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“Moral licensing and supernatural sanctioning”

Abstract

Moral licensing is defined as behavior when “past good deeds can liberate individuals to engage in behaviors that are immoral, unethical, or otherwise problematic, behaviors that they would otherwise avoid for fear of feeling or appearing immoral.” (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). For economists, moral licensing opens the question whether moral behavior is guided by stable preferences, or should be seen as a path-dependent phenomenon, predicting individual oscillation between moral and immoral behavior. So far, the extent, size and contextual dependence of moral licensing has to remain open to discussion, as suggested by recent meta-studies and replication attempts (Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015; Blanken, van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Meijers, 2014). We therefore run a high powered incentivized online experiment on the Amazon Turk platform, addressing moral licensing of altruistic behavior. Altruism is measured in a give&take dictator game, and moral license is generated by a charity donation. Our study contributes to the few controlled experimental works on moral licensing in economics.