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Should morality be abolished? An empirical challenge to the argument from intolerance

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ABSTRACT

Moral abolitionists claim that morality ought to be abolished. According to one of their most prominent arguments, this is because making moral judgments renders people significantly less tolerant toward anyone who holds divergent views. In this paper we investigate the hypothesis that morality's tolerance-decreasing effect only occurs if people are realists about moral issues, i.e., they interpret these issues as objectively grounded. We found support for this hypothesis (Studies 1 and 2). Yet, it also turned out that the intolerance associated with realism is mediated by moral conviction and perceived consensus. People tend to feel more strongly about those moral issues they ground objectively and, in doing so, are more prone to display the vice of moral smugness toward those who disagree with them. The remedy for this that has been recommended is humility which we found (Study 3) is indeed related to reduced intolerance, in part by predicting a reduction in realism, but also in part through a direct connection to intolerance. These results put pressure on abolitionists' "argument from intolerance."

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Free thinkers and skeptics throughout history have entertained the suspicion that morality is a mistake, a scam, a fiction that we make up; but few others have welcomed this idea with open minds. (Garner, 2011)

Does judging actions in terms of rightness/wrongness, goodness/badness, etc. make us better off – is it in our interest? Or should we rather do away with such judgments? At first blush such questions seem trivial; maybe even comical or absurd. Of course, the practice of making moral judgments is overall beneficial, we are inclined to respond. It prevents us from giving in to egoistic impulses; it helps us to resist the allure of short-term benefits; it incites us to cooperate and live together peacefully.

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Nevertheless, over the years some thinkers have argued that morality is actually harmful and should be abolished (e.g., Burgess, 2007; Garner, 1994, 2007, 2019; Hinckfuss, 1987; Marks, 2013). On this "abolitionist" view, people should no longer believe actions to be morally right/wrong; they should only feel favorably or opposed to them, like or dislike them, or be willing to praise or punish those who engage in them (without making any corresponding moral judgment).[1]

In support of their view, abolitionists have provided several distinct arguments. For example, they have maintained that morality blinds people to the authoritarian nature of their society (Hinckfuss, 1987); that it is used to justify and preserve large-scale inequalities in power and economic status as a reflection of purported moral desert (Garner, 2007; Hinckfuss, 1987); and that it creates feelings of moral inferiority in people who believe they are bad, even vile, for committing moral wrongs (Hinckfuss, 1987; Marks, 2013). In this paper we will be concerned with what is perhaps abolitionists' most widespread and influential argument – the so-called "argument from intolerance".

According to the argument from intolerance, people ought to stop thinking in moral terms because doing so makes them significantly more intolerant toward those holding divergent views. Morality makes people more narrow-minded, stubborn, and emotionally involved; it makes us less likely to acknowledge or even listen to plausible arguments in favor of an opposing view; it causes people to think of this opponent as someone who is ignorant, vicious or evil; and so on. All of this renders disagreements more intractable and volatile, preventing us from reaching compromises, even when this uncompromising stance negatively affects ours or others' well-being (Garner, 2007, 1994 ; Greene, 2002; Hinckfuss, 1987; Marks, 2013).

Garner (2007), one of the most prominent contemporary abolitionists, puts this argument as follows:

> Morality inflames disputes because moralizing an issue tends to excite and confuse the parties involved. If we hope to resolve conflicts by arriving at a compromise, our task will be easier if moral disagreements are seen as partial conflicts of interest "without the embroidery of rights and moral justification." [. . .] The controversy over abortion would not be nearly as intractable as it has become if the fiction of moral rights had not been appropriated by both sides. If the issue is not moralized, Roe v. Wade looks like a sensible compromise between two extreme positions, but when the right to life is set against the right to choose, neither side can yield without violating morality. (p. 502)

One way of criticizing the argument from intolerance is to deny that intolerance is (always) bad (Brink, 1989). In this paper, in contrast, we will focus on the argument's underlying empirical hypothesis – namely, that morality decreases tolerance. The truth of this hypothesis is an empirical question; one that can only be answered by gathering data about

morality's actual effects on people's tolerance. Thus far abolitionists have supported their empirical hypothesis by appealing to anecdotal and introspective evidence, as well as philosophical speculation (see, e.g., Garner's above quotation; Hinckfuss, 1987; Marks, 2013).

