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Less Evil Than You: Bounded Self-Righteousness in Character Inferences, Emotional Reactions, and Behavioral Extremes

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that self-righteousness is bounded, arising more reliably in evaluations of immoral actions than in evaluations of moral actions. Here, we test four implications of this asymmetry in self-righteousness and the mechanism explaining it. We find that people are less likely to make negative character inferences from their own unethical behavior than from others' unethical behavior (Experiment 1), believe they would feel worse after an unethical action than others (Experiment 2), and believe they are less capable of extreme unethical behavior than others (Experiment 3). We observe weaker self–other differences in evaluations of ethical actions. This occurs partly because people base evaluations of themselves on their own moral intentions, leading to predictable individual differences. People more likely to ascribe cynical motives to their own behavior exhibit a smaller asymmetry in self-righteousness (Experiment 4). Self-righteousness seems better characterized as feeling "less evil than thou" than feeling "holier than thou."

Keywords

self-righteousness, self-evaluation, social judgment, moral psychology, cynicism

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A widely cited survey asked 1,000 Americans to indicate the likelihood that they, and a long list of celebrities, would go to heaven (Stanglin & Gross, 1997). Among the celebrities, former football player and accused murderer O. J. Simpson received the worst assessment, with only 19% estimating he was "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to go to heaven. More thought that Oprah Winfrey would make it (66%), and even more thought Mother Theresa would (79%). Who did respondents believe was most likely to make it to heaven? Themselves (87%).

This result will not surprise any social psychologists, who have repeatedly documented people's strong tendency for self-righteousness. To give just a few examples, people tend to believe that they are more likely than others to donate blood, give to charity, treat another person fairly, and give up one's own seat in a crowded bus for a pregnant woman (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991; Heath, 1999; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985). This is not a new phenomenon. Self-righteousness is repeatedly condemned in the Christian Bible, and Buddha noted, "It is easy to see the faults of others, but difficult to see one's own faults." The average person, it seems, has long believed that he or she is more moral than others.

Although self-righteousness is reliably observed, its generality may be easily exaggerated because of an important ambiguity in existing research. When people exhibit self-righteousness, are they reporting a sense of being more moral than others, less immoral than others, or both? In the opening example, do people predict they are heaven bound because they think their virtues will deliver them there, or because they lack the sins that condemn others? In general, do people feel "holier than thou" or "less evil than thou"?

Recent research suggests the latter (Klein & Epley, 2016). In one experiment, participants predicted they were dramatically less likely than others to engage in explicitly unethical behaviors such as lying or stealing money from a lost wallet, but were only slightly more likely than others to do the same actions when framed as ethical behaviors, such as telling the truth or returning money found in a lost wallet. Across a series of eight experiments, self-righteousness was bounded: People believed they were less likely than others to engage in

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immoral actions but not necessarily more likely than others to engage in moral actions. This was not produced by socially desirable responding, such as false modesty, because an independent measure of this response bias yielded symmetric self-righteousness for both moral and immoral actions. Rather than occurring across the entire moral spectrum, self-righteousness seems bounded—asymmetrically occurring more strongly in immoral than in moral behaviors.

Here, we present four experiments designed with two goals in mind. First, Experiments 1, 2, and 3 test three new implications of bounded self-righteousness in character inferences, emotional reactions, and predictions of extreme behavior. Besides providing novel demonstrations, these experiments test the robustness of bounded self-righteousness. Credibly establishing the robustness of a scientific result, especially one that modifies a long-held view, requires independent replications using a wide range of stimuli (Open Science Collaboration, 2015; Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011; Wells & Windschitl, 1999). With the exception of one experiment measuring recall of ethical behaviors, Klein and Epley (2016) demonstrated bounded self-righteousness mainly in people's predictions of future behavior. However, a growing body of research finds important differences between how people make moral judgments about the future versus the present or past (e.g., Caruso, 2010; Caruso, Van Boven, Chin, & Ward, 2013). In particular, the future tends to seem more uncertain than the past, tends to feel psychologically closer, and tends to focus more on intentions. Any of these differences, or other idiosyncratic features of behavioral predictions, could have contributed to the results of Klein and Epley (2016). If bounded self-righteousness is robust, then similar results should occur in a variety of measures of moral superiority. However, if bounded self-righteousness is restricted to only a narrow conceptualization, then broad conclusions about the self-concept are unwarranted.

Second, Experiment 4 tests an implication of one possible mechanism underlying asymmetric self-righteousness. We predict that asymmetric self-righteousness occurs partly because people use different sources of information when reasoning about themselves versus others (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Koehler & Poon, 2006; Malle, Knobe, & Nelson, 2007; Pronin, 2009; Pronin & Kugler, 2007; Williams, Gilovich, & Dunning, 2012). People tend to rely on "inside information" when evaluating themselves, focusing on mental states such as intentions and conscious motives. Because people lack similar access to others' mental states, people instead focus on observable "outside information" when considering others, such as the observed base rates of behavior. Assessments of self and other can differ when these two sources of information diverge. For ethical behaviors, one's own intentions and others' actions are often aligned—people judge themselves based on their positive intentions and judge others based on others' observed ethical behavior. For unethical behaviors, in contrast, intentions and actions may be misaligned partly because people tend to justify their own actions either before or after committing them (Brownstein, 2003; Hsee, 1996). Accordingly, perpetrators of unethical actions typically believe they are being guided by ethical intentions (Baumeister, 1999).

