

Not all transgressions are equal in the eyes of a child. Asked to evaluate the permissibility of certain actions (hitting another child, or stealing a toy from her) young children are quick to judge these actions wrong. Their judgment does not change when it is made explicit that in these hypothetical scenarios there are no rules or authority figures condemning these particular actions. Even more tellingly, when asked about conventional transgressions, such as wearing pajamas in the classroom, they suddenly ground their judgment in the presence (or absence) of an explicit rule condemning that specific practice. Children (it seems) insist that harming another child is bad, no matter the circumstances, and the reason why they do so is not simply because they do not pay attention to contextual changes. In fact, by acknowledging that wearing a weird uniform in class would be acceptable in a world without rules against odd classroom uniforms, they give us reasons to think that they have different normative expectations for different moral domains.



Turiel and Smetana have been the main proponents of this idea. They argue that, when faced with examples of interpersonal harm, young children behave as moral autodidacts (Turiel, 2006) In other words, children's judgment about the wrongness of a harmful action does not depend upon the existence of a governing rule or a social norm. Moreover, as Nucci (2001) emphasizes, moral reasoning in this domain exhibit a cluster of other specific features, such as rule and act generalizability (it is considered wrong for members of other societies not to have a given rule condemning moral transgression as well as to engage in a harmful action, even if their society does not have a rule about it). While there is a general agreement with the contention that the prescriptive force of moral standards is perceived as objective and universal, Turiel's idea that such type of moral reasoning is exclusively deployed in the harm domain has spurred an ongoing controversy in moral psychology (see, for instance, two recent criticism of Turiel's distinction between moral and conventional transgressions by Haidt, 2012, and Rai & Fiske, 2011).

Taking Turiel's idea at face value, his theory naturally raises a question: How do children differentiate between the moral and the conventional domains? To find out, says Paul Harris, we should ask vegetarian children.

One possible answer is that preschoolers are particularly sensitive to others' signs of distress. They might use these cues to differentiate between moral and conventional transgressions. One piece of evidence to substantiate this claim comes from Smetana (1985). In her study, children were presented with stories in which they could see that a child was upset after her peer engaged in novel actions (referred to with unfamiliar words - "mibbing" or "fepping"). Children not only systematically judged that these actions were wrong. They also justified their claims by referring to the distress they caused in the other kid. Moreover, they held the same judgment even when they learned about the emotional impact of these actions only through testimony, for example, via a teacher's oral comment.

By combining these two conclusions, we can expect that if young children are told that something they do actually causes a good deal of suffering, they are likely to conclude that it is wrong, and they will cling to their beliefs even if authority figures such as parents or teachers allow the practice in question. The decision-making process looks elegantly simple. Children learn about the harmful consequences of certain actions, then they cast a moral verdict that is unlikely to be mitigated by whether the local normative system does not condemn that particular action. However, is there any reason to believe that children apply the same moral rules also outside the artificial world of hypothetical moral scenarios? With the help of Harris' detailed research on the rather small community of independent vegetarians (extensively covered in his [latest book](#)), I hope I will be able to persuade you that this is indeed the case - and that, at the same time, the picture is not as simple as we might assume.

"Independent vegetarians" are children who choose to become vegetarian even though they are being raised in meat-eating families. When asked why they refrained from eating a certain type of meat, [Hussar & Harris \(2010\)](#) found that independent vegetarians - IV from now on - predominantly mentioned considerations based on animal welfare. Meat eaters, in contrast, unsurprisingly referred to health and taste considerations alone. However, it is worth noting that animal welfare was a much more crucial issue for IVs even when compared to family vegetarians (children raised in vegetarian families). IVs really seem to base their dietary decision on moral grounds. However, there is a catch: all the three groups not only came to the same conclusions about the condemnation of harmful actions outside the meat-eating domain, but also within it. All the groups, IV included, were equally non-judgmental about meat-eating.