Yet, psychologists have been investigating the relation between morality and tolerance for quite a while. Studies have found that people typically have stronger negative reactions toward divergent beliefs, values, and practices that involve moral issues than those that involve non-moral (e.g., personal or social) issues (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Wainryb et al., 2004, 2001, 1998; Wright et al., 2008; Wright, 2012). They are also generally less supportive of moral diversity than other forms of diversity (Haidt et al., 2003). In addition, people often make important distinctions between moral and other types of issues – e.g., they tend to treat moral wrongs as more serious, less permissible, and more severely punishable than social/conventional wrongs (Turiel, 1983, 1998; see also Davidson et al., 1983; Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Nichols, 2004; Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003; Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1981, 1983; Smetana & Braeges, 1990).

At first glance, these findings seem to support the argument from intolerance: people tend to have stronger negative reactions to moral transgressions, and they view them as more serious, more punishable, and so on.

Yet, there are two important limitations present in this body of research. The first is that the researchers assume an issue's moral status without asking participants about this classification – even though further research (Wright, 2018; Wright et al., 2008, 2013, 2014) has clearly demonstrated that people of all ages disagree about what should be considered "moral" and what should not be. More importantly, this research averages across people's responses to moral transgressions without looking more closely to see: 1) what is actually driving morality's tolerance-decreasing effect in these studies (i.e., is it viewing the transgression *as moral* or is it something else), and 2) whether these effects are consistently present across a wide range of moral transgressions.

In other words, these studies leave it unclear whether the increased intolerance being witnessed is a function of simply viewing something *as moral* – i.e., as belonging in the moral domain, as opposed to some other (e.g., social or personal) domain – or if it is instead the result of factors that may *precede, accompany, or result* from such classifications, but that can be avoided, both as a matter of empirical and conceptual fact.

Another way of asking this question is whether "moralizing an issue" (Garner, 2007, p. 502), which abolitionists argue results in deeply problematic (and intractable) intolerance, is simply a function of *viewing an issue as moral*, or whether there is something more going on. If it's the former,

then the abolitionists have a point – maybe viewing things as belonging in the moral domain should be discouraged – but if it's the latter, then maybe it's not morality *per se* that is the problem, but something else.

But, what might that "something else" be? One plausible hypothesis appeals to what philosophers refer to as "moral realism", i.e., the view that morality is grounded in objective facts, independent from the moral beliefs and attitudes of individuals and cultures (e.g., Brink, 1989; Huemer, 2005; Shafer-Landau, 2003). According to this hypothesis, viewing an issue as moral only makes people less tolerant if they also view it as objectively grounded. After all, realism implies that there is a right answer (and only one right answer) as to whether something is morally good/bad, right/wrong. Anyone who disagrees with us must therefore be incorrect – eliminating (or lessening) the need for tolerance. If, on the other hand, people think that what is right/wrong, good/bad, is determined by their own or their culture's beliefs/attitudes or is not a matter of fact at all (that is, if people are anti-realists) then morality would largely cease to "excite and confuse" and generate intolerance.

Importantly, the hypothesis that objectivism mediates the relation between morality and intolerance has received some empirical support (e.g., Goodwin & Darley, 2012; Wright, 2018; Wright et al., 2013, 2014). Unfortunately, these early studies are vulnerable to methodological objections, including not fully or accurately capturing people's meta-ethical intuitions (Beebe, 2015; Moss, 2017; Pölzler, 2018a, 2018b; Pölzler & Wright, 2019; Pölzler et al.,). Thus, our aim here is to test the hypothesis using measures we recently developed (Pölzler & Wright 2020). This will provide a reliable empirical assessment of the abolitionist argument from intolerance: of whether viewing something as moral by itself is sufficient to elicit higher levels of intolerance, or whether the "moralization" abolitionists worry about involves something else, namely moral realism.