This mechanism implies that variance in people's own ethical intentions, specifically cynicism about one's own motives, should moderate self-righteousness. Cynicism is a personality trait that is negatively correlated with psychological health, physical health, and economic outcomes (Fehr & List, 2004; Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2010; Haukkala & Uutela, 2000; Kaplan, Bradley, & Ruscher, 2004; Smith, Glazer, Ruiz, & Gallo, 2004; Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016). Cynicism is traditionally defined as chronic mistrust of others' motives, but cynicism about one's own and others' motives are theoretically separable. Our mechanism suggests that self-perceptions are a stronger determinant of asymmetric self-righteousness than perceptions of other people. If self-righteousness is asymmetric because people perceive ethical intentions in their own ethically questionable behavior, then people with an idealistic view of their own intentions and motives should exhibit a larger asymmetry in self-righteousness than people with more cynical beliefs about their own intentions and motives.

Experiment 1: Character Inferences

A person's behavior is typically presumed to reveal his or her underlying character (e.g., "He didn't help his coworker because he's inherently selfish."), unless there are reasons to discount the correspondence between behavior and character (e.g., "He didn't help his coworker because he was having a bad day"; Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Existing research suggests that an action's valence may be one reason to discount the correspondence between behavior and character, with people being more likely to make a correspondent inference for both good and bad behaviors when evaluating others but discounting negative behaviors when evaluating themselves (Malle, 2006). If people consistently think of themselves as less "evil" than others, then they would be less likely to draw character inferences from their own potentially immoral behavior than from others' immoral behavior. In contrast, no self–other differences should emerge when making character inferences based on moral behavior.

Method

In this experiment, sample size was determined to allow for at least 30 participants in each experimental cell. In all other experiments, sample sizes were determined to allow for at least 50 participants in each experimental cell. These sample sizes are comparable with those used in previous research (Klein & Epley, 2016), allowing for adequate statistical power to detect the hypothesized effects.

Participants (N = 126) from a community sample in Chicago participated in exchange for US$2.00. We used a 2

(role: actor vs. target) × 2 (action: generous vs. selfish) between-participants design. Participants were randomly assigned to be either actors or targets (in the actual experiment, these participants were referred to as "Messengers" and "Owners," respectively). Actors participated first and learned that they would be paired with another participant, and that the two would have a chance of receiving US$10 in a lottery among all the pairs of participants in the experiment. Actors were told that the entire US$10 were randomly assigned to the targets, and that they, the actors, have the opportunity to take some of this money for themselves (Keysar, Converse, Wang, & Epley, 2008; List, 2007). Actors were then told that their role was to take some amount from targets so that the experimenter can "deliver" the rest to the targets, meaning that they did not choose the amount but were randomly assigned to take a specific amount.

To provide targets with individuating information on which to base impressions (Yzerbyt, Schadron, Leyens, & Rocher, 1994), actors were then asked to list five words that describe "who they are" and we videotaped the actors describing themselves using these five words. Actors were then instructed to take either US$1 (relatively generous and, therefore, moral action) or US$9 (relatively selfish and, therefore, immoral action) from targets' endowment of US$10. Actors then reported how selfish and generous their behavior was on separate scales (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Actors then evaluated their own character by assessing whether their actions reflect the kind of persons they are (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*), and by assessing whether, if they were free to do what they desired, they would take the same amount of money from targets as the experimenter instructed them (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very likely*). These two measures were averaged into an index of character inferences (α = .73).

Targets completed the experiment in separate sessions. Targets were informed that they had been endowed with US$10 as a potential prize should they win a lottery. Targets were then told that before this session, actors had the opportunity to take some of this money away. To make sure targets were fully aware of what actors were told to do, the experimenter emphasized that actors did not choose but were instructed to take a certain amount out of the US$10. Targets then learned of the amount actors took from them and watched the actors' recorded self-descriptions. Finally, targets rated actors on measures identical to those completed by actors. Notice that by directly asking targets to speculate about how actors might have behaved had the experimenter not provided them with instructions, we ensured that targets were fully attentive to the situational constraints actors were under (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

Results

Manipulation checks. A mixed-model ANOVA of role and action on perceived selfishness revealed only a significant main effect for action, $F(1, 61) = 162.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .73$. Taking US$9 was judged as more selfish ($M_{actors} = 1.78$ and $M_{targets} = 1.53$, $SD_{actors} = 1.56$ vs. $SD_{targets} = 1.22$) than taking US$1 ($M_{actors} = 4.90$ vs. $M_{targets} = 5.48$, $SD_{actors} = 2.32$ vs. $SD_{targets} = 1.77$), ts > 6.29, ps < .001, ds > 1.61. Similarly, a mixed-model ANOVA of role and action on perceived generosity revealed only a significant main effect for action, $F(1, 61) = 133.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .69$. Taking US$1 was judged as more generous ($M_{actors} = 5.84$ and $M_{targets} = 6.19$, $SD_{actors} = 1.51$ vs. $SD_{targets} = 1.42$) than taking US$9 ($M_{actors} = 2.39$ and $M_{targets} = 2.39$, $SD_{actors} = 1.91$ vs. $SD_{targets} = 1.80$), ts > 7.99, ps < .001, ds > 2.04. No other main effects or interactions emerged on either measure, Fs < 1.46, ps > .23. Participants' roles did not influence how they construed actors' behaviors.

