

## 7. Social mechanisms of dissonance reduction

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### Dissonance and its antidotes

Within segments of the social sciences that are concerned with model building, the individual is commonly portrayed as a pleasure machine incapable of experiencing anguish, regret, guilt, or shame. Exploiting his opportunities to the fullest, this imagined individual suffers no discomfort over unavailable options or bygone choices. The construct has its uses, of course. Ordinarily, we experience no inner turmoil when choosing among restaurants, vacation spots, or investment strategies. Yet to experience anxiety over some of our choices is an essential element of what it is to be human. Many of the participants in the 1978 demonstrations that turned Iran into an economically contracting theocracy continue to question their fateful judgments and actions. Working parents endure persistent anxiety over allocating time between their children and their jobs. Members of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural minorities routinely feel torn between cravings to assimilate and those to retain a distinct collective identity. For yet another example, employees commonly feel frustrated at having to turn a blind eye to the dishonest or unfair actions of their superiors.

What unites these substantively diverse examples is that they harbor choices capable of producing both prospective and retrospective discomfort; initially made with difficulty, the choices are then revisited and critiqued. Individually and collectively, such choices create a demand for discomfort prevention and alleviation. The purpose of this chapter is to

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examine some of the major social mechanisms that help meet this demand, with special attention to their interactions.

I use the term *dissonance*, shorthand for "decisional dissonance," to refer generically to the tensions that individuals experience because of their choices. As the foregoing examples indicate, the source of dissonance can vary. I distinguish, in particular, between *expressive dissonance*, which accompanies preference falsification, and *moral dissonance*, which stems from impractical or infeasible values. An example of expressive dissonance is the frustration a college administrator silently incurs over her politically expedient endorsement of an academically questionable curriculum change. And one of moral dissonance is the inner tensions that competing duties instill in a working parent. By no means are the two forms of dissonance mutually exclusive. Immigrants trying to assimilate without losing their ancestral identity can experience expressive dissonance for yielding to conformist pressures, and also moral dissonance for failing to do their share to uphold their cultural heritage.

I argue later that both types of dissonance are inevitable consequences of our social interactions. In living together, producing jointly and consuming collectively, we steadily generate new sources of dissonance and, hence, new demands for dissonance reduction. The demand is met partly as a by-product of efforts to accomplish other ends. Often, however, political, social, and moral entrepreneurs contribute to the process through efforts to make people comfortable with their past and future choices. Such efforts are not, of course, always successful. Depending on factors knowable only imperfectly, they may galvanize events that, while alleviating one form of dissonance, aggravate another. The emergence, operation, and effects of these interrelated mechanisms do not lend themselves to easy prediction. Partly because they involve intrapersonal processes, their dynamics and outcomes are harder to predict than to explain retrospectively. I begin by developing the meaning of expressive dissonance.

### Expressive dissonance

In interacting with one another, people routinely encounter situations that place their private preferences in conflict. They respond by trying to reshape each other's private preferences, as when a person seeks to convince his neighbor that she would benefit from a tax hike to finance recreation

programs for seniors. He cannot be certain of success, so he will try, in addition, to control his neighbor's relevant public preferences. By proposing that "only the selfish stand in the way of programs for seniors" and hinting that "selfish people get frowned at," he can make her believe that by publicizing her reservations she would tarnish her social standing. In the interest of avoiding negative reactions, the neighbor may choose, therefore, to engage in preference falsification. She can do so by endorsing the planned intergenerational transfers and concealing her misgivings.

In *Private Truths, Public Lies* (1995), I examined, among certain other consequences of preference falsification, the resulting social inefficiencies. A byproduct of hiding one's qualms about a policy is to intensify the social pressures that weigh on others choosing what preferences to communicate. And the induced incentives may produce an equilibrium whereby most people publicly support a policy that few favor privately; they may result, in other words, in a public opinion sharply at odds with private opinion. My interest here is not in the dynamics of this inefficiency-fostering process; it lies in the social mechanisms that lighten the resulting psychological tensions.

As individuals, we derive satisfaction from being our own persons, from pursuing our own goals rather than those of others, from expressing our wishes truthfully. In earlier works, I have referred to such satisfaction as *expressive utility*. If  $x$  represents a person's private preference among a set of options and  $y$  his public preference, his expressive utility is maximized when  $y = x$ , in which case he incurs no expressive dissonance. If he picks  $y$  to be anything other than  $x$ , he fails to maximize his expressive utility, thus experiencing dissonance. For any chosen public preference, then, his expressive dissonance is the absolute value of  $D_E = E(x, y) - E(x, x)$ , where  $E(\cdot)$  is a function declining in the distance between its two arguments.

A person bent on maximizing expressive utility would avoid preference falsification and experience no expressive dissonance. As a practical matter, however, expressive utility forms but a component of the total utility stemming from the choice of a public preference. The chooser will derive *reputational utility* from the reactions of others, and *intrinsic utility* from any substantive effects of the choice itself. In maximizing the *sum* of these forms of utility, the individual may well make a selection that generates expressive dissonance. To revisit an earlier example, if the neighbor being

pressured to endorse a tax hike opts to protect her reputation, she will maintain good social relations but only at the expense of expressive utility.<sup>1</sup>

In every society, the extent and distribution of expressive dissonance varies from issue to issue. At one extreme are issues that produce practically no expressive dissonance. An example is the matter of whether highways should be paved: Genuine agreement being nearly universal, people do not feel pressured to conform to a public opinion at odds with their private preferences. Another example is whether the referees of football (soccer) games should return to wearing exclusively black uniforms; sentiments differ, but few of those who care about the matter feel compelled to conceal their preferences. At the opposite extreme are issues that exhibit widespread preference falsification. When a political position gets associated with national honor or survival, there are usually many who mute their contrary views for fear of being considered unpatriotic.