To this end, we present three empirical studies. Studies 1 and 2 measured the relationship between people's morality classifications and meta-ethical groundings and their intolerance. The results of these studies suggest that it is realism – not morality *per se* – that predicts intolerance for divergent moral views. They further suggest that several aspects of moral realism – namely a higher level of moral conviction about the issue and a greater perception of consensus within one's community – are driving the relationship with this increased intolerance. In other words, moral realism is typically accompanied by (and/or accompanies) stronger moral conviction and greater perceived consensus, which both predict greater intolerance for divergent views.

This suggests that the cultivation of something that offsets this greater conviction and perceived consensus – one candidate being humility – may mitigate the connection between realism and intolerance. Study 3 explores this possibility, revealing that humility is indeed related to reduced intolerance, via a connection to realism and, thus, to conviction.

We close with a discussion of the implications of these findings for abolitionism, arguing that they put pressure on the argument from intolerance, and hence, on abolitionism. Morality may, in the end, be salvageable.

Study 1

Methods

Participants

Our first survey was taken by 173 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an international online survey platform. 14 participants failed to complete the survey or failed over 10% of standard attention checks, leaving 159 participants: 56% male, 43% female, 1% other; 79% Caucasian, 8% African-American, 4% Asian-American, 7% Hispanic, 2% other. The average age was 38.3 years (SD = 12.8). We felt that a sample at or above 100 participants provided sufficient power for our analyses, given previous research conducted in our lab. The methods and results of Study 1 below report all measures and conditions used, as well as all data exclusions.

Design

Participants were presented fifteen issue-statements in random order, twelve of which described socially-relevant behaviors/activities and three of which described basic facts:

(1) selling children on the internet
(2) stealing money and/or supplies from the large company where you work
(3) consciously discriminating against another person on the basis of gender or race
(4) having sex with people other than your spouse or romantic partner (without him/her knowing)
(5) refusing to provide help to people who obviously need it
(6) helping terminally ill patients end their lives
(7) eating factory-farmed meat
(8) burning the American flag
(9) wearing your pajamas to an important business meeting
(10) smoking cigarettes in enclosed public space
(11) watching pornographic videos
(12) getting tattoos and/or body piercings
(13) the earth is flat
(14) Boston (Massachusetts) is farther north than Miami (Florida)
(15) the chemical formula of water molecules is H2O

Participants were asked to classify each of these as belonging to one of the following four categories: (1) Personal choice/preference, (2) Social convention/norms, (3) Moral issue, (4) Scientific fact. Then they were presented with metaethics and tolerance tasks (the order of which was counterbalanced).

Metaethics tasks. To determine whether participants consider morality to be objective we used a three-step disagreement measure that we developed in previous research (Pölzler & Wright 2020). First participants were presented with an intra-cultural disagreement scenario for each of the issues listed above:

> SCENARIO 1: Consider the following situation. Two people from the same culture discuss whether [ISSUE] is okay. One person says that [ISSUE] is okay. The other person says that it is not the case that [ISSUE] is okay. Which interpretation of this disagreement seems most appropriate to you?[2]

They were given the following responses to choose from:

> (A1) One of these two people is right and the other one is wrong (Please note that this could be the case for several reasons: for example, because the truth of the people's sentences is objective, or because it is determined by the dominant moral beliefs in their culture, or because it is determined by the commandments of God).
>
> (A2) Both people are right (because the truth of their sentences is determined by the moral beliefs of individuals).
>
> (A3) Both people are wrong (because although their sentences intend to state moral truths, there are no such truths).
>
> (A4) Neither person is right or wrong (because their sentences do not intend to state
>
> moral truths and are therefore neither true nor false).