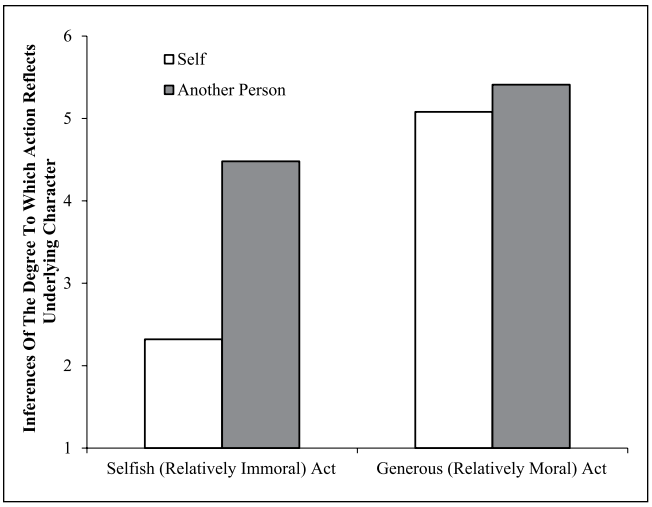

Figure 1. Character inferences from moral and immoral acts in Experiment 1.

Character inferences. A mixed-model ANOVA of role and action revealed a main effect of action, $F(1, 61) = 42.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .41$, and a main effect for role, $F(1, 61) = 18.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$, qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 61) = 10.30$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. As Figure 1 shows, targets believed the selfish action reflected the actor's true character ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.49$) more than the actors did ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.77$), *paired* $t(30) = 5.19$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.94$, 95% CI = [1.31, 3.01]. However, targets ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.23$) and actors ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.82$) did not differ in their character inferences of the generous action, *paired* $t(31) = 0.84$, $p = .41$, $d = 0.15$, 95% CI = [0.47, −1.13] (see Figure 1). Separately analyzing the two components of the index of character inferences yielded similar results. Actors were less likely than targets to believe that their relatively selfish actions reflected their true character, but no self–other difference emerged in character inferences from relatively generous actions. These results are consistent with asymmetric self-righteousness. People were more likely to discount their

own apparently selfish behavior compared with others' equally selfish behavior, but were not more likely to augment their own generous behavior compared with others.

Experiment 2: Asymmetric Emotional Consequences

If self-righteousness is best characterized by thinking that one is less immoral than others, then people should also predict asymmetric emotional consequences of moral and immoral behaviors. Specifically, participants should predict feeling worse than others after imagining doing an immoral act, but not necessarily better than others following a moral act. Experiment 2 tests this hypothesis.

Method

Participants (N = 364) were recruited from Amazon.com's M-Turk for US$0.20. We used a 2 (target: self vs. other) × 3 (action: selfish, fair, generous) between-participants design. Participants read that researchers were interested in feedback about a potential experiment. Participants then read that the researchers were interested in the emotional state of respondents in this upcoming experiment, in which one person will receive US$6 from experimenters and decide how much of it to give to another person. In the self condition, participants were asked to think about themselves as having given, of their own free will, either US$1 (selfish), US$3 (fair), or US$5 (generous) out of US$6 to the other person. Participants then assessed how nice those actions would be (100-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very nice*), predicted how they would feel after taking those actions (seven-point scale ranging from *terrible* to *great*), and finally predicted how the receiver of the money would feel (identical scale). In the other condition, participants were asked to imagine another person who had freely chosen to give either US$1 (selfish), US$3 (fair), or US$5 (generous) out of US$6, assessed how nice those actions would be, predicted how this other person would feel after taking those actions, and finally predicted how the receiver of the money would feel.

Results

Manipulation checks. Participants did not construe the selfish, fair, or generous actions differently when performed by oneself or another person, but they did rate the selfish action as less nice than the fair and generous actions. A 2 (target: self, other) × 3 (action: selfish, fair, generous) ANOVA on niceness ratings revealed only a main effect for action, $F(2, 358) = 333.23$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .65$. Participants rated the selfish actions more negatively ($M_{self} = 32.33$ and $M_{other} = 32.53$, $SD_{self} = 29.97$ and $SD_{other} = 23.67$) than the fair ($M_{self} = 87.45$ and $M_{other} = 89.73$, $SD_{self} = 15.99$ and $SD_{other} = 12.77$) or generous actions ($M_{self} = 90.13$ and $M_{other} = 95.00$, $SD_{self} = 21.86$ and $SD_{other} = 10.36$), ts > 12.75, ps < .0001, ds > 2.31.

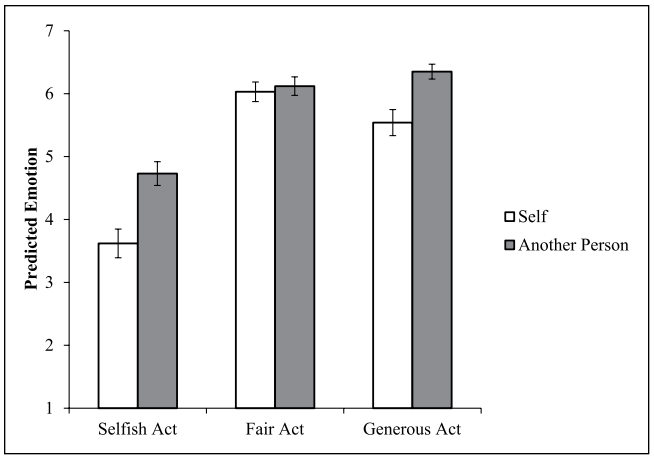

Figure 2. Predicted emotional consequences of engaging in a selfish, fair, and generous act in Experiment 2.