### The dissipation of expressive dissonance through internalization

The very social mechanism that produces persistent expressive dissonance on a wide scale generates feedback effects tending to dampen the discomfort. These effects hinge on the important role that public discourse plays in shaping our private understandings and preferences. The distortion of public discourse through preference falsification may lighten expressive resentments by reducing, if not eliminating, people's exposure to facts and arguments in conflict with their private preferences. The corrections would not occur overnight, of course. A person who chooses to hide her reservations about an instituted intergenerational transfer program will not lose her qualms automatically. Especially if the media continue to pay attention to the case against transfers, her private opposition might persist indefinitely. However, the intensity of her ill feelings may well diminish as a result of her greater exposure to arguments favoring the transfers. Al-

<sup>1</sup> Whether her intrinsic utility gets affected will depend on the role that her own public preference plays in shaping the forms and magnitudes of intergenerational transfers. Because huge numbers of voters, bureaucrats, media workers, and politicians participate in the relevant policy decisions, her personal influence on the substantive outcome is likely to be negligible. Her intrinsic utility may thus be considered essentially fixed.

though these arguments are unlikely to make her forget the counterarguments, they will at least weaken her preexisting beliefs.

Every society's composition changes over time through births, deaths, and migration. Sooner or later, the individuals inclined to dislike the instituted transfers will be replaced, therefore, by newcomers who were not present at the time of the program's adoption. Insofar as public discourse shapes their private knowledge and preferences – other factors will also play a role – the paucity of arguments against the established program will condition them to accept it unthinkingly. Some of them may not even realize that there is an issue worthy of reflection and debate: They may consider it natural for working generations to subsidize the retired and equally natural for the poverty rate to be higher for children than for seniors. The relative merits of the alternative social arrangements need not concern us here. The relevant point is the existence of a social mechanism tending to make preference falsification self-correcting. At least over the long run, expressive dissonance need not be permanent.

The outlined self-correction mechanism, which is developed in *Private Truths, Public Lies*, does not occur through planning. Although people with insight into the workings of social systems may grasp the long-term effects of preference falsification, the mechanism operates through the decisions that individuals make merely for their own short-term advantages. Ordinarily, it will operate alongside countermechanisms. Higher taxes on workers may reduce their incentives to work and their readiness to bear children; the consequent shrinkage of the tax base may then foster budget deficits, accentuating the competition for government-controlled resources and focusing attention on the proper limits of forced redistribution. Lulled into contentment by years of insincere public discourse, people may one day find themselves awakened, therefore, by its substantive costs. The attention-enhancing effects of this countermechanism may eventually overtake the attention-suppressing effects that operate through public discourse. Accordingly, aggregate expressive dissonance may follow a U-shaped trajectory – falling for some time, then rising.

My illustration should not be taken to mean that the byproducts of preference falsification are necessarily harmful. A common theme in the literature on the Islamic world's economic evolution is that, even as European attitudes toward commerce, profit making, and competition underwent the fundamental changes that culminated in the Industrial Revolution,

Muslim traders tended to remain wedded to the Medieval economic attitudes epitomized by the fraternal, anticompetitive rules of the guilds. The shock waves of Europe's economic transformation eventually made ambitious Muslim traders switch to new ways of doing business. There were initially loud objections to such traders, but as they gained market share from guildsmen, the latter started muting their public complaints. In particular, they began treating as virtues acts that they actually continued to consider vices.<sup>2</sup> The resulting expressive dissonance promoted the Muslim world's economic modernization. Insofar as its effects are measured by economic growth, it produced, then, a major social benefit. In any case, with individuals coming to see aggressive profit seeking as normal, it has self-dissipated.

### Reduction in expressive dissonance through revolt

The key point thus far is that the expressive dissonance generated by preference falsification can disappear through the internalization of understandings and sentiments once only feigned. There is another social mechanism capable of overcoming such dissonance: social revolt that exposes knowledge and feelings that had tended to be concealed.

Let us reconsider a self-sustaining distribution of public preferences that rests substantially on preference falsification – a public opinion that differs dramatically from the underlying private opinion. The very existence of individuals privately unhappy with what they profess to want implies the equilibrium's vulnerability to shifts in reputational incentives. Indeed, given the pervasiveness of expressive dissonance, there will be people waiting for the right conditions to make their misgivings public. If such people somehow detect a sufficient decline in the punishments imposed on those making their dislikes public, they will switch sides. In so doing, they will dampen the incentives against displaying public opposition: With the number of vocal opponents growing, members of the public opposition will feel less isolated and possibly less threatened. This change in reputational incentives may encourage others to join the public opposition, whose switches may then galvanize further switches. What I have described is a revolutionary bandwagon process through which public opin-

<sup>2</sup> The best source on the Muslim world's preindustrial economic norms is Ülgener (1981); Lewis (1993, Chs. 16 and 27) describes the transformation. See my 1997 piece for additional references and a broader interpretation.

ion shifts dramatically following an intrinsically minor perturbation to reputational incentives.

To the extent that public opinion gets transformed through personal decisions to be truthful, aggregate expressive dissonance will fall. With people who had been pretending to favor the status quo ante now openly supporting change, their expressive dissonance will diminish, thus lowering aggregate expressive dissonance. Sudden overturns in public opinion often generate widespread joy and relief. For example, when a privately hated but long publicly supported government suddenly gets overthrown through a groundswell of public opposition, there is a period of euphoria characterized by vociferous denunciations of the fallen government and exalted forecasts of better days ahead. The same pattern is observed within organizations whose leaders, long quietly resented for their corruption, suddenly resign in disgrace because, say, the authorities overseeing their actions found the moment politically ripe for a crackdown.