If participants selected A1, then they were presented with an analogous cross-cultural disagreement scenario.

> SCENARIO 2: In the previous task you indicated that when two people from the same culture utter conflicting sentences about whether [ISSUE] is okay, one of them is right and the other one is wrong. Suppose these disagreeing people are from different cultures. The person who says that [ISSUE] is okay is from a culture in which most people believe that this action is okay. The person who says that it is not the case that [ISSUE] is okay is from a culture in which most people believe that it is not the case that this action is okay. Which interpretation of this disagreement seems most appropriate to you?

They were given the following responses to choose from:

> (B1) One of these two people is right and the other one is wrong (Please note that this could be the case for either of the following reasons: for example, because the truth of the people's sentences is objective, or because it is determined by the commandments of God).
>
> (B2) Both people are right (because the truth of their sentences is determined by the dominant moral beliefs in cultures).
>
> (B3) Both people are wrong (because although their sentences intend to state moral truths, there are no such truths).
>
> (B4) Neither person is right or wrong (because their sentences do not intend to state moral truths and are therefore neither true nor false).

If participants selected B1, then they were presented with another disagreement scenario:

> SCENARIO 3: In the previous tasks you indicated that when two people utter conflicting sentences about whether [ISSUE] is okay, one of them is right and the other one is wrong. Suppose these disagreeing people live in worlds in which God wills different things. The person who says that [ISSUE] is okay lives in a world in which God does not forbid this action. The person who says that it is not the case that [ISSUE] is okay lives in a world in which God forbids this action. Which interpretation of this disagreement seems most appropriate to you?

They were given the following responses to choose from:

> (C1) One of these two people is right and the other one is wrong (Please note that this is because the truth of the people's sentences is objective).
>
> (C2) Both people are right (because the truth of the people's sentences is determined by the commandments of God).
>
> (C3) Both people are wrong (because although their sentences intend to state moral truths, there are no such truths).
>
> (C4) Neither person is right or wrong (because their sentences do not intend to state moral truths, and are therefore neither true nor false).

We then coded for meta-ethical positions based on the following choice patterns (See Table 1):

- **Realism**: A1, B1, and C1
- **Divine Command Theory**: A1, B2, and C2
- **Cultural Relativism**: A1 and B2
- **Individual Subjectivism**: A2
- **Non-Cognitivism**: A4
- **Error Theory**: A3

Table 1. Flowchart of meta-ethical groundings.

Studies 1 and 3			
	Intra-Cultural Disagreement	*Cross-Cultural Disagreement*	*Cross-WorldDisagreement*
Realism	one right, one wrong	one right, one wrong	one right, one wrong
Divine Command Theory	one right, one wrong	one right, one wrong	both right
Cultural Relativism	one right, one wrong	both right	
Individual Subjectivism	both right		
Non-Cognitivism	both wrong		
Error Theory	neither right or wrong		
Study 2			
Disagreement			
Realism	one correct, one incorrect	one correct, one incorrect	
Cultural Relativism	one correct, one incorrect	both correct	
Individual Subjectivism	both correct	both correct	
Non-Cognitivism	neither correct or incorrect	neither correct or incorrect	
Nonstandard	any other combination of responses		
Agreement/Disagreement			
Realism	both correct	one correct, one incorrect	
Cultural Relativism	one correct, one incorrect	one correct, one incorrect	
Individual Subjectivism	both correct	both correct	
Non-Cognitivism	neither correct or incorrect	neither correct or incorrect	
Nonstandard	any other combination of responses		

Other measures. Participants were also asked the following strength of agreement, consensus, and tolerance questions:

- STRENGTH OF AGREEMENT: Do you agree or disagree (6 points: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) with the following statement: "[ISSUE] is okay"? Following the strategy used to measure moral conviction used in Wright et al. (2008), this was used to generate the CONVICTION variable by folding along the mid-point, so that 3/4's represented the lowest level of conviction and 1's/6's represented the strongest level of conviction.
- CONSENSUS: How many people from your own community do you think would agree with you? (6 points: Almost nobody would agree to Almost everyone would agree)
- PROHIBIT/CONDONE: With respect to [ISSUE], how acceptable would it be (6 points: Very Acceptable to Very Unacceptable) for society: to pass a law prohibiting it? to condone/support it?
  - With respect to [ISSUE], would you be willing to (6 points: Not very willing to Very willing; *positive tolerance*, negative intolerance):
    - *be friends with someone who disagrees with you*
    - *have a friendly discussion about it with someone who disagrees with you*
    - *participate in a public debate about the pros and cons of the issue*

- *have a private debate about the pros and cons with a group of friends*
- *publicly support a friend/family member who engages in the behavior*
- *privately support a friend/family member who engages in the behavior*
- *seriously consider the opposite view (from what you currently believe)*
- *advocate in favor of it in a public setting*
- publicly shame someone for engaging in the behavior
- personally shun someone for engaging in the behavior
- advocate against it in a public setting

- With respect to [ISSUE], if someone did this, what do you think would be true of them (6 points: Strongly disagree to Strongly agree; *positive tolerance*, negative intolerance)?
  - *They would be different, but different is okay.*
  - *They would probably not be that different from me.*
  - *They would be living the way they thought was best.*
  - *They would be someone who is obviously proud of who they are.*
  - They would be someone who doesn't care much about themselves.
  - They would be doing something they knew deep down was wrong.
  - They would not have the same values as I do.
  - They would be a bad person.
  - They would be someone who doesn't care much about other people.[3]

The "positive tolerance" and "negative intolerance" question responses were averaged together into summary variables for the purposes of analysis.

Results

Domain classification/Grounding

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the domain classifications. Six issue-statements were dominantly classified by participants (i.e., received the highest classification percentage) as moral, three as social/conventional, three as personal, and three statements as factual.[4]

Of the six issue-statements classified as moral, five were given dominantly anti-realist groundings (which includes all meta-ethical positions except realism) and one was given a dominantly realist grounding. Of those classified as social and personal, all were given dominantly anti-realist groundings, and those classified as factual were given dominantly realist groundings.

Table 2. Domain clasifications and groundings.

		Personal	Social	Moral	Factual	Anti-Realist	Realist
1	Selling children on the internet	4%	6%	**88%**	2%	38%	**62%**
2	Stealing money and/or supplies from the large company where you work	5%	13%	**79%**	3%	**61%**	39%
3	Consciously discriminating against another person on the basis of gender or race	11%	21%	**64%**	4%	**55%**	45%
4	Having sex with people other than your spouse or romantic partner (without him/her knowing)	15%	13%	**68%**	4%	**72%**	28%
5	Refusing to provide help to people who obviously need it	29%	11%	**59%**	1%	**78%**	22%
6	Helping terminally ill patients end their lives	28%	9%	**62%**	1%	**82%**	18%
7	Eating factory-farmed meat	**60%**	8%	29%	3%	**91%**	9%
8	Burning the American flag	17%	**59%**	21%	3%	**87%**	13%
9	Wearing your pajamas to an important business meeting	26%	**67%**	4%	2%	**91%**	9%
10	Smoking cigarettes in enclosed public space	18%	**48%**	23%	11%	**69%**	31%
11	Watching pornographic videos	**62%**	11%	25%	3%	**91%**	9%
12	Getting tattoos and/or body piercings	**78%**	15%	5%	2%	**92%**	8%
13	The earth is flat	12%	3%	3%	**82%**	45%	**55%**
14	Boston (Massachusetts) is farther north than Miami (Florida)	3%	4%	3%	**89%**	36%	**64%**
15	The chemical formula of water molecules is H2O	3%	4%	2%	**91%**	40%	**60%**

The moral domain as a domain of intolerance

Since participants classified the issue-statements into domains themselves (and thus potentially differently from one another), we calculated the means of the other measures by domain separately for each participant (a technique employed in Wright et al., 2008, 201, 2014). This gave every participant a mean for every variable within each of the four domains. Analyses were conducted on these means.