Ratings of the fair and generous behaviors did not differ from each other, consistent with prior research on moral judgment (Klein & Epley, 2014; Klein, Grossmann, Uskul, & Epley, 2015). We observed no significant self/other difference in evaluations of how nice each action would be, $F(1, 358) = 1.33$, $p = .25$.

Likewise, receivers' reported feelings revealed only a main effect for action, $F(2, 358) = 485.91$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .73$. Participants predicted that receivers would feel worse following a selfish division ($M_{self} = 2.46$ and $M_{other} = 2.55$, $SD_{self} = 1.27$ and $SD_{other} = 1.21$) than following a fair ($M_{self} = 6.26$ and $M_{other} = 6.27$, $SD_{self} = 0.90$ and $SD_{other} = 0.84$) or generous division ($M_{self} = 6.33$ and $M_{other} = 6.57$, $SD_{self} = 1.43$ and $SD_{other} = 0.85$). We observed no significant self/other difference in predictions of how the recipient of a selfish, fair, or generous outcome would feel, $F(1, 358) = 0.94$, $p = 0.33$.

These results are important because they confirm that selfish actions are judged more negatively than fair and generous actions, but that they are not construed differently when performed by the self versus another person.

Predictions of actors' feelings. Our primary hypotheses focused on predictions of the actor's own feelings. A 2 (target: self, other) × 3 (behavior: selfish, fair, generous) ANOVA on the actor's predicted feelings revealed main effects for target and action, Fs > 21.03, ps < .001, η_p^2s > .05, qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(2, 358) = 4.38$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = .024$. As Figure 2 shows, participants believed that they would feel worse than others following a selfish action (Ms = 3.62 vs. 4.73, SDs = 1.78 vs. 1.46), $F(1, 119) = 14.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$, 95% CI = [0.52, 1.70], but would feel no better than others following a fair action (Ms = 6.03 vs. 6.12, SDs = 1.23 vs. 1.14), $F(1, 120) = 0.16$, $p = .69$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, 95% CI = [−0.34, 0.51]. Interestingly, participants predicted that they would actually feel worse than others following a very generous action (Ms = 5.54 vs. 6.35, SDs = 1.62 vs. 0.92), $F(1, 119) = 11.39$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, 95%

CI = [−0.33, −1.28]. These results are again consistent with asymmetric self-righteousness. Participants expected to feel worse than others when forced to imagine enacting a relatively immoral action, but did not expect to feel better than others when forced to imagine enacting a relatively moral action.

Experiment 3: Self-Righteousness in Extreme Moments

Every weather forecaster knows that averages should not be confused with ranges. How a person typically behaves and how they are capable of behaving at their best and worst moments are not the same thing. Existing research typically asks participants to predict how they would be most likely to behave compared with others, essentially predicting the equivalent of a behavioral average (Klein & Epley, 2016). Here, we ask participants to consider the possible range of their own and others' behavior. If people think they are less "evil" but not necessarily more moral than others, then they should predict behaving less unethically than others in their most selfish moments but not necessarily more ethically than others in their most generous moments. Moreover, to obtain a fine-grained understanding of where people place themselves within the range of possible behaviors, we compare participants' perceived capacity for ethical and unethical behavior with two targets that differ in their extremity: the most extreme person participants personally know, and the average person.

Method

Participants (N = 151) were recruited on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk for US$0.20. We used a 3 (target: self vs. extreme other vs. average other) × 3 (capacity: most selfish, most fair, most generous) mixed-model design with target varying between participants and capacity varying within participants. Participants read that a group of researchers was planning to conduct an experiment and wanted participants' feedback. Participants then read that one person would receive US$6 and decide how much of it to give to another person. In the self conditions, participants were asked to think about themselves in their most selfish, fair, and generous moments. Participants were then asked to predict how much of the US$6 they would give to another person in their most selfish moment, their most fair moment, and their most generous moment (in counterbalanced order). In the average other condition, participants were asked to provide these same judgments for the average person's most selfish, fair, and generous moments. Finally, in the extreme other condition, participants were asked to write down the initials of the most selfish, the most fair, and the most generous persons they knew and write briefly about the kind of behaviors these persons typically engage in. Participants then predicted how much of the US$6 each of these people would give to a stranger (in counterbalanced order).

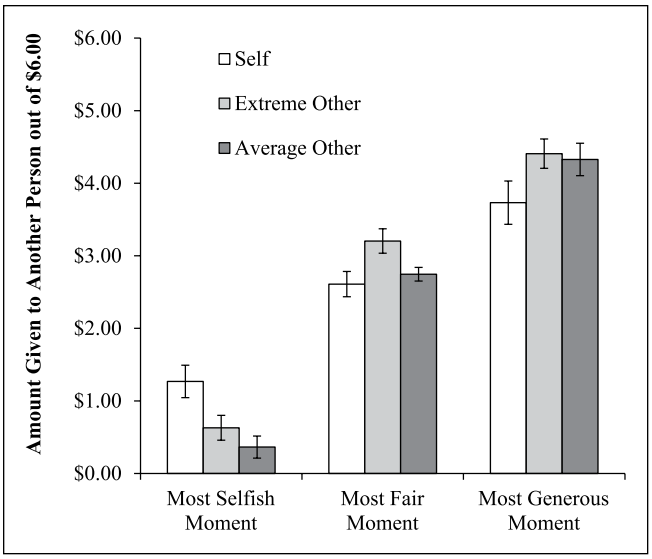

Figure 3. Participants' predictions of their and others' giving amounts in extreme moments in Experiment 3.
Note. Error bars represent standard errors.