In outlining the bandwagon process that propels a major shift in public opinion, I left unexplained the change in reputational incentives that pushes it into motion. A revolutionary bandwagon might get activated by a natural disaster, like a flood that breeds ill will against leaders suspected of negligence. It can also be activated by a coincidence of social events, such as a series of economic decisions that unintentionally produce a recession. But shifts in public opinion can also be driven, at least partly, by the planned actions of astute political activists. Just as an engineer who notices the softness of the soil beneath a house will know that even a moderate earthquake would topple it, so a talented political player might sense the fragility of an apparent near-consensus. Linking up with the declared supporters of change, he may set up a revolutionary organization that seeks both to educate and to lessen the incentives against vocalizing opposition to the status quo. Although no one can know exactly what it would take to activate the revolution, the organization can take steps to increase the status quo's fragility. If its plans bear fruit, the revolution that reduces the expressive dissonance of many individuals will have occurred through a mechanism that was at least partially constructed.

In reducing some people's expressive dissonance, a revolutionary shift in public opinion may well heighten the dissonance of others. In fact, it may well raise aggregate expressive dissonance. This is because the very mechanism that lowers the reputational incentives to support the status quo ante heightens those to oppose it. Accordingly, in the course of a

revolution, people genuinely happy with the established arrangements will feel increasingly pressured to feign approval of the ongoing transformation. Their expressive dissonance may increase, therefore, just as that of the sincere supporters of change is decreasing. The net change in aggregate expressive dissonance will depend, then, on the balance of the two effects. But the essential point is that conditions exist under which a revolutionary bandwagon will lower aggregate dissonance.

The two social mechanisms that I have identified as vehicles for dampening expressive dissonance work at cross-purposes. Where internalization involves adjustments that generally reinforce the preestablished equilibrium,<sup>3</sup> revolt entails adjustments that destroy it. The two mechanisms differ also in regard to the variables that they burden with adjustment. Internalization works on private preferences, revolt, primarily on public preferences. The mechanisms differ, finally, in regard to time span. Where internalization often takes generations to run its course, a revolution might occur very quickly and at any time after an equilibrium's establishment.

Insofar as the passage of time fosters internalization, the likelihood of revolution diminishes. This is because a lessening of expressive dissonance lowers the hidden demand for change. The observation raises the question of whether the effects of these mechanisms are predictable and fully explicable. I will offer an answer in the essay's final section, but only after exploring the sources and alleviation of moral dissonance.

## Moral dissonance

In addition to the strains that accompany preference falsification, people experience stresses rooted in moral conflicts. The latter form of psychological discomfort, moral dissonance, may occur even in the absence of any expressive constraints.

Moral dissonance arises when one's values are impractical or infeasible. One feels obligated to achieve a goal, satisfy a limit, or abide by a standard; yet one's preferences steer one away from these objectives. Alternatively, the objectives prove unattainable, because one's resources are limited. The values that form a person's moral system or morality rank his preferences, and they judge the actions that his preferences induce. By

<sup>3</sup> Under certain conditions, which I have specified elsewhere, the equilibrium will become more extreme.

this account, values are both metapreferences – preferences over preferences – and judges of behavior. They need not be realistic. A devoted mother may feel guilty over the little time she spends away from her children; and she may blame herself for her children's failures. The source of her moral dissonance is that her expectations of herself are too stringent relative to human capabilities. Such *moral overload* can also be generated by values that are incompatible. Consider a shopkeeper who feels obligated, on the one hand, to be strictly honest in his dealings with customers and, on the other, to provide his children certain comforts and privileges. Given his talents and market opportunities, he is able to meet his self-defined parental duty only by overbilling his customers. Were he to keep his business totally honest, his income would fall short of what he requires to give his children the lifestyle he considers essential.

Moral overload is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for moral dissonance. It may be that the shopkeeper is capable of meeting both his values, yet his preferences are such that he overbills his customers anyway. Where expressive dissonance results from failure to express oneself truthfully, moral dissonance thus stems from failure to abide by one's personal morality. The former measures unachieved expressive utility, the latter unachieved moral utility. Let  $x^m$ , the individual's *moral base*, represent the action or set of actions that would just satisfy each of the values that form his morality. And let  $x^c$  be the choice or set of choices that he reaches by maximizing his intrinsic utility function subject to his resource constraints. In the illustration involving a tradeoff between honesty and standard of living, each of these variables has two dimensions:  $x^m = [x^{m^1}, x^{m^2}]$  and  $x^c = [x^{c^1}, x^{c^2}]$ . In terms of this notation, his moral dissonance is  $D_M = M(x^m, x^c)$ , where  $M(\cdot)$  is a function that is increasing in the distances between  $x^{c^i}$  and  $x^{m^i}$ , for each dimension  $i$  for which the moral base is unsatisfied.  $D_M$  would be nil for someone whose choice  $x^c$  met all his relevant values. It would be positive if, say,  $x^{c^2}$  fell short of  $x^{m^2}$ .