We ran a repeated measures ANOVA with *classification domain* (personal/social/moral/factual) and *tolerance type* (prohibit/condone/positive/negative tolerance) as within-participants variables. This revealed a main effect for classification domain, $F(3,417) = 8.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$, and tolerance type, $F(3,417) = 35.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$, and a significant two-way interaction, $F(9,1251) = 116.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .46$.

Paired-sample t-tests were then run, revealing that there was increased intolerance across the board for those behaviors people had categorized as moral. Specifically, participants thought prohibition was much *more acceptable* and condoning was much *less acceptable, ts*(142) = 6.7 and 6.3, *p*s < .001, for those behaviors they considered to be moral than those they considered to be social. And the same thing was true when comparing behaviors considered moral to those considered to be personal, *t*s (151) = 17.4 and 11.6, *p*s < .001, and to those considered to be factual, *t*s (154) = 17.9 and 11.1, *p*s < .001 (Figure 1).

Participants were also *less willing* to express positive tolerance, and *more willing* to express negative intolerance, *t*s(142) = 8.0 and 7.7, *p*s < .001, for behaviors they considered to be moral than for behaviors they considered to

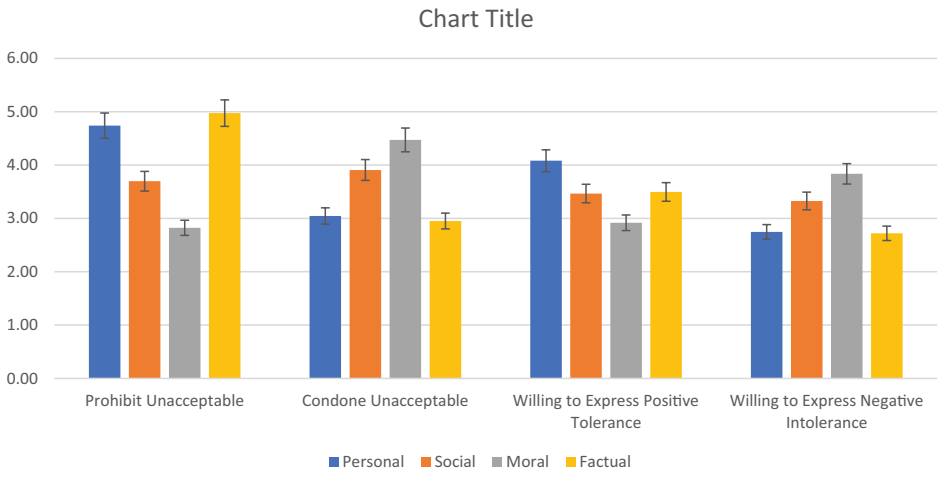

Figure 1. Study 1: Tolerance by domain.

be social. And, once again, the same thing was true when comparing behaviors considered to be moral to those considered to be personal, *t*s (151) = 16.3 and 16.8, *p*s < .001, and to those considered to be factual, *t*s (154) = 8.6 and 7.7, *p*s < .001 (Figure 1).

In sum, taken by themselves, these findings show a strong relationship between moral categorization and intolerance, providing support for the view that there is something specific *about morality* (that is, viewing something *as moral*) that breeds intolerance for disagreement and divergence.

Moral realism vs. Anti-realism

But, was this higher level of intolerance a function of something being classified as moral, as abolitionists suggest – or something else? To examine this, we ran another repeated measures ANOVA with *classification domain* and *tolerance type* (same as above) as within-participants variables – only this time the domain categories we used were: personal, social, moral realist, and moral anti-realist (and once again, since participants had classified each issue-statement as being objectively or non-objectively grounded for themselves, we calculated the means for grounding by domain separately for each participant and analyses were conducted on these means).

