Between Law and Conscience: Act Legality Shapes Moral Evaluation

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Draft version November 19, 2025. This manuscript has not yet been peer reviewed.

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Abstract

Does the legal status of an action shape how morally wrong people judge it to be? Across three experiments ($N = 1,226$), participants judged actions labeled as "illegal" to be more morally wrong than identical actions labeled as "not illegal." This effect extended beyond judgments of actions to shape perceptions of the moral character of those performing them and proved robust across manipulations of agent intentionality and type of law-making process. Participants rated actions labeled as "illegal" as more morally wrong even when agents broke the law unintentionally and when laws were imposed by a totalitarian government. In Experiments 1 and 2, act legality exerted the strongest influence among participants who viewed respect for authority as a moral good. We forward an account in which individuals use an action's legal status as a heuristic cue when making moral evaluations. Together, these findings suggest that legal frameworks not only mirror citizens' moral attitudes but can also actively shape them.

Keywords: morality, law, moral judgment, authority, heuristics and biases

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From ancient thinkers to modern psychological theories, moral judgments have been profoundly influenced by philosophical, religious, and scientific thought (e.g., Cicero, 2016; Harris, 2010). Beyond abstract moral musings, concrete legal frameworks may similarly guide moral views. In many ways, laws can be seen as society's attempt to codify moral principles to ensure order, justice, and well-being. Laws not only reflect moral standards but may, over time, shape moral perceptions by delineating boundaries around what is and is not acceptable. Prior work reveals that legal outcomes often mirror the prevailing moral *zeitgeist* to maintain public support, with many landmark Supreme Court rulings serving as examples of this alignment (Brace & Boyea, 2008; McGuire & Stimson, 2004). These findings suggest that a legal system's legitimacy hinges, at least in part, on its congruence with prevailing moral sentiments (Casillas et al., 2010; Durr et al., 2000). When legal decisions contradict the modal citizen's moral convictions, the legitimacy of the law can be challenged (Skitka et al., 2009). According to Klarman (2004), judges "rarely hold views that deviate far from dominant public opinion" (p. 6). Consistent with this claim, changes in public opinion have been shown to influence Supreme Court rulings in both the short- and long-term, even when controlling for the impact of broadly influential social forces (e.g., the current political climate; Casillas et al., 2010). Thus, citizens' moral beliefs may not only guide legal judgments, but serve as a benchmark against which the law's legitimacy is measured.

Nevertheless, there are cases in which notable legal judgments diverge from the moral sentiments of the average citizen. For example, most Americans (57%) disagreed with the Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade (Pew Research Center, 2022a), with 61% of Americans stating that abortion should be legal in all or most cases immediately prior to this

landmark ruling (Pew Research Center, 2022b). Regardless of public support (or lack thereof), one may wonder the extent to which legal judgments shape the moral beliefs of citizens.

From Morality to Legality and Back: Do Legal Judgments Shape Moral Perceptions?

Studies investigating the impact of Supreme Court decisions on public opinion have produced mixed results (Christenson & Glick, 2015; Clark et al., 2024; Egan & Citrin, 2011; Marshall, 1987; Tankard & Paluck, 2017; Unger, 2008). For example, Unger (2008) found that knowledge of a Supreme Court decision shifted peoples' attitudes in a direction consistent with the Court's decision in one case but in the opposite direction in another. Tankard and Paluck (2017) showed that the Court's 2015 decision supporting same-sex marriage altered perceptions of social norms in line with the ruling, yet did not impact individuals' personal attitudes. Examining the Court's more recent decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, Clark and colleagues (2024) found that the ruling shaped individuals' personal beliefs about the legality of abortion in a manner consistent with the decision, shifted perceptions of social norms away from the decision, and did not affect judgments about the morality of abortion.

One explanation for these inconsistent findings is that media framing of Supreme Court decisions varies widely, shaping how citizens interpret and respond to such rulings (Clawson & Waltenburg, 2003). This variability underscores the need for controlled experiments that isolate the causal impact of legal judgments on attitude change. Supporting this approach, Bartels and Mutz (2009) demonstrated that participants informed of the Supreme Court's endorsement of a policy position (e.g., support for federal laws that require affirmative action programs) reported stronger endorsement-consistent attitudes than those who were not shown this message. Taken together, these findings suggest that when the confounding influences of real-world contexts are minimized, the legality of an action or policy can shape peoples' attitudes toward it.

How might the high-profile legal decisions of Supreme Court justices impact the moral beliefs of citizens? To the extent that people view the law as legitimate, the legality of an act may serve as a heuristic cue guiding the evaluation of morally ambiguous behaviour. By describing legality as a heuristic, we mean that individuals may substitute the more complex and uncertain question of "*is this act morally wrong?*" with the simpler, binary question of "*is this act illegal?*" (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Stanovich, 2018). Many actions are not universally moralized; they may be ambiguous or culturally contested, making direct moral evaluation challenging and effortful. In such cases, an act's legal status offers a cognitively efficient, easily accessible cue, allowing individuals to substitute their own moral reasoning with the judgments of legal decision-makers. This heuristic cue may be especially influential for individuals who view deference to authority as a moral virtue (Graham et al., 2011), as, for these individuals, disobeying the law—regardless of the action performed—may, in itself, be seen as immoral. Consistent with this theorized influence of legal status on moral evaluation, Barbosa and Jimenez-Leal (2017) found that participants judged actions taken in sacrificial dilemmas as less moral when they were described as having significant legal consequences (i.e., a four year jail sentence) compared to when unaccompanied by such consequences (see also Zeev-Wolf & Mentovich, 2021).

The Present Research

Previous research examining the influence of legal decisions on moral attitudes has produced mixed results. The present work contributes to this literature by conducting three tightly controlled experiments that directly assess how the legality of an action shapes moral evaluations. In each experiment, participants read descriptions of ten morally relevant actions (see Table 1) performed by a person in a fictitious nation where the action was described as

either legal or illegal. For each action, participants judged the wrongness of the action and the moral character of the person performing it. By experimentally isolating the role of act legality, this research offers new insights into how the legal status of an action influences moral evaluations of both actions and the individuals who perform them.