Results

A 3 (target: self, extreme other, average other) × 3 (capacity: generous, fair, selfish) mixed-model ANOVA on the predicted giving amount with repeated measures on the second factor revealed a nonsignificant effect for target, $F(2, 148) = 1.65$, $p = .20$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, a significant main effect for capacity, $F(1, 148) = 355.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .71$, and a significant interaction, $F(2, 148) = 6.67$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$.

As Figure 3 shows, participants believed that they would give more in their most selfish moment (M = US$1.13, SD = US$1.44) compared with the most selfish person they knew (M = US$0.32, SD = US$0.94) and compared with the average person in his or her most selfish moment (M = US$0.58, SD = US$1.17), $F(2, 148) = 5.87$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, 95% CIs = [0.33, 1.29] and [0.03, 1.07]. No differences emerged in predictions of selfish behavior between the average target and the extreme target, $t(104) = 1.29$, $p = .20$, $d = 0.25$.

In contrast, participants did not believe they would give more money in their most generous moment (M = US$3.71, SD = US$1.73) than the most generous person they knew (M = US$4.51, SD = US$1.48), or than the average person in his or her most generous moment (M = US$3.91, SD = US$1.76). In fact, participants believed that they would give *less* money in their most generous moment than the most generous person they know, $t(96) = -2.47$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.50$, 95% CI = [−1.44, −0.16]. Participants also believed that they would give directionally less in their most generous moment than the average person would, $t(96) = 0.55$, $p = .58$, $d = 0.11$, 95% CI = [−0.51, 0.90].

Finally, participants believed they would give less in their fairest moment (M = US$2.71, SD = US$0.94) than the most fair person they knew (M = US$3.23, SD = US$1.09),

$t(96) = -2.48$, $p = .015$, $d = 0.51$, 95% CI = [−0.93, 0.10], and believed that they would give no more than the average person in his or her fairest moment (M = US$2.68, SD = US$0.80), $t(96) = 0.18$ $p = .86$, $d = 0.04$, 95% CI = [−0.38, 0.32].

These results reveal no self-righteousness in the perceived capacity for two ethical actions—giving fairly and giving generously—while revealing self-righteousness in the perceived capacity for a relatively unethical action, namely, giving selfishly. Moreover, this bounded sense of self-righteousness occurred for both an extreme target (the most selfish, fair, or generous person participants knew) and an average target. Participants believed they are capable of a narrower range of behaviors than others: no more generous than others in their best moments, but not as bad as others in their worst moments.

Experiment 4: Self-Centered Self-Righteousness

Experiments 1 to 3, in addition to those reported by Klein and Epley (2016), suggest that asymmetric self-righteousness is robust, at least in the populations tested so far. Asymmetric self-righteousness emerges in predictions of behavior, in predicted emotional reactions, and in the character inferences drawn from moral and immoral actions.

We suggest this occurs partly because of an asymmetry in the way that people evaluate themselves and others. People evaluate themselves by adopting an "inside perspective" focused heavily on evaluations of mental states such as intentions and motives, but evaluate others based on an "outside perspective" that focuses on observed behavior for which intentions and motives are then inferred. To the extent that people typically view their own behavior as being motivated by ethical intentions, people are unlikely to predict that they would behave in an unethical fashion and would feel especially bad if they did so.

This predicts that variance in people's evaluations of their own motives and intentions should moderate the asymmetric self-righteousness we have observed. In particular, people with more chronic self-interested motives—that is, those with more cynical motivations—should be more likely to indicate a willingness to behave in a self-interested and unethical fashion than those with a more idealistic view of their own motives. Asymmetric self-righteousness should then be moderated by people's evaluations of their own intentions and motives.

To test this prediction, participants first completed a measure of cynicism about their own and others' motives, and then reported their own and others' likelihood of engaging in seven ethical and seven unethical behaviors. We made three predictions. First, self-righteousness will be asymmetric, such that there will be a larger self–other difference in predictions of unethical behavior than of ethical behavior. Second, this asymmetry will be moderated by self-cynicism, such that those who report cynical motives show weaker asymmetric self-righteousness than those who report more idealistic motives. Third, self-righteousness will be more strongly correlated with cynical views of one's own intentions than with cynical views of other people's intentions, consistent with our theory that people are more likely to adopt an inside approach to prediction when evaluating themselves.

Method

Participants. Participants (N = 306) were recruited for "a study on people and behavior" from Amazon.com's M-Turk for $US0.30. This was a 2 (within-subject factor: moral vs. immoral behaviors) × 2 (between-subjects factor: direct vs. indirect elicitation) design. We elicited self–other judgments in two ways: either by asking participants to directly compare themselves with "other people" on one response scale, or by asking participants to indirectly compare themselves with others by first rating their own likelihood of engaging in a behavior and then separately rating others' likelihood of engaging in that behavior (Klar & Giladi, 1997; Moore, 2007). We used these two methods because past research has suggested that self–other differences may be larger when using the direct comparison method. However, we did not find differences in the magnitude of self-righteousness between the two elicitation methods and so, for simplicity, we report the indirect elicitation method in the text below (n = 154) and report results of the direct elicitation method (n = 152) in the online supplementary materials.

