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The Ethics of Environmentalists

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by Jordan Carr

In a recent piece in [Slate](#) titled [Buy Local, Act Evil](#), Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow raises the question: “Can buying organic produce and natural shampoo turn you into a heartless jerk?” She describes [a study](#) by Nina Mazar and Chen-Bo Zhong of the University of Toronto:

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.

Enter [Benoit Monin](#), a Stanford Psychology Professor who, based on this experiment and his own work has two theories about the phenomenon of an altruistic justifying a selfish one:

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.*

Another, potentially overlapping theory holds that we have a kind of subconscious moral accounting system...In this model, “moral credits” are a kind of currency we accrue and spend.

The second theory applies to a lot of realms. Who hasn’t said “I studied/worked out/eat a salad yesterday, so I don’t have to today” at one point? From over at the Stanford Medical School, Kelly McGonigal, [writes a prescription](#) in [Psychology Today](#) for the struggle to eat well that applies equally to avoiding self-righteousness:

Awareness is a powerful antidote to all of these challenges. If you know that eating certain foods is going to fool your appetite, you can prepare yourself to make more conscious choices. If you start paying attention to the indulgences that are most satisfying, you can reward yourself

with them. And if you know that your choices today are likely to influence your choices tomorrow, you will be less likely to tell yourself, “Today I indulge, tomorrow will be different.

Basically, if you know that your good behavior (environmental, dietary or otherwise) is going to license you to act badly, at least make it a good behavior with high rewards, and if you undertake it with the awareness that your actions are interrelated, you will have more control over the entire process. Generally speaking, the more we are aware of our subconscious’ mechanisms, the better we are able to control them. Check out [this Stanford Report article on stereotype threat](#) for another example.

Perhaps more than anything, this study goes to show a major weakness of the environmental movement. Instead of asking for real sacrifices, the environmental movement has largely been content to wait around on political change (be it with [cap and trade legislation](#) or the upcoming [Copenhagen Climate Change Conference](#)) while emphasizing relatively minor decisions such as which lightbulbs to buy, and reusing bags at the supermarket.

This laxity of standards has allowed for people to feel as if they are participating in the environmental movement even if they are a net negative to it. As a result almost meaningless decisions such as buying a more “eco-friendly” shampoo justify praise—or a counterbalancing bad action—that they did not warrant.

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