Intentionality plays an important role in both legal and moral judgment (Cushman, 2008; Hart & Honoré, 1985; Fletcher, 1978; Malle et al., 2014; Young & Saxe, 2011). As such, in Experiment 2, we manipulated whether individuals who performed illegal actions did so with or without intent, allowing us to assess the extent to which the purposeful flouting of laws—as opposed to an action's legal status alone—shapes moral judgment. Moreover, the extent to which an action's legal status serves as a useful heuristic cue for moral evaluations should depend on the perceived legitimacy of the law-making process. Therefore, in Experiment 3, we manipulated whether the legality of actions was determined by a democratic or totalitarian government, thereby varying the degree of citizen involvement in the law-making process and allowing us to assess whether government type moderated the relationship between legal status and moral judgment. Finally, in each experiment, we assessed the extent to which participants viewed respect for authority as a moral good (Graham et al., 2011), allowing us to examine whether the hypothesized influence of legal status on moral evaluation varied according to the extent to which participants viewed respect for authority as a moral virtue.

Transparency and Openness

For all experiments, we collected the full sample prior to data analyses and report all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures used. Study materials can be viewed in the supplementary materials (Part A). All data and analyses scripts are publicly available on Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/project). Experiments 1, 2, and 3 were preregistered through

Open Science Framework. These pre-registrations can be viewed via the following links:

Experiment 1; Experiment 2; Experiment 3. There were minor deviations from each

preregistration (see Supplementary Materials Part B).

Table 1. Vignettes Presented in Experiments 1-3

1.	A person goes to the nation of Costaguana. During their time there, this person attends festivities and enjoys smoking a joint.
2.	A person goes to the nation of Laputa, and during a conversation, speaks profanely about God.
3.	A person goes swimming in a public pool while on vacation in the nation of Ambrosia and urinates in the pool during their swim.
4.	A person takes a trip to the nation of Angria and partakes in weeklong protests. One night, they burn the flag of Angria.
5.	A person goes to the nation of Tazbekistan for vacation. While there, they have sex with someone they newly meet.
6.	A person goes to the nation of Erewhon. While there, this person refers to someone by a racial slur.
7.	A person goes to the nation of Avalen to hunt deer, which are abundant in the country.
8.	A person and their newborn child go to the nation of Zembla. While at a public park, this person breastfeeds their baby.
9.	A person goes to the nation of Yejano. When visiting a religious temple, this person dresses provocatively.
10.	A person takes a trip to the nation of Tanbourg and goes grocery shopping to buy snacks. When finished, they abandon the shopping cart on the street, halfway between the store and their hotel.

Note. Vignettes described actions that could plausibly be deemed legal or illegal in a variety of countries. Within each experiment, we manipulated the legal status of the described actions and had participants judge the morality of actions and the individuals performing them. Note, all nations implicated in these vignettes were fictitious to avoid preconceived notions about a country and their laws.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

For all experiments, we conducted a power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al.,

2009) to guide decisions related to sample size. To detect a small effect ($f = .20$) with 80% power

at a significance level of .05, we required at least 200 participants. Across experiments, we oversampled to account for outliers and exclusions. A sample of 508 participants was recruited from a Canadian university's psychology research participant pool. Consistent with our pre-registered intent, we excluded participants ($n = 231$) who failed to correctly respond to a comprehension check question. Notably, this exclusion criterion did not change the interpretation of any significance tests.[1] An additional 49 participants did not provide any responses in one or both experimental blocks and thus could not be included in analyses. Following exclusions, our final sample consisted of 228 participants (80% Female, $M_{age} = 20.25$, $SD_{age} = 3.61$; 43% White/Caucasian). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect a small effect ($d = 0.19$) for the conducted paired-samples t-tests ($\alpha = .05$).

Materials and Measures

We generated 10 vignettes, each of which described an individual performing a morally relevant action within a fictitious nation (see Table 1). We referred to fictitious nations to avoid biases about existing countries and their laws. These vignettes were used across all three experiments. In Experiment 1, each vignette included a statement that described the legality of an action (e.g., "Law: Burning the national flag is [**illegal/not illegal**] in Angria"), constituting our manipulation of each action's legal status. For each presented vignette participants made two judgments: one regarding the morality of the action described and the other regarding the moral character of the person performing it. Specifically, participants were asked "how morally wrong is this act?" and responded on a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (Not at all wrong) to 7 (Very wrong). Likewise, participants were asked "how would you judge this person's moral

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[1] For example, legal status was shown to impact moral evaluations of both actions and people when including participants who failed the comprehension check in our analyses (both $p < .001$).

character?", responding to this question using a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (Extremely immoral) to 7 (Extremely moral).

Moral Foundations Questionnaire

Participants completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011), a 30-item measure assessing five domains of moral concern: harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity. Given our focus on act legality, we centered our analyses on the authority domain. Within this domain, participants rated the moral relevance of three items (e.g., "Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority") on a scale from 1 (not at all relevant) to 6 (extremely relevant) and indicated their agreement with three statements (e.g., "Respect for authority is something all children need to learn") on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Responses to these six items were averaged to create each participant's *Authority* score, with higher values indicating a stronger belief that respect for authority is a moral virtue.

Design and Procedure

Experiment 1 used a within-subject design whereby participants completed two experimental blocks: One presenting five vignettes describing actions that were said to be legal and another presenting five vignettes describing actions that were said to be illegal. The legal status ascribed to vignettes was randomized. The order of presentation of each block (legal first or illegal first) was counterbalanced. After providing two moral judgments (see *Measures*) to all ten vignettes participants concluded Experiment 1 by completing the MFQ and answering six demographic questions.

Results and Discussion

The legal status of actions shaped moral judgments (see Figure 1). Participants viewed actions as less morally wrong when they were performed in a country in which they were legal ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.00$) as opposed to illegal ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(227) = 8.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.72].[2] Furthermore, the influence of legal status was not constrained to judgments of actions, but also guided moral evaluations of the individuals performing them. That is, despite being described as performing the same act, agents were judged to possess a more favorable moral character when the action they performed was legal ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.74$) compared to illegal ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(227) = 4.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.32$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.45]. In sum, Experiment 1 provides initial evidence that legal status shapes how people evaluate the morality of actions and the individuals engaging in them.