Procedure. Participants first completed a measure of cynicism about both their own and others' motives, in a counterbalanced order. To measure cynicism about others' motives, we used a validated cynicism scale containing 11 statements reproduced in Table 1 (α = .85; Turner & Valentine, 2001). To measure cynicism about one's own motives, we adapted this cynicism scale to focus on self-perceptions where possible (see Table 1), resulting in seven statements about oneself (α = .91). In both versions, participants indicated their agreement with the statements on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Participants then read about seven moral and seven immoral behaviors described in Table 2, presented in a random order. For example, the moral behaviors included returning a lost wallet and buying food for a homeless person, and the immoral behaviors included lying to coworkers and stealing a US$20 tip left for a waiter in a restaurant. For each behavior, participants (in the indirect elicitation condition) predicted how likely they were to engage in each behavior on scales ranging from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). Participants also predicted how likely other people are to engage in each behavior on the same 0 to

Table 1. Scales Used to Measure Cynicism About Oneself and Others in Experiment 4.

	Cynicism about others	Cynicism about oneself
1.	Salespeople are only interested in making a sale, not customer service.	If I was a salesperson, I think I would be interested in making a sale, not in customer service.
2.	Big companies make their profits by taking advantage of working people.	If I was running a big company, I would likely make profits by taking advantage of working people.
3.	Outside of my immediate family, I don't really trust anyone.	Other people should not really trust me.
4.	When someone does me a favor, I know they will expect one in return.	When I do someone a favor, they should know that I will expect one in return.
5.	People only work when they are rewarded for it.	I only work when I am rewarded for it.
6.	To a greater extent than people realize, our lives are governed by plots hatched in secret by politicians and big businesses.	—
7.	Familiarity breeds contempt.	—
8.	Reports of atrocities of war are generally exaggerated for propaganda purposes.	—
9.	No matter what they say, men are interested in women for only one reason.	—
10.	When you come right down to it, it's human nature never to do anything without an eye to one's own profit.	When you come right down to it, it's my nature never to do anything without an eye to my own profit.
11.	Businesses profit at the expense of their customers.	If I was running a business, I would try to profit even at the expense of my customers.

Table 2. Moral and Immoral Behaviors Used in Experiment 4.

Moral behaviors
1. Stop to help someone with a flat tire.
2. Donate blood when asked to do so.
3. Return a lost wallet you found to the police, leaving the significant amount of cash inside of it untouched.
4. Spend a Sunday volunteering in a soup kitchen.
5. Tell a professor that he or she had incorrectly marked your final exam and gave you too high a grade.
6. Return US$20 you had been incorrectly given as change after making a small purchase.
7. Buy food for a homeless person standing outside of a grocery store.
Immoral behaviors
1. Take advantage of a person who does not know the value of a product and sell it to them at an inflated price.
2. Rush to take the last seat on a crowded bus ahead of an elderly lady.
3. Find a US$20 tip left for the waiter in a restaurant and take the money for yourself.
4. Engage in an extra-marital affair.
5. Lie to your coworkers to increase the chances that you will get a promotion rather than them.
6. Offer your help in the future while knowing that you do not intend to fulfill the promise when the time comes.
7. Crash into a parked car and drive off without leaving a note.

7 scale. Finally, participants rated how ethical, how desirable (good or bad), and how common they considered each behavior to be on nine-point scales ranging from −4 (*very unethical/bad/uncommon*) to 4 (*very ethical/good/common*).

Results

Manipulation checks. As expected, participants rated the moral behaviors as more ethical ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.93$) than the immoral behaviors ($M = -2.77$, $SD = 1.09$), *paired* $t(153) = 33.16$, $p < .0001$, $d = 2.70$. Both the moral and immoral behaviors differed significantly from the extreme ends of the ethicality scale (4 and −4, respectively), *one-sample* ts > 25.85, ps $< .0001$, but they did not differ in the magnitude of extremity from each other, $z = 1.62$, $p = .11$. Desirability ratings were closely correlated to ethicality ratings in both moral and immoral behaviors, rs $> .89$, ps $< .0001$. The immoral behaviors were rated as less common ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.43$) than the moral behaviors ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.20$), *paired* $t(153) = 2.95$, $p = .003$. However, none of the results that follow are meaningfully altered when commonness was entered as a covariate, and we, therefore, do not control for commonality in the following analyses.

Self-righteousness. We created a measure of self-righteousness by subtracting behavioral predictions for others from behavioral predictions for the self (i.e., [self-ratings] − [other ratings]). As predicted, participants exhibited asymmetric self-righteousness, replicating the results reported in Klein and Epley (2016). Participants predicted that they would be less likely than others to engage in immoral behaviors ($M = -1.85$, $SD = 1.37$), *one-sample* $t(153) = -16.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.71$, 95% CI = [−1.63, −2.07], but did not believe they would be significantly more likely than others to engage in moral behaviors ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 1.03$), *one-sample* $t(153) = 0.82$, $p = .42$, $d = 0.13$, 95% CI = [−0.09, 0.23]. As Figure 4 shows, participants predicted that others would be somewhat more likely to engage in moral than immoral behaviors

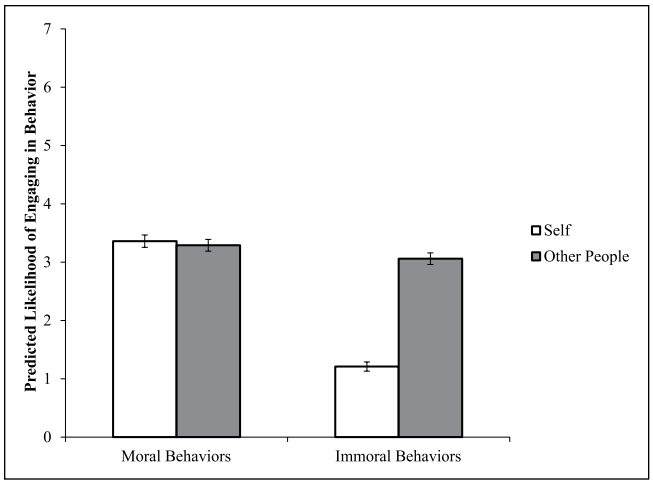

Figure 4. Predictions of likelihood of engaging in moral and immoral behaviors for the self and for another person in Experiment 4 (indirect elicitation method).