In the classical model of decision making, the individual maximizes a unitary utility function subject to a resource constraint. He has no values to satisfy, no inner goals that he must achieve to feel at peace with himself. Accordingly, he does not experience anguish or guilt over his actions. If his resources are very tight, he consumes little and perhaps dreams of having more, but he does not feel that he has failed morally; having tried to derive maximum utility from his resources, he does not feel that he *should* have done better. The framework proposed here superimposes on

the classical framework a personal morality – a set of internal standards that the individual must meet to retain a good conscience. Facing a tradeoff between professional honesty and his children's well-being, he need not, having made a choice, feel satisfied that he simply did his best. If his resources are sufficiently limited, he will inevitably feel guilty for behaving dishonestly, failing to meet his parental obligations, or both.<sup>4</sup>

I am thus proposing that the individual has not one but two rankings. Neither ranking has anything to do with how an outside observer might judge them. A father may feel morally obligated to give his daughter a lucrative education, just as he may feel a moral duty to keep her at home as a means of shielding her from what he considers adverse cultural influences; in either case, his feeling constitutes a value that he must meet to keep his conscience clear. Likewise, he may or may not enjoy educating his daughter; whatever we ourselves think of him, his satisfaction, or its absence, points to a preference ordering. The example shows that the distinction between values and preferences has nothing to do with their perceived social advantages. Whatever our own criteria, both preferences and values can be socially beneficial, and both can be socially harmful.

The distinction between the two constructs is not trivial: Although values are never binding, the moral dissonance that they generate can have socially significant repercussions. A morally dissonant person is someone who feels unsettled and, hence, in need of assistance. As the next section will show, this need constitutes a force for social, cultural, and even civilizational change. Moral dissonance is not, of course, the only source of discomfort that we strive to alleviate. We try also to relax our resource constraints, as when a worker, finding her income insufficient to purchase a car, works overtime to raise her income. In contrast to this example, lessening moral dissonance is not a task that ordinarily one achieves unilaterally. We shall see that some major mechanisms for reducing moral dissonance are essentially social rather than personal.

Insofar as we have values that judge our preferences and achievements, they raise the question of why. The most basic probable reason, developed by Robert Frank (1988), lies in human evolution. In the conditions under

<sup>4</sup> The notion that human values create inner strains is in itself not new. It was encapsulated by the ancient idea of a Pantheon – a temple housing many gods competing with one another for influence. Over the past century, numerous sociologists have written on what I am calling “moral dissonance,” though under different characterizations. For instance, Merton (1968, pp. 348–9) uses the term “ambivalence” to describe the concept. For these observations, I am grateful to Richard Swedberg.

which most of our ancestors lived, personal survival was contingent upon successful cooperation with others, whether in hunting, predation, or defense. Hence, individuals were steadily on the lookout for signs of trustworthiness. A person who appeared guilty upon failing to help a distressed tribe member would, all else being equal, seem a less risky partner than one who gave no indication of having a moral sense. Values involving honesty, sympathy, fairness, and self-control, along with the outer signs of moral dissonance, may thus have become hardwired into the human species because they advanced genetic fitness. Certain specific values, like those associated with parenting, might have gotten disseminated through a similar, yet distinct, genetic mechanism: higher survival rates for the offspring of caring parents relative to those of uncaring parents. This evolutionary mechanism need not, however, have wiped out all values that we would characterize as selfish or antisocial. Because the outward signs of inner turmoil are imperfect, selfish values could have survived, although they would have become less common than altruistic ones.

Ethnographers have documented how the exact content of our values varies across time, across space, and across individuals. Some, like Robert Edgerton (1992), have shown that the dominant values of a society can become dysfunctional, endangering its very existence. But the essential point is that we have a moral sense. The meaning of good parenting may vary enormously, as may interpretations of commercial honesty, fairness among friends, and proper self-control. Yet, as James Q. Wilson (1993) observes, the existence of a moral sense is universal. A contemporary mother might regret placing her children in daycare; her great grandmother might have felt guilty instead for failing to feed her children adequately. Although the perceived failings are different, they both stem from a deep-seated sense of parental duty.

Taking as given the existence of moral dissonance, the next section will turn to the social mechanisms that lessen it. Note that moral and expressive dissonance are not mutually exclusive. They will be present simultaneously if social pressures make it imprudent to vocalize one's values honestly. Consider a person whose chosen action,  $x^c$ , leaves  $x^m$  unmet, thus generating moral dissonance. He happens to find it prudent, because of social pressures, to pretend that he aspires to no more than  $x^c$ . With his *public* moral base,  $y^m$ , set at  $x^c$ , he will experience both moral and expressive dissonance. It is possible, too, for all three variables to differ. A member of an organization might consider it too risky to express disgust

at the corruption of her superiors, pretending that her own standards of honesty are somewhat lower than they actually are. Her own behavior may fall short, however, even of the looser standards that she chooses to articulate; wanting to support her family, she might take bribes in a broader array of cases than even her expressed standards would justify.

### Moral dissonance reduction through rationalization and redemption

Moral dissonance results, we have seen, from a combination of biological factors and social forces. We all have an innate capacity to carry values, and some of our specific values are inborn. But social forces influence, and in some contexts determine, how values are interpreted. Behind the social forces lie pressure groups that consider moral education a cheap instrument for achieving their own objectives. Such pressure groups do not coordinate their educational activities; costs of communication and negotiation preclude a comprehensive coordination even in autocracies, and in democracies coordination is not even attempted. Lack of coordination is a leading contributor to moral dissonance.<sup>5</sup> If one pressure group is concerned with parenting, another with professional honesty, and still others with fairness, the social safety net, and professional standards, there will be members of society whose circumstances keep them from satisfying all of the diverse values that they have internalized.