This once again revealed a main effect for domain, $F(3,264) = 8.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, and for tolerance type, $F(3,264) = 40.0$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$, and a significant two-way interaction, $F(9,792) = 102.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .54$.

Paired-sample t-tests were then run, revealing that the increased intolerance toward moral divergence previously found is largely explained by people taking a realist stance. Specifically, participants thought prohibition was much *more acceptable* and condoning was much *less acceptable,* *t*s

(100) = 9.5 and 8.6, *p*s < .001, for those behaviors they considered to be moral and objectively grounded than for those they considered to be moral and non-objectively grounded. The same relation was found when comparing behaviors considered moral and objectively grounded to those considered to be personal, *t*s(112) = 22.0 and 14.2, *p*s < .001, and to those considered to be social, *t*s(103) = 11.2 and 10.0, *p*s < .001. Yet, there was not a significant difference in how acceptable participants found the prohibition or condoning of behaviors they considered to be moral and non-objectively grounded and those they considered to be social, *t*s(129) = 2.0 and 1.6, *p*s > .05 (Figure 2).

Participants were also *less willing* to express positive tolerance, and *more willing* to express negative intolerance, *t*s(100) = 10.1 and 9.0, *p*s < .001, when they considered the behaviors to be moral and objectively grounded than when they considered them to be moral and non-objectively grounded. The same relation was found when comparing behaviors participants considered to be moral and objectively grounded to those they considered to be personal, *t*s(112) = 18.9 and 17.1, *p*s < .001, and to those they considered to be social, *t*s(103) = 13.1 and 11.3, *p*s < .001. Yet, once again, there was not a significant difference in how willing participants were to express positive and negative intolerance between behaviors they considered to be moral and non-objectively grounded and those they considered to be social, *t*s (129) = 2.0 and 1.6, *p*s > .05 (Figure 2).

Participants still displayed greater intolerance for behaviors they had considered moral and non-objectively grounded than for those they considered personal across all four measures, *t*s(137) = 10.7–7.4, *p*s > .05. But

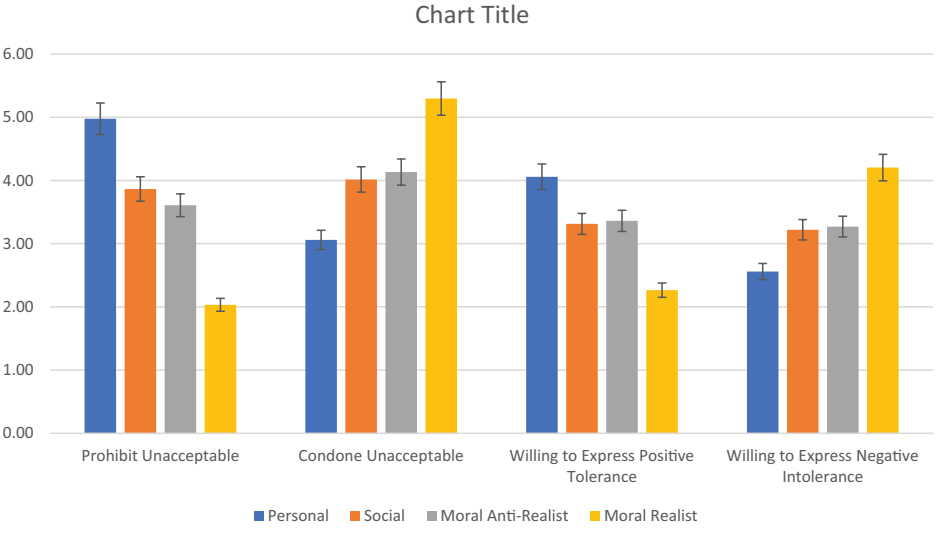

Figure 2. Study 1: Tolerance by domain and grounding.