($M_{\text{other-moral}}$ = 3.29 vs. $M_{\text{other-immoral}}$ = 3.06), *paired* $t(153)$ = 1.78, p = .077, d = 0.15, but predicted that they themselves would be much more likely to engage in moral than immoral behaviors ($M_{\text{self-moral}}$ = 3.36 vs. $M_{\text{self-immoral}}$ = 1.21), *paired* $t(153)$ = 14.30, $p < .0001$, d = 1.16. People simply do not believe they are likely to engage in immoral behaviors, producing an asymmetry in self-righteousness.

Cynicism about oneself and others. To ensure that the scales for cynicism about one's own motives and about others' motives were comparable, we used only the seven items included in both scales (see Table 1).[1] Cynicism about one's own and others' motives were highly correlated, $r(154)$ = .43, $p < .01$. Participants reported more cynicism about others' motives (M = 4.39, SD = 1.11) than about their own motives (M = 2.87, SD = 1.41), *paired* $t(153)$ = 13.82, $p <$ .001, d = 1.13.

We next correlated cynicism about one's own and others' motives with the indirect measure of self-righteousness reported above (the self–other difference in predicted likelihood of engaging in the seven moral and seven immoral behaviors). We reverse scored self–other ratings of immoral behaviors so that larger values reflected greater self-righteousness. As Table 3 shows, cynicism about one's own motives was more strongly correlated with self-righteousness for both moral and immoral behavior than cynicism about others' motives, zs > 2.62, ps < .01. This is consistent with our suggestion that participants are more likely to adopt an "inside approach" to prediction when evaluating their own behavior. Participants' perceptions of their own intentions and motives predicted self-righteousness better than perceptions of other people's intentions and motives.

More important, we predicted that asymmetric self-righteousness emerges at least partly because most people interpret their own unethical actions as coming from ethical intentions, and hence presume that they would rarely engage in unethical actions. This predicts that those who have more cynical motives would show less of an asymmetry in self-righteousness than those with more idealistic motives, because those with cynical motives would be less likely to interpret their own unethical actions as coming from ethical intentions. To test this, we conducted a fixed-effects regression of behavior type (moral vs. immoral) and self-cynicism on behavioral predictions. This regression revealed an interaction between self-cynicism and behavior type, B = .54, SE = 0.10, t = 5.47, $p < .01$ As Figure 5 shows, participants with relatively idealistic self-views reported more asymmetric self-righteousness than those with relatively cynical self-views.

Table 3. Correlations Between Self-Righteousness in Moral and Immoral Behaviors and Cynicism About One's Own and Other People's Intentions in Experiment 4 (Indirect Elicitation Method).

	Self-righteousness in moral behaviors	Self-righteousness in immoral behaviors
Cynicism about oneself	$-.40_a$*	$-.25_a$*
Cynicism about other people	$-.12_b$	$.22_b$*

Note. Correlations that have different subscripts within columns differ at $p < .05$.
*$p < .05$.

General Discussion

In psychological research, the self-concept has been synonymous with self-righteousness—the belief that one is more moral than other people. However, our findings suggest that self-righteousness is asymmetric, occurring more strongly for immoral than for moral behaviors. Self-righteousness is revealed as bounded only when examining the entire spectrum of ethical actions, ranging from immoral to moral. Existing research typically fails to distinguish between moral and immoral actions, masking this asymmetry.

Here, we meaningfully extend the set of manipulations previously used to test the asymmetry in self-righteousness (Klein & Epley, 2016), thereby establishing its generalizability. These experiments also attest to the replicability of previous findings, thereby addressing an important concern in psychological science (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Finally, the current experiments also provide a novel test of the underlying mechanism that produces asymmetric self-righteousness, demonstrating that cynicism about one's own motives moderates the magnitude of self-righteousness.

Not only has the breadth of self-righteousness been overstated in existing research but also the two mechanisms known to cause self-righteousness have also been misapplied. Upon closer inspection both mechanisms predict bounded—rather than boundless—self-righteousness. The more precise view of self-righteousness presented in this

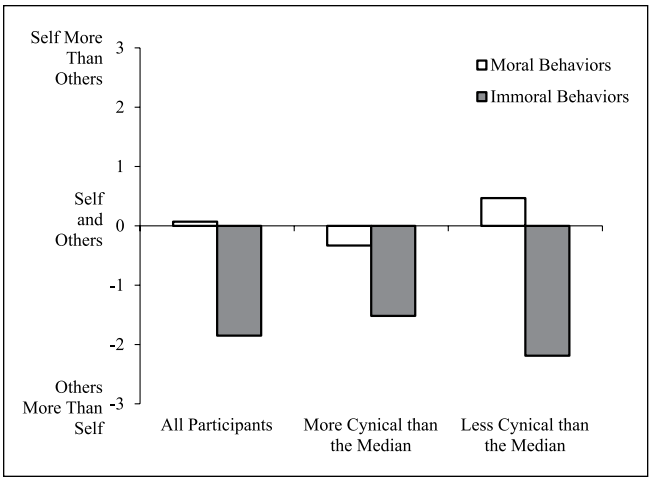

Figure 5. The effects of cynicism about one's own intentions on the asymmetry in self-righteousness in Experiment 4 (indirect elicitation method).

article requires only a more careful consideration of these two mechanisms.