Figure 1

*Experiment 1: Moral Evaluations by Legal Status*

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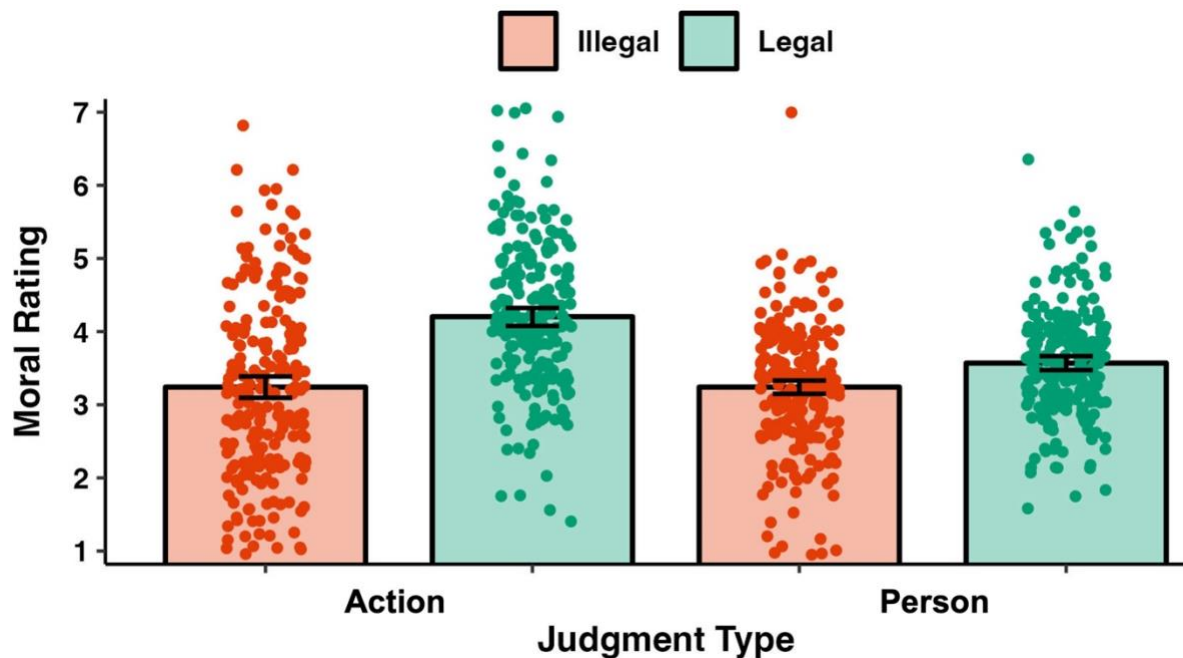
[2] This effect was consistent at the item-level: each action was judged as less moral when described as illegal rather than legal, with differences reaching statistical significance for 8 out of the 10 actions ($ps < .009$, $ds > 0.34$).

Note. Bars illustrate the mean moral evaluations of participants for actions described as illegal (red) or not illegal (green). Judgment Type indicates whether the moral evaluation was directed at the action or the person performing it. Action judgments were reverse coded so that higher scores represent greater perceived morality across both judgment types. Dots indicate the mean moral evaluations for individual participants. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Respect for Authority Moderates the Influence of Act Legality on Moral Evaluations

We next examined whether individual differences in respect for authority, as measured by MFQ items, moderated the effect of an action's legal status on moral evaluations. We conducted mixed-effects models with legality (0 = Legal, 1 = Illegal), MFQ authority score, and their interaction as predictors, including a random intercept for subject to account for individual variability in moral evaluations. These analyses revealed a legality by authority interaction for judgments of actions, $\beta = 0.21$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.39], $t = 2.34$, $p = .020$, *Marginal R^2* = .211, but not the agents performing them, $\beta = -0.09$, 95% CI [-0.27, 0.09], $t = -1.01$, $p = .313$, *Marginal R^2* = .062. These findings indicate that act legality does not shape the moral evaluations of all individuals equally, with the difference between judgments of legal and illegal actions increasing as participants' respect for authority grew (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Experiment 1: Legality by Authority Interaction
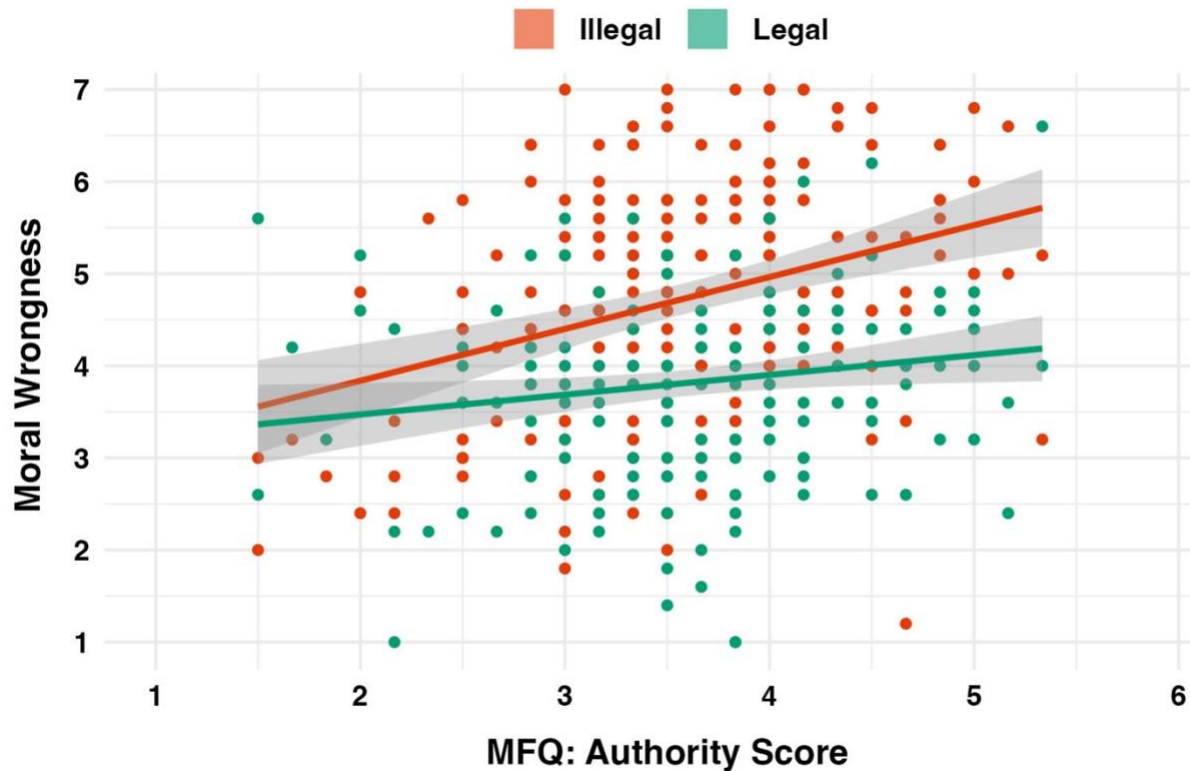
Note. Figure depicts the linear relationship between participants' Authority score on the MFQ and their judgments of moral wrongness for illegal (red) and legal (green) actions. Dots represent the Authority score and mean moral wrongness judgments of individual participants.