This is indeed an unexpected finding. If IVs thought of eating meat as causing animals to suffer, why didn't they condemn other people for doing so? One hypothesis advanced by Harris and Hussar is that IVs, and possibly all children in general, think of the decision to avoid meat as a kind of promise - if you made such a commitment, it is wrong for you to break it; otherwise, it's fine. Moreover, the authors reasoned, a morally committed person who breaks her promise not to eat meat should be condemned more harshly than a person who has reneged on a personal commitment. And this is exactly what they found: all the three groups, meat-eaters and vegetarians alike, agreed that someone who had made a moral commitment to avoid eating meat would be maximally wrong to eat it. This means, as Harris rightly noted (2012), that young vegetarians are not unusual in their views about moral commitment - they are unusual only in having made that commitment in the first place.

However, despite the clarity of the hypothesis, this view of morality begets an enigma. In the case of moral obligation we do not usually exonerate the uncommitted - just imagine condoning a rapist because, as he just swore to us, he never bound himself to respect women! Therefore, why are IVs not morally outraged by others' inveterate meat-eating habits? Perhaps, as Harris suggests, they think of their own abstinence from meat as an action that goes beyond the call of duty - a supererogatory action, as a philosopher would say. However, even if this interpretation can help us making sense of why they do not condemn meat-eaters (while still thinking that their dietary choice is a morally worthwhile decision) there are other considerations that do not fit so easily in this picture. Recall that IVs frame their decision in utilitarian terms: they abstain from meat-eating because this practice results in avoidable animal suffering. Precisely because of this moral framing - the utilitarian argument goes - vegetarianism, rather than being a laudatory extra, should be considered an imperative, something anyone who intends to minimize suffering should commit to.

Harris' last theoretical move to solve this puzzle is to assume that IVs' tolerance towards meat-eaters rests on the fact that these young vegetarians realize from very early on that they are a minority in a population that did not make any commitment to avoid meat. To use Harris' example (chapter VII), we do condemn liars regardless of whether they committed themselves to truth-telling or not, but we seldom meet people who profess no commitment to telling truth and who make a daily

habit of lying. By contrast, we see every day people who made no commitment to vegetarianism and who make a daily habit of eating meat. According to this argument, it is the peculiar condition of being a lone dissenter in the moral landscape that produces this commitment-based view of moral obligations and the tolerant attitude toward those who eschew a particular commitment.

But, even if Harris' suggestive hypothesis is right, here I'm left puzzling over a bunch of implications that he did not address. First, how do we conceptualize children's tolerance? Is it a sort of consensus-sensitive strategic moral attitude, which is expected to morph into universal moral condemnation as soon as vegetarianism becomes the majority's dietary choice? Does this commitment-based view have anything specific to do with the meat-eating domain? If not, given the ongoing fragmentation of moral communities that characterizes affluent Western societies (as the USA, which the sample of young vegetarians studied by Hussar and Harris is from), shouldn't we expect a progressive extension of this type of moral reasoning also in other domains where there is no clear-cut consensus? Moreover, how do young IVs rationalize (if they do it at all) the fact that their utilitarian reasoning would lead them to normative conclusions that do not justify their permissiveness toward other people's eating habits? And why on Earth would they condemn a person who did not manage to live up to a resolution, but at least shares their very same moral viewpoint? On the other hand, why would they spare a person who plainly disregards animal welfare?

Finally, from a more strictly cognitive perspective, how do children detect moral violators using this commitment-based morality? If we all agree that killing is bad, no matter what, then we can simply decide to base our condemnations on people's behaviors. But moral commitments, contrarily to actions, are quite invisible. And since we do not bear a scarlet letter to indicate our moral status (vegetarians, vegan, or straight-edge) how is a preschooler to find out the morally questionable individuals who broke their commitment? This is especially the case for vegetarians, as they do not constitute a community with specific cultural markers that would help children to identify them (I have in mind a random sample of the urban population, not West-Coast hippies). Moreover, even assuming that children come to know each and every individual commitment of their fellow community members, how can they manage to keep track of this cognitively cumbersome number of personal moral files?

P.S. This post was mostly based on the chapter VII of Paul Harris' latest book, "Trusting What You're Told. How Children Learn from Others". It is a page-turning, thought-provoking reading. I recommend it.