Motivated reasoning is the first mechanism known to produce self-righteousness, because people either are motivated to view themselves positively (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Gilovich, 1991) or are motivated to view themselves consistently and generally hold a positive self-view (Swann, 2012). However, people's motivation to counteract information that threatens an existing positive self-view is likely to be stronger than people's motivation to counteract information that fails to augment their positive self-view (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Kunda, 1990). If the prospect of acting in an immoral way is more threatening to one's identity than the prospect of failing to act in a moral way, then immoral behavior is more likely to trigger motivated reasoning processes than moral behavior, resulting in the asymmetry in self-righteousness we observe. Although not directly testing this mechanism, our Experiment 4 does provide consistent evidence: Those who admit to having cynical intentions are also less likely to feel threatened by admitting to engaging in immoral behavior, and, therefore, also less likely to exhibit an asymmetry in self-righteousness.

Asymmetric access to internal states is the second mechanism known to produce self-righteousness (Buehler et al., 1994; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Pronin, 2009). People typically perceive their own intentions and motives as benign or justified even when engaging in morally questionable behaviors (Baumeister, 1999). When perceiving others, in contrast, people typically have access only to others' behaviors, not to others' internal states. For immoral behaviors, experiencing one's own intentions positively and lacking access to others' intentions means that people will judge others' immoral behaviors more harshly than they will judge their own. For moral behaviors, no such self–other difference occurs because people's experienced positive intentions are congruent with others' observable positive behaviors. We tested this mechanism in Experiment 4, finding that variance in people's beliefs about their own motivations moderates asymmetric self-righteousness.

We think these results raise at least two interesting questions for future research. First, does the self–other asymmetry we observed in moral domains generalize to nonmoral domains as well? Our theory suggests that asymmetric self-righteousness is caused by asymmetric construal of intentions: People can construe others' intentions as malevolent and harmful but do not do so for their own intentions. Based on this mechanism, we predict that valence asymmetries are less likely to occur in domains that do not lend themselves to systematic self–other differences in presumed intentions. Evaluations in competence domains, for instance, are based more on perceived abilities and are, therefore, not likely to be affected by the mechanism that we believe underlies self-righteousness. Because intentions are central to moral judgment (e.g., Hauser, 2006), moral domains may be particularly likely to be characterized by asymmetric self–other judgments.

Second, although asymmetric self-righteousness appears robust across our experiments, its magnitude may vary across cultures. Although only a systematic investigation of this question will provide a complete answer, we believe that there are several reasons to predict cultural differences and other reasons to predict cultural similarities in self-righteousness in ethical and unethical behaviors. On one hand, the degree and nature of self-enhancement varies by culture, likely due to differences in people's construal of the self-concept (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; Heine & Lehman, 1997; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). Likewise, the correspondence bias—the degree to which people draw inferences about other people's dispositions from their behaviors—also varies by culture (Miyamoto & Kitayama, 2002). If self-enhancement and the correspondence bias vary by culture, then self–other asymmetries in self-enhancement may also. Moreover, because self-righteousness partly results from inferring that other people's character corresponds to their unethical behavior, variance in the base rates of unethical behavior might affect self-righteousness. In countries where corruption is more common, the asymmetry in self-righteousness might be more pronounced because people will be more likely to observe unethical behavior committed by other people.

On the other hand, there is little evidence that the mechanism underlying asymmetric self-righteousness, namely, construal of one's own ethical intentions, varies by culture. Testing this question will require measuring *self*-cynicism across cultures rather than cynicism about other people, as existing research has done (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2016). Moreover, because cultures differ in how they define ethicality, people of different cultures may not agree on precisely what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior. Actions that seem unethical in some cultures may not seem unethical in

other cultures, further complicating cross-cultural comparisons of asymmetric self-righteousness. Overall, a systematic cross-cultural comparison of asymmetric self-righteousness would be a productive direction for future research.

Finally, we believe asymmetric self-righteousness has important practical implications. Managers commonly ask behavioral scientists to recommend organizational changes aimed at preventing unethical behavior and increasing ethical behavior (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008; Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012). However, enacting any policy requires the support of organization members. In turn, policy support depends partly on people's judgments of their own and others' likelihood of engaging in moral and immoral behaviors. Asymmetric self-righteousness predicts that people may be especially likely to resist policies aimed at preventing people's own unethical behavior, simply because people do not believe they are likely to engage in immoral behaviors in the first place (Sharek, Schoen, & Loewenstein, 2012). In contrast, if people believe that they and others are equally likely to engage in ethical behavior, then policies that promote ethical behavior are less likely to be met with indifference or even resistance. This suggests that framing policies as promoting ethical behavior rather than discouraging unethical behavior is likely to increase policy support. Understanding asymmetric self-righteousness could help foster support for policies that can create more ethical people, and more ethical organizations.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available online.

Note

1. Including all 11 items in the scale measuring cynicism about other people does not meaningfully alter the results.

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