjective value of alliance formation, but also the *moral* value attached to the beliefs held by one's groups and alliance partners, bringing alliance and moral motives in line with each other rather than pitting them against each other.

Individual differences in relational motives may also shape alliance motivations. Indeed, there is reason to expect ideological differences in the extent to which people view others as similar and thus more or less relevant alliance partners. Past research has found that left-leaning individuals overestimate attitude differences among people within their broader ideological camp, whereas right-leaning individuals underestimate these (Stern et al., 2014). The smaller perceived differences are to a certain individual, the easier it should be for that person to overcome those differences for the sake of alliance formation, meaning that even the broader motivations included in Alliance Theory (Pinsof et al., 2023) may differ depending on one's ideology, across contexts that may increase or decrease the subjective utility

of alliance formation. This further highlights the need for a multi-faceted examination that considers individual differences alongside shared motivations and contextual features.

The above constitute only a small selection of relevant contextual and group-specific factors to consider when trying to understand the role of ideological morality in political judgment. Major features of the specific context, such as leadership, a population's level of education, or the presence of major sources of threat, should all, based on the literature (e.g., Baekgaard et al., 2020; Ellemers et al., 2004; Milstein et al., 2010) influence the relative importance of alliance motives, moral motives, or other individual and contextual considerations. A comprehensive list may not be within reach, but even regarding the named factors we currently have little insight from the literature. That may be because prior work relied mostly—if not only—on politically-loaded paradigms and contexts. For example, work on ideological differences (or lack thereof) in intergroup prejudice has employed real-world outgroups of political significance, such as racial minorities or ideological opponents.(e.g., Brandt & Crawford, 2019b; Jost et al., 2017). It thus remains open whether differences in intergroup prejudice emerge also in the absence of 'loaded' past intergroup relations. Accordingly, what is needed is an approach that allows a comparison between content-neutral examinations of ideological differences in psychological constructs and examinations in which relevant contextual features are introduced experimentally, facilitating a multi-dimensional examination of the factors shaping political judgment.

A Different Approach: Quantifying Contextual Effects

Just as Pinsof et al. (this issue) argue, a radically different approach is needed to understand the impact of alliance motives on political judgment. In fact, to differentiate context-specific effects of ideology on political judgment from broader individual differences, a radical shift in *methods* used to study political ideology is needed. We need paradigms that allow control over the presence versus absence of (implicit) political context and content, while also illuminating individuals' motivations and cognitions. One way to achieve this is through the use of experimental games of cooperation and conflict (Van Dijk & De Dreu, 2021), borrowed from behavioral economics. Employing such games in content-free, incentivized settings, alongside settings in which various contextual features—such as the concepts reviewed above—are introduced, can inform the long-standing debate on ideological symmetry vs. asymmetry (e.g., Crawford, 2014; Jost, 2017) by illuminating *when* ideological differences emerge in political judgements and decision making, rather than trying to establish whether they universally emerge or do not emerge. Such an experimental approach could illuminate the question of just how impactful alliance motives are better than the largely descriptive findings reviewed as part of Alliance Theory (Pinsof et al., this issue), because of its ability to isolate alliance motives from individual differences, while also illuminating the

circumstances that give more or less weight to these motives in decision making.

My colleagues and I have recently adopted this approach to better understand ideological differences in cooperation—of particular relevance to alliance formation. Instead of trying to understand whether ideological differences exist in cooperation tendencies, we manipulated the features of a public good on which participants could cooperate, thus allowing us to understand under what circumstances they emerge (Hoenig et al., 2023). To this end, we allowed participants to choose whether to contribute to two types of public goods—meaning, shared group resources that benefit the group most when all individuals contribute to it maximally (i.e., cooperate), but benefit individuals most when they keep their own resources while enjoying the contributions of others (i.e., free-ride). When returns from the public good where distributed equally among all group members, we replicated past indications (e.g., Romano et al., 2021; Sidanius et al., 1994) that left-leaning individuals cooperate more than right-leaning individuals. While this could reflect broader cooperation tendencies, it may also stem from the greater value placed by left-leaning individuals on equality (see, for example, Becker, 2020; Carnahan & Greenwood, 2018; Kteily et al., 2017; Thorisdottir et al., 2007), as the returns were distributed equally. Indeed, when we examined contributions to an additional public good that differed in its returns structure, distributing these unequally among group members, we found no ideological differences in cooperation (Hoenig et al., 2023).

The bulk of existing research on ideological differences has embedded its examinations within existing political contexts or intergroup dynamics. Nonetheless, like us, others have started applying methods from behavioral economics to the study of political ideology (e.g., Anderson et al., 2005; Balliet et al., 2018; Brewer et al., 2023; Grünhage & Reuter, 2022; Kerschbamer & Müller, 2020; Mansell, 2018, 2020; Romano et al., 2021; Sheldon & Nichols, 2009; Van Lange et al., 2012). Such work provides a useful foundation for future work that will more systematically manipulate contextual features to compare "content-free" treatments to those laden with relevant contextual features. For example, future work could examine alliance formation in minimal groups, manipulating features such as the viability of gaining rewards without forming alliances, the number of (minimal) groups present, whether ideological orientations of (groups of) individuals are known, or any other variable relevant to encouraging or discouraging the formation of alliances, as discussed above.

The benefits of adopting such an approach are manifold. Beyond answering some of the specific questions posed by Alliance Theory (Pinsof et al., this issue) and in the current commentary, a cumulative body of research employing similar methodologies could enable the construction of a taxonomy of contextual features that do or do not give rise to ideological differences in morality, political judgment and decision making. This, in turn, could allow for more reliable "bounded" generalizations of research findings, generating more trust that findings from one context could be

informative for other contexts with similar features. This approach could also illuminate under which circumstances similarities between left- and right-leaning individuals are obscured, generating greater perceived chasms between these two groups and feeding into growing polarization.

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