

Buy Local, Act Evil

Can organic produce and natural shampoo turn you into a heartless jerk?

By Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow

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As the owner of several energy-efficient light bulbs and a recycled umbrella, I'm familiar with the critiques of "ethical consumption." In some cases, it's not clear that ostensibly green products are better for the environment. There's also the risk that these lifestyle choices will make us complacent, sapping the drive to call senators and chain ourselves to coal plants. Tweaking your shopping list, the argument goes, is at best woefully insufficient and maybe even counterproductive.

But new research by Nina Mazar and Chen-Bo Zhong at the University of Toronto levels an even graver charge: that virtuous shopping can actually lead to immoral behavior. In their study (described in a paper now in press at *Psychological Science*), subjects who made simulated eco-friendly purchases ended up less likely to exhibit altruism in a laboratory game and more likely to cheat and steal.

In an experiment, participants were randomly assigned to select items they wanted to buy in one of two online stores. One store sold predominantly green products, the other mostly

conventional items. Then, in a supposedly unrelated game, all of the participants were allocated \$6, to share as they saw fit with an anonymous (and unbeknownst to them, imaginary) recipient. Subjects who had chosen items from the green store coughed up less money, on average, than their counterparts. In a second experiment, participants were again assigned to shop in either a green or conventional store. Then they performed a computer task that involved earning small sums of cash. The setup offered the opportunity to cheat and steal with impunity. The eco-shoppers were more likely to do both.

It would be foolish to draw conclusions about the real world from just one paper and from such an artificial scenario. But the findings add to a growing body of research into a phenomenon known

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among social psychologists as "moral credentials" or "moral licensing." Historically, psychologists viewed moral development as a steady progression toward more sophisticated decision-making. But an emerging school of thought stresses the capriciousness of moral responses. Several studies propose that the state of our self-image can directly influence our choices from moment to moment. When people have the chance to demonstrate their goodness, even in the most token of ways, they then feel free to relax their ethical standards.

In 2001, Benoit Monin and Dale Miller of Princeton published a pioneering study of this licensing tendency. The study investigated whether showing a lack of bias in one situation would free subjects to express prejudice later on. They found that people who had designated a woman as the best candidate for a gender-neutral job were then more likely to recommend a man for a stereotypically masculine job. Another experiment yielded similar results with regard to race.

Newer work has focused on morality more broadly. Earlier this year, researchers at Northwestern reported that subjects who wrote self-flattering stories later pledged to give less money to charity than those who wrote stories

that were self-critical or about someone else. In another recent study, participants who recalled their own righteous deeds were less inclined to donate blood, volunteer, or engage in other "prosocial" acts. They were also more likely to cheat on a math assignment.

Why might this happen? According to Monin, now a professor at Stanford, there are two theories. One is that when we've established our rectitude, we interpret ensuing behavior in a different light: *I just proved I'm a good person, so what I'm doing now must be okay.* This reasoning, of course, works best in ambiguous situations, not with egregious sins. For example, in Monin's experiments, it seems plausible that after participants have displayed a lack of prejudice, they see their next judgment call as based on sound analysis. (Indeed, it's possible that the subjects are not expressing prejudice but simply feel liberated from the

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pressure to be politically correct.)

Another, potentially overlapping theory holds that we have a kind of subconscious moral accounting system. We like to think of ourselves as good guys, but sainthood has costs. So when we have done our mitzvah for the day, we cut ourselves some slack. In this model, "moral credits" are a kind of currency we accrue and spend.

The notion that being good leads us to be bad doesn't sound so far-fetched. It's reminiscent of the idea that after a day of salads and nonfat yogurt, you can indulge in a slice of cheesecake. Yet the opposite hypothesis also rings true. Don't we all get a "warm glow" from doing good, which incentivizes us to do even more good? Also, if you think of yourself as generous or honest or environmentally responsible (and others see you that way too), it seems that you'd be motivated to affirm that image. Indeed, several studies have indicated that when people are praised for agreeing to a request, they are more likely to consent to a follow-up favor.

Good behavior, then, sometimes appears to beget more good behavior, while at other times it triggers moral slackening. Further research may determine how and when these different mechanisms apply.

The green-products study broke ground

by suggesting that behavior in one realm (environmental decisions) may have a licensing effect in a different area (not future environmental choices, but general morality). So, when I buy Seventh Generation laundry detergent and organic local squash—or bring reusable bags to the grocery store—will that make me act like a selfish jerk?

I asked several experts on moral licensing how to avoid that fate. The most obvious advice was that being conscious of this potential reaction allows me to be on guard against it. They also pointed out that the licensing effect has a flip side. Some of the studies revealed an impulse for "moral cleansing": When our moral self-image is threatened, we want to restore it—to add moral credits to the account. Research indicates that writing about our negative traits, or recalling our own sketchy behavior, prompts a surge of virtue. Reminding people of ethical ideals

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or of other people's probity seems to have a similar effect. So in the wake of a noble act, we can try to curb self-satisfaction by thinking back on past transgressions or, more pleasantly, contemplating Gandhi or a personal role model.

Another strategy is to make worthy actions habitual. When volunteering at the soup kitchen—or turning off unused lights—becomes routine, you'll stop basking in that halo every time. Cultural norms are also key. If everyone is driving a Prius and taking the stairs, I won't feel so smug about doing the same. Now, for instance, I don't feel heroic when I sort the paper and plastics and take the blue bin out to the curb. That's just what people in my neighborhood do on Monday nights.

A decade or two ago, buying green products and other environmentalist measures might have just seemed idiosyncratic. Now such conduct is widely lauded—which is precisely why, according to researchers, it may be capable of producing this behavioral backlash. But, for the most part, it's not yet a matter of course. What's the lesson here? Let's stop congratulating each other—and ourselves—for using nontoxic cleaning products and compost bins. After all, it's really the least we can do.

Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow is a contributing writer for the Ideas section.

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