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 demonstrated that act legality influences moral evaluations. In a second experiment, we aimed to replicate and extend this finding by manipulating not only the legal status of actions but also the intent behind agents' law-breaking. Intentionality plays a significant role in both legal and moral judgment (Cushman, 2008; Young and Saxe, 2011). For example, the distinction between murder and manslaughter is based on whether the perpetrator intended to cause severe harm. As such, in Experiment 2, we examined whether the intentions behind illegal actions modulate the effect of illegality on moral judgments.

Method

Participants

A sample of 352 participants was recruited from a Canadian university's psychology research participant pool. Consistent with pre-registered exclusion criterion, we excluded data from 100 participants who failed a comprehension check question. These exclusions did not alter the interpretation of any significance tests, with one exception: agents who unintentionally broke the law were no longer judged as possessing a worse moral character than those performing the same actions in a nation where the actions were legal. Two participants did not respond to experimental trials and thus could not be included in analyses. Following exclusions, the final sample included 250 participants (77% Female, M_{age} = 20.16, SD_{age} = 3.59; 38% White/Caucasian). Sensitivity power analyses indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect a small effect (f = 0.20, η^2_p = 0.04) for the conducted one-way ANOVA (α = .05) and a small-to-medium effect (d = 0.44) for follow-up independent-samples t-tests.

Materials and Measures

The materials and measures used in Experiment 2 were identical to those used in Experiment 1 with one exception: actions that were described as illegal were now accompanied by an additional statement that described the intentionality of the individual breaking the law (e.g., "assume this person broke the law [**intentionally/unintentionally**]"). No such statement accompanied actions that were said to be legal in the nation they were performed.

Design and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three between-subject conditions (Legal, Intentional, Unintentional). In the Legal condition, actions described in each vignette were accompanied by an explicit statement indicating that they were "not illegal" in the nation in

which they were performed. Conversely, in both the Intentional and Unintentional conditions, all actions were said to be illegal. However, these conditions differed with regards to whether agents were described as breaking the law intentionally or unintentionally. Regardless of condition, all participants were presented with ten vignettes in a random order and, for each vignette, judged the morality of an action and the moral character of the person performing it. Participants concluded Experiment 2 by responding to the MFQ and demographic questions.

Results and Discussion

There was a main effect of condition on participants' action judgments, $F(2, 247) = 30.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .199$ (see Figure 3). Consistent with Experiment 1, illegal actions were judged as more morally wrong than legal actions ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.83$), regardless of whether the agent performing the action was described as intentionally ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 0.98$), $t(159) = 8.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.26$, 95% CI [0.92, 1.60], or unintentionally ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(166) = 4.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$, 95% CI [0.41, 1.04], breaking the law.[3] Nevertheless, intentionality did influence judgments of moral wrongness: actions were seen as more morally wrong when agents intentionally broke the law compared to when they did so unintentionally, $t(169) = 3.26$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.50$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.80].

There was also a main effect of condition on judgments of moral character, $F(2, 247) = 15.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .112$. Agents who performed an illegal action were viewed as less moral than those performing the same action in a country where it was not illegal ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.68$), regardless of whether the agent breaking the law did so intentionally ($M = 3.15$, $SD =$

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[3] This effect was again evident at the item level. For example, across all vignettes, actions were judged as less moral when agents broke the law intentionally than when the same actions were described as "not illegal," with differences reaching statistical significance for 7 of the 10 actions ($ps < .041$, $ds > 0.33$). Although comparisons between legal actions and unintentional illegal actions were somewhat less consistent, this pattern was not driven by a small subset of items, with significant differences being observed for 5 of the 10 actions ($ps < .026$, $ds > 0.35$).

0.73), $t(159) = 5.15$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.81$, 95% *CI* [0.49, 1.13], or unintentionally ($M = 3.53$, *SD* =

0.58), $t(166) = 1.98$, $p = .049$, $d = 0.31$, 95% *CI* [0.01, 0.61]. Thus, as in Experiment 1, the legal

status of actions influenced how participants perceived the moral character of agents performing

them. Intentionality also affected judgments of moral character: agents unintentionally breaking

the law were judged as more moral than those who broke the law intentionally, $t(169) = 3.79$, $p <$

.001, $d = 0.58$, 95% *CI* [0.27, 0.89]. In sum, despite actions being identical across conditions,

participants' moral evaluations were shaped by both act legality and agent intentionality.

Notably, even agents who broke the law unintentionally were judged as having a worse moral

character than those performing the same actions in a country where they were legal,

highlighting the impact of act legality on moral judgments.