A complementary problem stems from resource inequalities. Although efforts are made to tailor values to individual circumstances, as when a religion teaches that the rich have disproportionate obligations toward disaster victims, the tailoring can never be sufficiently fine to prevent moral dissonance. Inevitably, there will be individuals who develop values that they cannot satisfy fully. Yet another problem is that people's opportunities keep changing even after their values have taken shape. Consider a small-town trader who has adopted standards of fairness and honesty that he can easily satisfy. With changing economic conditions, he moves to a metropolis, where he finds that for economic survival he must conceal the defects of his merchandise and charge what the market will bear – behaviors that he had learned to consider dishonest. The compromises make him experience moral dissonance.

<sup>5</sup> This point is developed in my forthcoming paper.

The most obvious way to alleviate this dissonance would be for the former trader's infeasible value to adapt to his new opportunities. Relevant here is a large literature on the personal efforts people undertake to cope with their internal inconsistencies. Leon Festinger's classic, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), presented evidence that when people hold inconsistent cognitions, the resulting dissonance makes them try to eliminate the inconsistency. One possible remedy is selective exposure to information. Within the context of moral dissonance, our focus here, it would take the form of avoiding information likely to provide reminders of one's moral failures and seeking information about one's successes. Subsequent research, reviewed by John Cotton (1985), has emphasized that, while selective exposure is hardly a spurious phenomenon, its effectiveness is plainly limited. To this day, Cotton adds, we have learned little about why people differ in their abilities to benefit from selective exposure.

In any case, from the fact that moral dissonance can be a widespread problem whose eventual alleviation often comes through social means, one can infer that selective exposure is not always effective. One can also infer that discarding dissonance-generating values is not a simple task. In the spirit of La Fontaine's fox who called the grapes he could not reach sour, the peasant settling in a city might *want* to dismiss his now-infeasible values as old-fashioned. But he may not be able to do so: Migrants commonly experience problems of adjustment, including the feeling that their new conditions make it impossible to live morally. As a practical matter, the ability to change one's own values intentionally is limited. For reasons that Jon Elster (1983) identifies in relation to preferences and beliefs in general, values often change either through social means or as by-products of actions that individuals take for other purposes.

A commonly used personal coping mechanism involves *rationalization*: Remaining committed to upholding one's values, one redefines what the task requires. The small-town trader who moves to the city will not just abandon his commitment to being fair; rather, he will redefine the concept of fair commercial behavior in a way to make the value easier to fulfill. In his initial location, he considered it unfair, say, to raise his prices in response to a shortage; the practice was easy to follow, for it offered him reciprocal benefits in the form of pricing restraint on the part of his own suppliers. With such reciprocal benefits now essentially gone because of the complexity and relative anonymity of metropolitan economic relations,

the opportunity cost of restraint becomes too high. So he redefines shortage-induced price increases as compensation for the costs of inventory replacement. Insofar as the rationalization works, his moral dissonance falls.

Our trader's efforts to redefine fairness are more likely to succeed if most other traders respond similarly to their own moral dissonance than if the preponderance continues exercising restraint. Aggressive pricing on the part of others will make it easier for him to justify his own price adjustments as a business necessity.<sup>6</sup> Reasoning that so many people could not all be immoral, he can feel more confident that urban commodity shortages differ qualitatively from rural ones. If it appears, however, that most traders are showing restraint, he will have reason to doubt his judgment. By the logic that his fellow traders would not pass up opportunities for windfall profits unless such gains were immoral, he will endure guilt.

Campaigns to alleviate the moral dissonance experienced by one social group need not be limited to that particular group. Religious, moral, and legal experts may provide new rationalizations or bolster existing ones. In times and places where interest was commonly considered sinful, moral entrepreneurs have devised ruses to enable people to give and take interest in roundabout ways. One such ruse, fashionable in the Medieval Muslim world, allowed a person to lend at interest by buying from the borrower an object for a certain sum and immediately returning it for a larger sum, payable at some future date. The ongoing revival of the Islamic ban of interest has generated a fresh supply of ruses aimed at helping the pious cope with the difficulties of abiding by the prohibition. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, prominent clerics have decreed that when a financial transaction between two government agencies occurs at a fixed rate of return, no interest is involved. The proposed logic is that all government agencies represent the same entity – the people – and an entity cannot lend to itself. The purpose of the rationalization has been to reduce the moral dissonance experienced by devout government employees.<sup>7</sup>

There exist additional mechanisms for lessening moral dissonance through collectively supplied means. One can provide guilt-ridden individuals opportunities to redeem themselves through donations, community

<sup>6</sup> This is an application of the heuristic of social proof, discussed in Kuran (1995, Ch. 10).

<sup>7</sup> On this ruse and others, see my 1993 article, pp. 308–17. The article examines also the initial rationale for the prohibition of interest.

service, penance, confession, political activism, and voting, among other possibilities. Redemption mechanisms require its designers to convince the potential beneficiaries of their viability, of course. Specifically, the beneficiaries must believe that failure to satisfy a particular value can legitimately be compensated through the designated means. Accordingly, the developers of guilt-alleviation mechanisms are generally among the important contributors to moral discourse. As Jean Delumeau ([1983] 1990), Robert Ekelund, Robert Hébert, and Robert Tollison (1992), and others, have documented, the Medieval Church promoted the idea that one could make up for sins through generosity and the purchase of indulgences. In the same vein, modern politicians strive to give moral significance to votes cast for them. By presenting issues like racial equality, abortion, and the environment as matters of right and wrong – clashing values as opposed to clashing preferences – political candidates enable morally distressed voters to gain comfort through the act of voting.

