

Are Good Deeds a License to Misbehave? ☆☆☆☆

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By Ashley Merryman

It happens every time. I walk into a restaurant and all I want is a small salad, and maybe a roll. Then the waiter comes up for my order and suddenly out comes, "Could I have a cheeseburger and—oh, wait, can you put bacon on that? And fries. Oh, wait, cheese fries would be even better. Thanks!" After having scarfed down the burger combo, I shamefacedly waddle out of the restaurant, wondering what on earth just happened.

If the work of Baruch College professor Lauren Block and her colleagues is any indication, I'm not the only one doing this. Block's team had college students look at a menu to choose a lunch side order. All the students saw pictures of a baked potato, chicken nuggets, and french fries. But some students also saw a fourth alternative: a salad. Having the salad as an option didn't improve the healthfulness of their choices. They didn't choose more salads or baked potatoes. In fact, it was the opposite: the students who saw salad as an option were more likely to choose the least healthful side order: fries.

Similarly, when students had a choice between a bacon cheeseburger, a chicken sandwich, and a veggie burger, they went straight for the bacon cheeseburger. And they did so more often than when the choice was just between the burger or the chicken.

The scholars determined these were examples of "vicarious goal fulfillment." Your goal in eating a salad is to eat better. But once you've thought to yourself, "I will have a salad," psychologically, you don't actually need to eat the salad. Because your brain considers the mere act of thinking about the salad as having moved toward a better diet. Thus, you've already met your goal of improving your nutrition. Having cognitively checked the goal off the mental to-do list, you can now eat the worst possible alternative, guilt-free.

In the study's conclusion, the scholars wondered if this plays out the same way in other contexts. They write: ". . . does merely considering your options for retirement-investing fulfill your goal to be economically responsible and license you to a day of frivolous shopping? Does considering a Sunday catching up on work fulfill your work-related goal and give you license to play a round of golf?"

This study gnaws at me every time I gnaw on a burger. But my poor food choices aren't what concern me. Instead, my preoccupation stems from another study I'd heard of, research out of Indiana University.

The Indiana scholars looked at volunteerism data for 1,700 kids, ages 10 to 18. The kids had been asked if they'd helped (with homework, chores, etc.) friends or siblings. The kids were also asked if they had done any other volunteer work, or donated money to a charity, within the same time period.

Not surprisingly, teens—both boys and girls—did more volunteer work than the younger children. But as the teens' volunteering for charities increased, the amount of help they gave friends and siblings dropped—at about the same rate as the volunteering increased. Teen boys also gave less money to charity. So the net rate of altruism stayed flat—or perhaps was even a bit lower for the 18-year-olds, than it was for the 10-year-olds.

Could it be that the teens, having volunteered in one context, cognitively checked off "help people" from their lives' "to do" list? And thus they didn't feel the need to do anything more? Even in their closest relationships?

Yes, according to University of Toronto professor Nina Mazar. That could be *exactly* what is going on.

According to Mazar, studies suggest there is a unconscious balancing act in place: "I helped my parents with chores, so I don't have to help my friends." We have a baseline sense of what society considers appropriate, moral behavior, and we have a sense of where we fit in that. If we do something that is better than our norm, we balance it out with something a bit devious: it's a zero-sum game.

Last week, Mazar, with her colleague Chen-Bo Zhong, published a report in *Psychological Science*, which lab-tested consumers' exposure to environmentally friendly products. After people purchased something from a list of green items, they were less generous in sharing a gift of money with a stranger. They were also more likely to cheat at a game and steal a small amount of cash.

Mazar's study is the first to show that a prosocial act in one context can actually increase the likelihood of one's misbehaving in a completely unrelated circumstance: good deeds in one arena give someone a psychological License to Misbehave in some other aspect of his life. (Think politicians with stainless legislation but soiled personal reputations.)

So what does this mean for all those schools and programs that require adolescents to participate in volunteer work? Or for parents who encourage their kids to contribute their toys to charities and commit other random acts of kindness? Could these sorts of efforts giving kids a License to Misbehave in other contexts? Cheating in middle school? Drinking in high school?

"It's conjecture, but I do think it could backfire—and in a completely different domain," says Mazar.

"It's extremely difficult to change people's behavior out of this zero-sum game—good things licensing bad things the next time. What it really takes is a societal shift in moral values, because then we sense a need to recalibrate our behavior. But it's a hard thing to bring up the society's baseline."

Mazar, and her mentor, MIT professor Dan Ariely, have had success in reducing cheating by administering honor codes immediately before a test: "Reminding someone of his moral values, right at the point of temptation, prevented him from giving into that temptation."

But we don't just want to get kids to refrain from bad behavior. We want kids to increase their good behavior—and without it leading to bad behavior later on. How do we do that?

"That is the multimillion dollar question," answers Mazar.

For now, what we do know is that we should start taking the License to Misbehave into account, when we are trying to teach kids about prosocial behavior. And that we need to be wary of efforts that inadvertently suggest that prosocial behavior is a mere task that we can check off a "to do" list—even by just thinking about it.

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