Figure 3

Experiment 2: Moral Evaluations by Condition
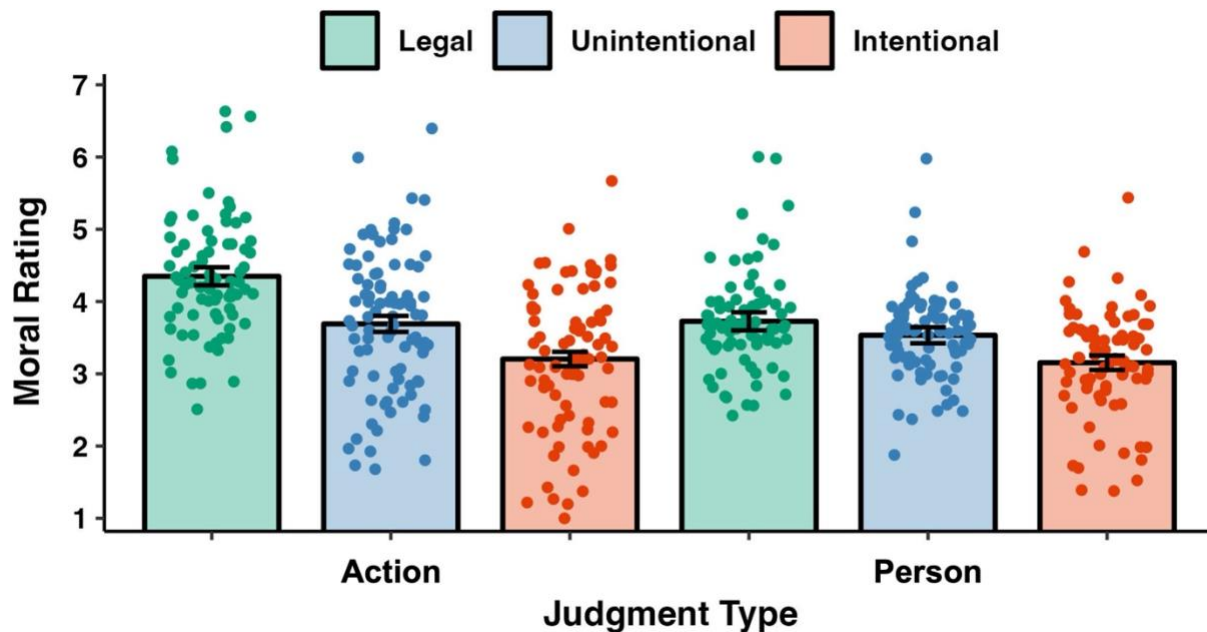

Note. Bars illustrate the mean moral evaluations of participants in Legal (green), Unintentional (blue), and Intentional (red) conditions. Action judgments were reverse coded so that higher scores indicate greater perceived morality across Judgment Type. Dots represent the mean moral evaluations of individual participants. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Respect for Authority Moderates the Influence of Act Legality on Moral Evaluations

We again examined whether individual differences in respect for authority moderated the effect of experimental condition on moral evaluations. Regression analyses featuring condition (0 = Legal, 1 = Unintentional, and 2 = Intentional), MFQ authority score, and their interaction as predictors of moral judgment revealed a significant condition (Legal vs. Intentional) by authority interaction for judgments of action wrongness, β = 0.33, 95% *CI* [0.07, 0.59], *t* = 2.53, *p* = .012, *Adjusted R^2* = .398, but not agent moral character, β = -0.27, 95% *CI* [-0.56, 0.03], *t* = -1.79, *p* = .074, *Adjusted R^2* = .235. Consistent with Experiment 1, the effect of condition was stronger among participants who endorsed stronger authority-related moral concerns (see Figure 4). Thus, Experiment 2 provides further evidence that the impact of act legality on moral evaluations is most pronounced among individuals who view respect for authority as a moral good.

Figure 4

Experiment 2: Condition by Authority Interaction
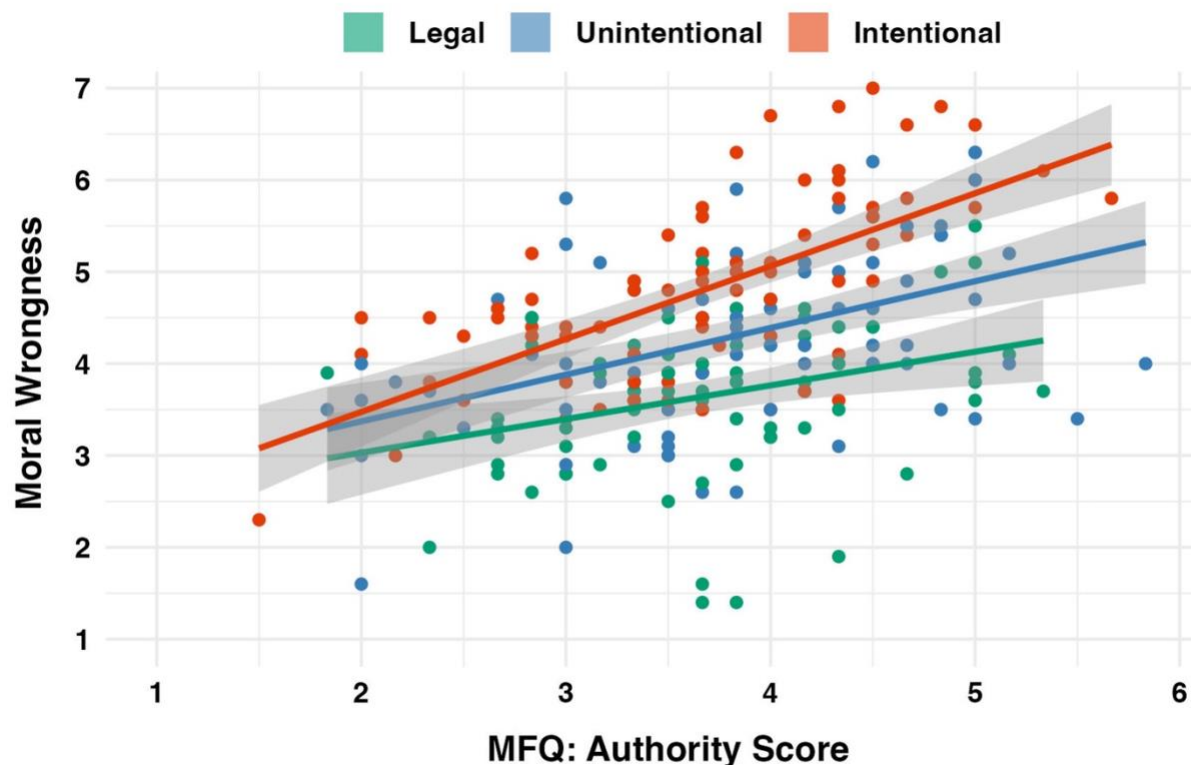
Note. Figure depicts the linear relationship between participants' Authority score on the MFQ and their judgments of moral wrongness within Legal (green), Unintentional (blue) and Intentional (red) conditions. Dots represent the Authority score and mean moral wrongness judgments of individual participants.