The gist of this section is that widespread moral dissonance generates socially provided, supported, and legitimated vehicles for helping individuals achieve inner peace. The prevalence of such mechanisms hardly implies, of course, that societies are able to rid themselves of psychological tension. Just as the tendency for markets to clear does not mean that they always do, so the existence of mechanisms for rationalization and redemption allow the indefinite persistence of moral overload. In any case, there is never a shortage of groups trying to promote new values that conflict with old values or with the prevailing preference orderings. Moreover, changing conditions are always producing new issues that generate clashes among previously compartmentalized values. As a case in point, the ongoing environmental movement is making people feel guilty for activities they once considered perfectly ethical. And it is making people relate their consumption and production choices to the planet's survival; not long ago, nature was considered too vast and too powerful to be vulnerable to human excesses.

### Moral reconstruction

Rationalization and redemption make it cheaper to satisfy a fixed set of values. An alternative remedy for widespread dissonance is reconstruction of the moralities that people harbor. Ordinarily, individuals cannot accomplish this task by themselves, for they cannot control public discourse. In

practice, the task requires collective action. And, as such, it is vulnerable to free riding: Because its benefits would accrue mostly to others, individuals may find the relevant personal efforts too costly in relation to their own expected benefits. Often, however, there is a mitigating factor stemming from the multiplicity of potential solutions. If there is more than one way to restructure a society's moral system, many of its individual members will have a stake in the particulars of reform.<sup>8</sup> One is likely to observe, therefore, the emergence of multiple pressure groups competing over the content of the moral reconstruction. At odds over the meaning of right and wrong, the groups will endeavor to eliminate values that others are trying to preserve, agreeing only that society is in *moral crisis*.

Europe's moral transformation that culminated in the Protestant Reformation offers an example of a moral crisis solved through intense political struggles over the definition of good and evil. As Nathan Rosenberg and L. E. Birdzell (1986, Ch. 4), Albert Hirschman (1977), and others have discussed, the expansion of European trade in the late Medieval era made it increasingly difficult for traders to live by the economic morality of the Church. They were forming attachments to economic enterprises based less and less on small-group solidarity and increasingly on individual profit; yet the Church continued to define economic virtue in terms of the pursuit of group benefits and to treat economic success as a reflection of character defects. The consequent moral dissonance fueled the political contest that spawned the Reformation. Although certain Reformation leaders fought to strengthen Church dogma on economic matters, it ended up legitimizing the rapidly spreading economic practices, enabling producers and traders to carry on their activities without developing guilt.

European struggles over defining economic virtue did not end, of course, with the Reformation. Even today, all branches of Christianity harbor strains hostile to economic individualism. And pressure groups formed primarily for economic reasons, like socialist parties of the industrial era, have pursued anti-individualist moral agendas as part of their political strategies.<sup>9</sup> With their educational campaigns influencing both economic values and economic preferences, the result has been the aggravation of moral dissonance related to economic behavior – the opposite

<sup>8</sup> This mitigating factor exists in other contexts, too. For a general analysis, see Hardin (1982, Ch. 5).

<sup>9</sup> Anti-individualism has taken two forms: communalism and collectivism. Oakeshott ([1958] 1993) contrasts them with individualism.

of what the Reformation achieved. The depiction of capitalists as “blood-suckers” serves to preserve the questionable moral status of individual profit seeking, much like the 16th-century north European proverb that treated usurers, millers, bankers, and tax farmers as “the four evangelists of Lucifer.”<sup>10</sup>

For another example of a moral crisis that has occasioned attempts and counterattempts at moral reconstruction, let us move to the Islamic world. Ever since it became clear that the West had overtaken Islamic civilization militarily and economically, efforts to emulate the West’s economic productivity have kept Muslims in touch with Western values, including individualism. Given Islam’s communalist tendencies, a lasting consequence has been widespread moral dissonance, as in Europe in earlier times. Indeed, for over a century, diverse writers have characterized Islamic civilization as suffering from a moral crisis rooted in incongruities between, on the one hand, certain traditional values associated with Islam and, on the other, some of the new values derived from contacts with the West.<sup>11</sup> The crisis has generated competing attempts to discard one set of values as a means of strengthening the status of the other. Atatürk in Turkey, the Pahlavis in Iran, and Bourgiba in Tunisia sought to lessen inner conflicts through Westernization. By contrast, Iran’s Khomeini endeavored to draw Muslims away from the West; when he quipped that “the Iranian revolution was not made to make watermelons more plentiful,” he meant that, as far as he was concerned, the revolution’s primary mission was moral and cultural rather than economic and political.<sup>12</sup> The struggle between the two camps, Westernizers and Islamists, continues to be fought throughout the Islamic world. The Westernizers accuse the Islamists of suffering from “Orientatis” – the disease of Eastern traditionalism. For their part, the Islamists portray the Westernizers as victims of “Occidentosis” – the malady of blind Westernism.<sup>13</sup>

My final example of moral reconstruction has accompanied the massive rise in the share of women in the paid workforce. This social transformation has unfolded over the past half-century against a background of

<sup>10</sup> I owe the last example to John Montias.

<sup>11</sup> For a statement by a prominent Islamist, see Maududi ([1940] 1985). Shayegan ([1989] 1992) offers similar observations from a Westernizer’s perspective. See Ayubi (1991, Chs. 2–3) for a comparative analysis.

<sup>12</sup> This was not an isolated remark. See my 1993 paper, pp. 303–8.

<sup>13</sup> For a spirited polemic against Occidentosis, see Al-Ahmad ([1964] 1982). Published in Iran, this book was banned by the Shah’s regime, which correctly saw itself under attack.

values that evolved in times when women tended to stay at home and carried primary responsibility for raising children. Working women have found it difficult to continue satisfying those values along with the new ones that they have acquired as professionals. In particular, they have found it emotionally draining, if not practically impossible, to reconcile the responsibilities of parenthood with those of pursuing a steady and serious career. Feminism has been one response to this moral crisis. Various strands of feminism have promoted moral reconstruction in seeking to legitimize childcare outside the home, calling for husbands to assume greater household duties, trying to make the professions gender-neutral, and seeking to eradicate moral obstacles to abortion. As in previous examples, there have been countercampaigns. Certain conservative religions have tried to reinvigorate traditional values and delegitimize the new ones.<sup>14</sup> Intellectuals who recognize the genetic foundations of human values are cautioning that psychological differences between the sexes, including differences in aggression and cognitive skills, make the feminist agenda infeasible.<sup>15</sup> And within feminism itself, a submovement is promoting the view that women deserve professional advancement not because their abilities are identical to those of men but because they are not.

If several values are jointly causing moral overload, the problem can be lightened by eliminating one or more elements of the system. This form of reconstruction constitutes *uniform simplification*. A less extreme form of reconstruction, *variable simplification*, involves limiting the situations to which each value applies. An extreme form of variable simplification is *moral compartmentalization*, which relegates the incompatible values to separate spheres of activity. Moral compartmentalization can be *contextual*, as when a person feels bound by one set of values at work and another at home. It can be *temporal*, as when one feels obligated to abide by religious precepts on certain days, feeling free to ignore them on others. It can also be *locational*, as when one considers it acceptable to litter the sidewalk when walking in a rundown neighborhood but not when walking in a posh part of town.

For moral compartmentalization to work, a person must be able to par-

<sup>14</sup> Focusing on the United States, Hunter (1991, especially Ch. 7) offers many insights into the struggle over gender roles. He makes a convincing case that this struggle has contributed to a major realignment in American politics. See also Haeri (1992) and Hardacre (1992) for complementary observations.

<sup>15</sup> Popenoe (1995) argues that in weakening the father's duty to provide for his family feminism has strained the institution of marriage and harmed children.

tition his choices into mutually exclusive domains that invoke different values or sets of values. The task might be impossible if others are behaving in ways that do not respect one's chosen compartments. If Muslim Cairenes tend to interrupt their work for afternoon prayers, the individual Muslim employee will find it harder to consider his worship obligations met by attending mosque services just once a week on Friday. Encountering daily evidence of his religious lapses, he will experience moral dissonance. By contrast, if his fellow employees are all avoiding public religious displays, he will find it relatively easy to treat his work as free of religious significance. This observation is supported by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's (1984) finding that the "framing" of choices has consequences. Just as an individual's willingness to pay for a therapy depends on whether its outcome is described in terms of mortality or survival, his perceived religious obligations during work hours will reflect the apparent values of his officemates.

Uniform and variable moral simplifications sometimes serve as complementary, rather than rival, forms of moral reconstruction. One can discard some of the values within a burdensome moral system, relegating the rest to compartmentalized domains. As a case in point, Atatürk's secularization campaign used a combination of repression and education to restructure Turkish Islam. For example, it employed state-approved sermons and manuals to promote an interpretation of Islam compatible with expanding women's rights. At the same time, it treated religion as irrelevant beyond the personal sphere; the workplace, for instance, was to be free of religious displays. Islamists have been disputing both the revisionist interpretation of Islam and the restrictions on its domain of authority.

### Implications for social forecasting and explanation

I have not provided a comprehensive account of the mechanisms that alleviate moral dissonance. A morally troubled society could also respond by splitting into several societies with separate moral systems, thus allowing its members to lighten their moral loads in diverse ways. This response, *social segmentation*, might unfold when multiple moral reforms are being advanced and individuals differ in their predispositions toward the form of resolution. For it to succeed, contacts across the new, smaller societies must be minimal; otherwise, individual exposure to dissonance-increasing values would remain substantial. Where subsocieties with dif-

ferent moral systems are already in existence, the segmentation can also be accomplished through individual escape. Morally overburdened people, hoping to simplify their personal moral systems, might move to a subsociety whose dominant values appear more manageable than their own.<sup>16</sup> A fuller analysis of moral dissonance reduction would address such additional possibilities<sup>17</sup> and draw out their implications. One implication is that some forms of structural complexity make it easier to cope with moral diversity; another is that the happiness of a person with a given moral history will depend on the moral discourse to which he gets exposed.

But even the limited analysis of the preceding two sections captures the factors essential to the implications to be drawn in this concluding section. The multiplicity of the mechanisms for lightening moral dissonance complicates the task of forecasting the resolution of moral dissonance. One obstacle to sound prediction is that the mechanisms for lightening moral dissonance can undermine one another, reducing their total effect below the sum of their parts. Campaigns to create redemption opportunities may weaken the effectiveness of moral reconstruction efforts. In particular, individuals subjected to incessant calls to do penance for behaviors characterized as sinful may become resistant to the countermesssage that those behaviors are perfectly ethical. Likewise, escape can undermine moral reconstruction by reducing the size of its natural constituency. If individuals most likely to support the elimination of a certain value decide instead to emigrate, the constituency for this moral reconstruction will be that much smaller.<sup>18</sup>

Another obstacle to prediction is that the various determinants of moral dissonance interact with those of expressive dissonance. Mechanisms that reduce expressive dissonance may end up aggravating, even generating, certain forms of moral dissonance, and vice versa. Every society produces abundant issues on which some people's private preferences come into conflict with those of others; attempts to resolve the clashes generate social pressures that result in preference falsification. The falsification produces expressive dissonance, and it also distorts the relevant public discourse, including its moral component. If this public discourse then remains es-

<sup>16</sup> Escape is a form of selective exposure predicated on the dependence of personal values on social influences.