Experiment 3

The results of Experiments 1 and 2 were consistent with individuals using act legality as a heuristic cue when evaluating an action's moral wrongness and a person's moral character. However, the informativeness of an action's legal status, and consequently, its usefulness as a heuristic guide for moral evaluations, may depend on the idiosyncrasies of the law-making process. In Experiment 3, we manipulated not only the legal status of actions but also the process by which laws were created, varying whether they were enacted by democratically elected officials or imposed by a totalitarian government. This design allowed us to test whether the

influence of act legality on moral evaluations is restricted to democratic contexts in which

citizens contribute to the law-making process.

Method

Participants

A sample of 366 participants were recruited from a Canadian university's psychology

research participant pool. As in Experiments 1 and 2, we excluded participants ($n = 112$) who

incorrectly responded to a comprehension check question. This exclusion criterion did not

change the interpretation of any significance tests. Our final sample consisted of data from 254

participants (81% Female, $M_{age} = 20.64$, $SD_{age} = 4.68$; 46% White/Caucasian). Sensitivity power

analyses indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect ($\alpha = .05$): (a) a small-to-

medium between-subjects effect of Government ($d = 0.35$), (b) a small within-subjects effect of

Legality ($d = 0.18$), and (c) a small interaction effect in the mixed ANOVA ($f = 0.18$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$).

Materials and Measures

Instead of a statement describing the intentionality of individuals breaking the law (as in

Experiment 2), all vignettes, both legal and illegal, were accompanied by a statement providing

information about the law-making process in each nation. Specifically, participants randomly

assigned to the Totalitarian condition were presented the statement "The government is

totalitarian and power is inherited, such that people have no say in the laws" below each

vignette. Conversely, those assigned to the Democratic condition read, "The government is

democratically elected by the people it governs, giving them say over the laws." Apart from this

manipulation, the methodology of Experiment 3 mirrored that of Experiment 1: participants read

the same ten vignettes, experienced the same manipulation of act legality, and made the same

two moral judgments.

Design and Procedure

Experiment 3 employed a 2 (Legality: legal, illegal [within]) x 2 (Government: democratic, totalitarian [between]) mixed design. Participants were randomly assigned to either the Democratic or Totalitarian condition. Regardless of condition, all participants completed two experimental blocks: one presenting five vignettes describing legal actions and another presenting five vignettes describing illegal actions. The order of presentation of each block was counterbalanced and the legal status ascribed to each vignette was randomized. After providing two moral judgments to all ten vignettes, participants concluded Experiment 3 by responding to MFQ and demographic questions.

Results and Discussion

We examined the influence of Legality and Government on judgments of action wrongness using a 2 (Legality: legal, illegal [within]) x 2 (Government: democratic, totalitarian [between]) mixed ANOVA (see Figure 5). There was a main effect of Legality, $F(1, 252) = 105.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .295$. Replicating the results of Experiments 1 and 2, actions labeled as "illegal" ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.26$), were judged as more morally wrong than those labeled "not illegal" ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.04$).[4] We did not observe a main effect of Government, $F(1, 252) = 0.06$, $p = .803$, $\eta^2_p < .001$, nor a Legality by Government interaction, $F(1, 252) = 2.54$, $p = .113$, $\eta^2_p = .010$.[5] Illegal actions were seen as more morally wrong regardless if an action's legal status was determined by a democratic, $t(134) = 8.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.76$, 95% CI [0.57, 0.95], or totalitarian government, $t(118) = 5.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.73].

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[4] Again, this effect was consistently observed at the item-level. Collapsing across Government conditions, all actions were judged as less moral when labeled as "illegal" rather than "not illegal," with differences reaching statistical significance for 9 out of 10 actions ($ps < .042$, $ds > 0.26$).

[5] A multi-level model assessing the influence of act legality and government type on participants' evaluations of action wrongness did reveal a Legality by Government type interaction, $\beta = -0.17$, 95% CI [-0.32, -0.01], $t = -2.13$, $p = .034$, *Marginal* $R^2 = .051$, with act legality having a larger influence on moral judgment when laws were enacted by a democratic as opposed to totalitarian government (see Part C of the Supplementary Materials).

We conducted the same analyses for judgments of moral character. Again, we observed a main effect of Legality, $F(1, 252) = 31.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .110$. Agents who performed actions in countries where the action was "not illegal" were perceived as having a more favorable moral character ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.71$) than those performing the same actions in countries where the action was illegal ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.84$). There was no main effect of Government, $F(1, 252) = 0.14$, $p = .712$, $\eta^2_p = .001$, nor a Legality by Government interaction, $F(1, 252) = 0.26$, $p = .610$, $\eta^2_p = .001$. Agents were judged as less moral when performing actions deemed illegal regardless of whether legality was determined by a democratic, $t(134) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.53], or totalitarian government, $t(118) = 3.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.54]. Thus, we find evidence that the legal status of actions shapes individuals' moral perceptions of both actions and people, not only in democratic countries, but also in totalitarian nations in which citizens were explicitly described as having no input in the law-making process.