<sup>17</sup> Some further observations are made in Kuran (forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> The argument is analogous to Hirschman's (1970) insight that "exit" often weakens "voice."

entially undisturbed for a sufficiently long time, the values that it promotes may get widely internalized. These values may well conflict with other common values, so an unintended byproduct of the internalization process might be new forms of moral dissonance. The same outcome could arise, of course, if revolt rather than internalization were the mechanism for alleviating expressive dissonance. The consequent change in public discourse could promote values that clash with preexisting ones.

The moral crisis that results from either internalization or revolt will produce, in turn, a new set of political struggles. To reduce moral dissonance, efforts will be made to reinterpret certain values, even to discard them altogether. Struggles will arise over the form of moral reconstruction, and the consequent social pressures may drive certain values underground. We have now come full circle, with politically induced expressive dissonance fueling moral dissonance, and with attempts to alleviate moral dissonance then generating expressive dissonance. Such a circular process may carry on indefinitely, especially if natural events, innovations, and cross-societal contacts are constantly reshaping individual utility functions. New sources of dissonance will generate reactions that create further sources, even as they extinguish others.

Circularity always complicates prediction. If every element within a system affects other elements, and those others produce feedback effects, the information necessary for knowing the long-term consequences of a given perturbation is enormous. Circularity does not mean, however, that political struggles must remain resistant to analysis. Observers with a good sense of the relevant social mechanisms can identify a society's politically sensitive issues; they can distinguish between public statements that bring rewards and ones that bring punishments; and if a political taboo suddenly vanishes, they can make sense of both the speed and the surprise. Likewise, if large numbers end up internalizing a value that public discourse has long favored, knowledgeable observers will understand the role that public discourse has played. They will also understand the incompatibilities responsible for a moral crisis. From the writings, goals, and pronouncements of the participants in moral struggles, they will be able to determine what is at stake for people's inner lives.

It is one thing to understand the social mechanisms at play, and quite another to make accurate forecasts of a social system's evolution. Many participants in the struggles over Church teachings knew what they were fighting for, and they understood what their efforts could accomplish. But

they had no way of knowing how Europe's economic morality would actually evolve. The same point can be made with respect to the ongoing struggles over gender roles and over Islam's domain. The participants in these contests understand the immediate implications of the moral agendas that they are defending as well as those of the ones they are opposing; but none can know how the struggles will be resolved, to say nothing of identifying the chain effects of their own efforts.

In earlier writings, I have pointed to two basic reasons why the outcomes of political struggles are inherently easier to explain than to predict. First, the imperfect observability of people's sensitivity to social pressures suppresses knowledge as to what it would take to change public opinion. And, second, the nonlinearity of the social effects of individual decisions means that changes and their consequences need not be proportionate; minor adjustments in individual behaviors might produce huge social shifts, just as major individual changes can leave social outcomes unaffected. This pair of observations rested on the fact that on politicized issues people commonly protect their reputations through preference falsification. We have limited access to people's inner worlds, yet their hidden motives are capable of producing huge consequences.

When two movements aim to solve a moral crisis in opposite ways, with one seeking to reinvigorate values that the other is trying to eradicate, how will the agendas resonate with any given group of individuals? And to what extent will a movement pursuing rationalization dampen the need for moral reconstruction? As a practical matter, confident answers to such questions cannot be given, because they call for information unknowable, except possibly by the individuals themselves. Even individuals may not have answers until actually presented with alternatives and compelled to make decisions. By definition, to experience moral dissonance is to feel committed to satisfying an infeasible moral system. Individuals may remain in this state indefinitely in the absence of social developments offering ways out. Until the solutions present themselves, they may not even consider ranking their values, hoping against hope to find a way to avoid unpleasant compromises.<sup>19</sup> The multiplicity of the social mechanisms that might come into play makes it all the more difficult to forecast individual responses.

<sup>19</sup> Slovic (1995) reviews a large literature that shows how personal preferences get constructed in the course of social interactions. Although this literature does not make this chapter's distinction between values and preferences, its insights are relevant to both.

The proposition that moral evolution is imperfectly predictable clashes with a large scientific literature that takes human preferences and values as essentially fixed. As a case in point, neoclassical economics treats individualistic profit maximization as an act that individuals universally consider legitimate. While recognizing that the act might get blocked through political means, it also asserts that the drive of profit maximization is constant. This neoclassical view overlooks the social factors shaping interpretations of what constitutes legitimate economic behavior. Moreover, it overlooks the possibility of clashes between the values of economic individualism and other human values. As such, it predicts that movements hostile to profit-oriented economic individualism must be ephemeral.

For another example, some thinkers consider the gender roles with which people feel comfortable to have been determined genetically. On this view, values in conflict with biologically natural gender roles cannot persist; such values will give way to ones sympathetic to the traditional division of labor between the sexes. Once again, the argument sketched here suggests, on the contrary, that poorly predictable social processes help shape individual values concerning proper gender roles. Insofar as the prevailing gender roles produce moral dissonance – or, for that matter, expressive dissonance – they will indeed be vulnerable to removal. But usually there is more than one way to achieve inner peace, so society's moral evolution will depend on the outcomes of struggles among groups with conflicting agendas. Moreover, individuals have a capacity to live indefinitely with some dissonance, whether expressive or moral. There is no sound basis, therefore, for believing that values contributing to inner turmoil must quickly self-destruct.

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