Figure 5

Experiment 3: Moral Evaluations by Legality and Government Type
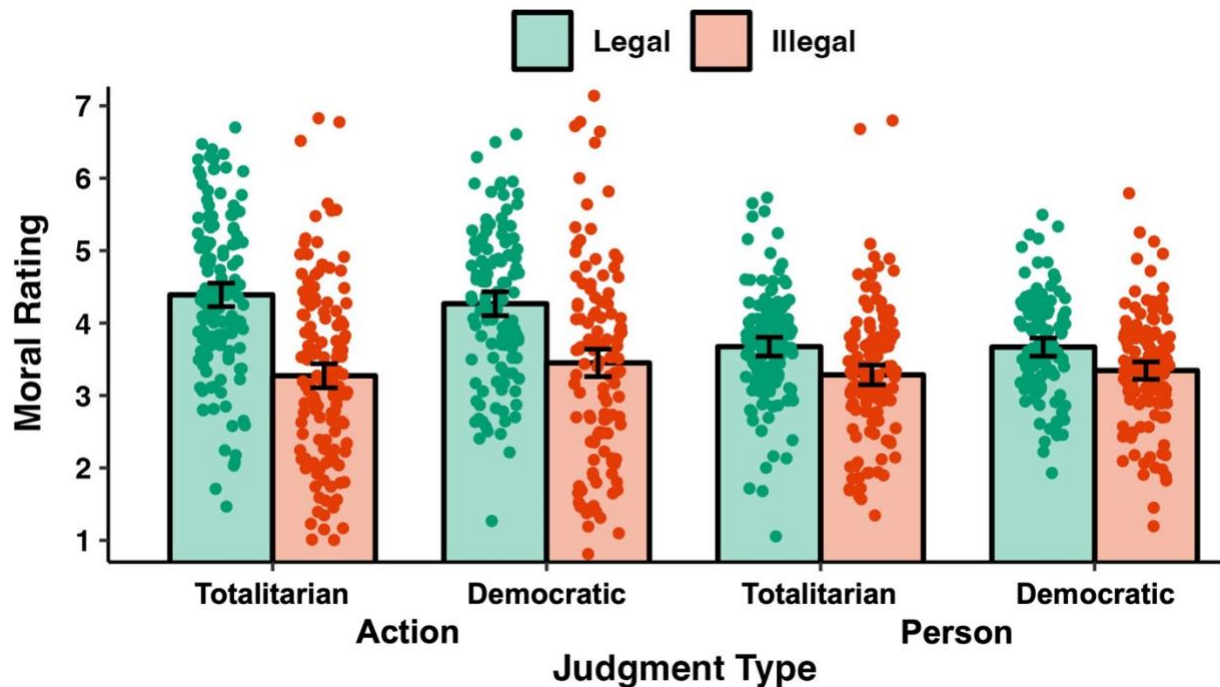
Note. Bars illustrate the mean moral evaluations of Legal (green) and Illegal (red) actions. Action judgments were reverse coded so that higher ratings reflected greater perceived morality across Judgment Type. Dots represent the mean moral evaluations of individual participants. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Respect for Authority and the Influence of Legality and Government Type on Moral Evaluations

We explored whether participants' respect for authority interacted with act legality and government type to predict moral evaluations (see Figure 6). Mixed-effects models featuring Legality (0 = Legal and 1 = Illegal), Government (0 = Democratic and 1 = Totalitarian), MFQ authority score, and their interactions as predictors, as well as a random intercept for subject, did not reveal evidence of any interactions for judgments of action wrongness or moral character (all *ps* > .081). Therefore, unlike in Experiments 1 and 2, the influence of legal status on moral evaluations in Experiment 3 did not vary as a function of participants' respect for authority.

Figure 6

Experiment 3: Legality by Government by Authority Interaction
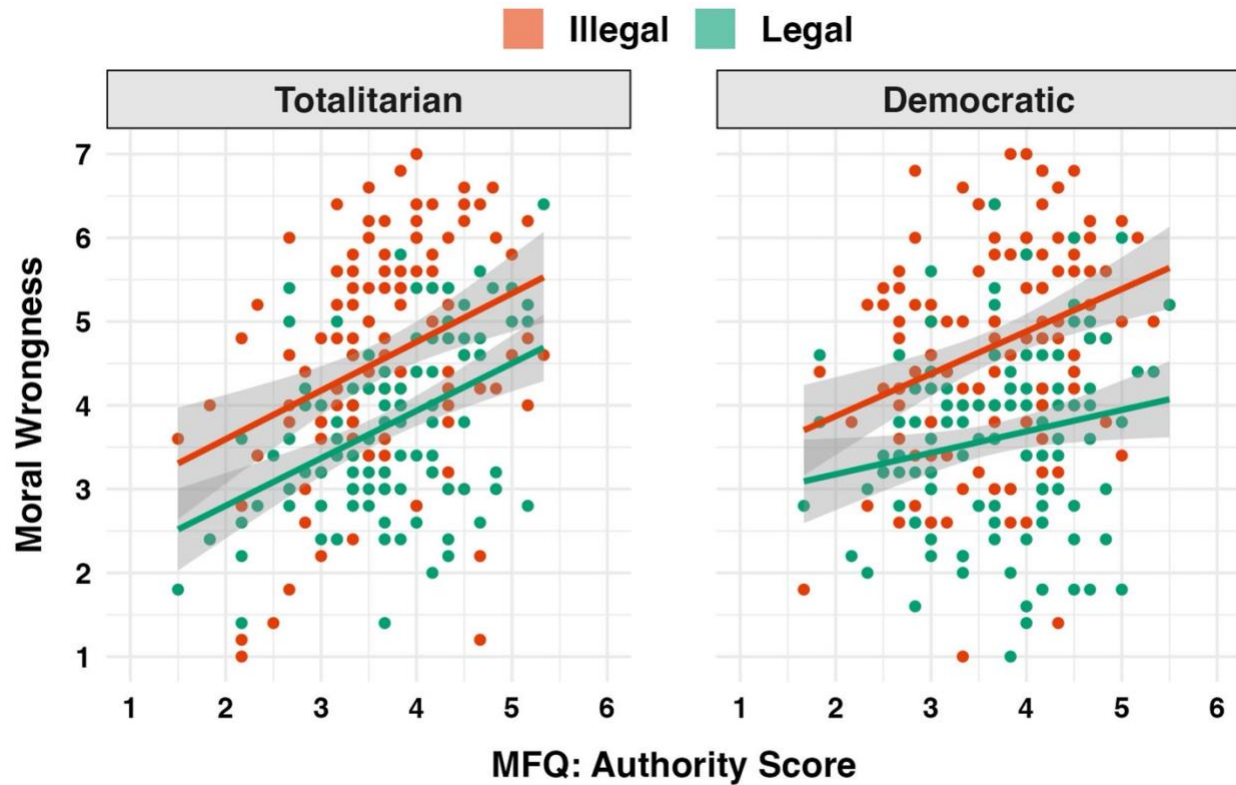
Note. Figure depicts the linear relationship between participants' Authority score on the MFQ and their judgments of moral wrongness for Legal (green) and Illegal (red) actions within Totalitarian (left panel) and Democratic (right panel) conditions. Dots represent the Authority score and mean moral wrongness judgments of individual participants.

General Discussion

Does the legality of an action influence how morally wrong people perceive it to be?

Prior work shows that citizens' moral beliefs influence the law-making process (Casillas et al.,

2010), yet evidence for the influence of legal judgments on moral attitudes is mixed, and based

almost exclusively on observational studies examining shifts in public attitudes following high-

profile Supreme Court decisions (Brickman & Peterson, 2006; Christenson & Glick, 2015; Clark

et al., 2024; Marshall, 1987, 1989; Persily et al., 2008; Unger, 2008; although see Barbosa &

Jimenez-Leal, 2017; Bartels & Mutz, 2009). The present research sheds light on this important, yet understudied question, experimentally manipulating act legality and demonstrating its consistent impact on moral evaluation. Across three experiments, simply labeling an action as illegal—as opposed to "not illegal"—led participants to judge it as more morally wrong. Notably, this effect emerged regardless of whether agents were described as breaking the law intentionally or whether citizens were said to participate in the law-making process. Furthermore, the influence of legal status was robust across both within- and between-subjects designs and was not limited to judgments of actions but also extended to perceptions of agents' moral character. Taken together, these findings suggest that legal frameworks not only reflect citizens' moral attitudes but can also actively shape them.

Why might legality guide moral judgment? One possibility is that, to the extent that people view the law as legitimate, an action's legal status provides useful information about its morality.[6] Rather than engaging in effortful reflective processes (Stanovich, 2018), people may rely on knowledge of an act's legality to guide their moral judgments. In this way, when judging morally ambiguous actions, knowledge that an act is illegal (or legal) may lead people to quickly judge that it is immoral (or moral). Of course, individuals differ in the degree to which they consider the legality of an action as informative of its moral wrongness. Under this account, the influence of legality on moral evaluation should depend on the extent to which individuals a) are motivated to avoid or unable to engage in reflective moral reasoning, and b) view an act's legal status as a valid heuristic cue to its moral wrongness. Of course, we use the term "heuristic"

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[6] A related possibility is that people view an action's legal status as reflective of social norms (i.e., other people's beliefs about an act's morality; Tankard & Paluck, 2017). If so, individuals wanting to avoid social repercussions for endorsing widely rejected moral beliefs may choose to align their moral beliefs with prevailing legal judgments.

conceptually rather than mechanistically, as we did not directly test implicated cognitive processes (e.g., response time)—an important direction for future research.

In Experiments 1 and 2, participants with greater respect for authority were more strongly influenced by an act's legality when judging its moral wrongness. Thus, consistent with the proposed account, individual differences related to the perceived legitimacy of authority figures moderated the impact of legal status on moral judgment. However, this interaction was not statistically reliable in Experiment 3. Furthermore, the influence of legal status persisted even when laws were said to have been enacted by a totalitarian government, a legal system that participants might be expected to view as less legitimate, thereby reducing their reliance on legality as a heuristic cue. Nevertheless, it is possible that participants did not view this law-making process as illegitimate, as legitimacy was not directly assessed in the present research. Future work could address this limitation by measuring the perceived legitimacy of legal authorities and examining how such perceptions shape the moral impact of act legality.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings were observed in a sample of Canadian undergraduates, the majority of whom were female. As such, the generalizability of these results, particularly to non-Western or non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, remains an open question. Future studies can assess whether the present findings generalize across diverse demographic groups, including those embedded in distinct legal systems or possessing different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Second, while we used fictitious country names, this approach may not have fully prevented participants from projecting pre-existing beliefs or associations onto these nations. Additionally, our vignettes described a wide range of actions, from relatively mundane violations (e.g., abandoning a shopping cart) to clearly moralized acts

(e.g., using a racial slur). While this variability increases the generalizability of our findings by ensuring they are not limited to a narrow class of moral acts, it also raises the possibility that item-level differences in moral severity influenced the results. Although item-level analyses partially mitigates this concern, future work could benefit from norming vignettes to determine whether the effect of legality varies based on action characteristics. Finally, to more directly assess the role of legal status as a heuristic cue, future research could manipulate or measure individuals' capacity for deliberative moral reasoning (Paxton et al., 2012; Pennycook et al., 2014). Consistent with the proposed framework, we predict that the influence of legality on moral judgments will be amplified when participants are required to make quick, intuitive moral decisions. Future studies could directly test this hypothesis.

Conclusion

Across three experiments, we found that legality reliably shaped moral evaluations: actions described as illegal were judged as more wrong, and the people who performed them were seen as less moral. This influence persisted even when laws were broken unintentionally and when they were imposed by a totalitarian regime, underscoring the robustness of legality as a cue for moral judgment. At the same time, this effect was strongest among individuals who endorsed respect for authority as a moral virtue, showing that not all citizens weigh legality equally in their moral reasoning. Together, these findings demonstrate that the law does more than delineate acceptable behaviour—it actively shapes how people judge the morality of actions and the character of those who perform them. The law thus functions not merely as an enforcement mechanism but as an ongoing influence on moral judgment itself.

Open Practices

All data and analyses scripts have been made publicly available at the following link: https://osf.io/project. Study materials for each experiment can be viewed in the supplementary materials. All experiments were preregistered through Open Science Framework. These pre-registrations can be viewed via the following links: Experiment 1; Experiment 2; Experiment 3.

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