this is entirely consistent with our hypothesis. After all, no abolitionist that we are aware of argues that we should treat all behaviors as *personal choices*, or that all forms of intolerance are unacceptable. Instead their argument is that all the social regulation of human behavior that we need in order to prevent/punish bad behavior and promote/reward good behavior happens at the level of social norms, rules, regulations, laws, etc. Thus, their problem with morality – with viewing these "bad and good behaviors" as *moral* – is that it adds an *extra level* of intolerance, which is not only unnecessary, but also causes more problems than it is worth.

This makes the comparison between the moral and the social domains the critical one. If the abolitionists are right, then viewing something as moral should generate a higher level of intolerance than viewing it as social. What we have now shown, however, is that there is only a relationship between moral categorization and intolerance when the issue is viewed both as moral and as objectively grounded.

The role of moral conviction and perceived consensus

This suggests that moral realism could really be what is driving people's intolerance; not morality, *per se*. But what sorts of things are related to whether people ground moral issues objectively, and can they help to explain realism's connection to intolerance? Previous research suggests two possibilities – stronger moral conviction and greater levels of perceived consensus within one's community. That is, viewing a moral issue as objectively grounded tends to be accompanied by (or accompany) feeling more convinced about it – about its moral rightness or wrongness – and viewing all others "like you" as agreeing with you (making anyone who disagrees a deviant) (Beebe et al. 2015; Beebe and Sackris 2016; Goodwin and Darley 2008, 2012; Wright, 2018; Wright et al., 2013, 2014).

So, could either of these variables be doing the "heavy lifting" where intolerance is concerned? To answer this question the first thing we looked at is the relationship between moral realism vs anti-realism, moral conviction, and perceived consensus. Analyses showed that both strength of conviction and consensus were positively correlated with the percentage of moral issues participants gave realist groundings, $rs(155) = .47$, $p < .001$ and .29, $p = .004$ respectively. Thus, as we suspected, the tendency to view moral issues as objectively grounded is accompanied by (or accompanies) both stronger conviction and greater perceived consensus.

But do one or both of conviction and consensus mediate the relationship between realism and intolerance – or does realism predict intolerance independently? To examine this, we first needed to create a composite "intolerance" variable, which we did by averaging together all the positive

and negative tolerance questions for each issue-statement identified by participants as moral into one composite variable (a Cronbach's alpha of .86 reinforced the acceptability of doing this).

We then used AMOS 26.0 to analyze a model in which we assumed that perceived consensus would predict moral realism, which would in turn predict strength of conviction – all three of which would also independently predict intolerance (Figure 3). This revealed significant relationships between all variables, except one – people's realism no longer directly predicted intolerance, once entered into this model. In other words, people's perception of consensus in their peer group predicted their being realist about morality (standardized β = .23, p= .004), which predicted the strength of their moral conviction (standardized β = .47, p< .001). In addition, both conviction and consensus continued to independently predict intolerance, while realism ceased to do so (*conviction*: standardized β = .58, p< .001; *consensus*: standardized β = .16, p= . 009; *realism*: standardized β = .12, p= . 07).

To examine the "goodness of fit" of this model, we examined several normally reported indices: the Chi-square (X^2) test, the Normed Fit Index (NFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TFI), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), which all compare the similarity of the covariance matrix predicted by the model and the observed indicators' covariance matrix. Higher values (ideally above .90) for these indices are desirable, as are non-significant X^2 values (Bentler, 1993). Our analysis of the model yielded overall good fit estimates for all three: X^2,1 = 2.501, p= .114, NFI = .983, TFI = .893, and CFI = .989. In addition, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is typically reported, which takes into account model complexity. Our RMSEA score was .09 (lower = .00, upper = .258). While typically RMSEA values below .05 indicate a good fit, the corresponding PCLOSE

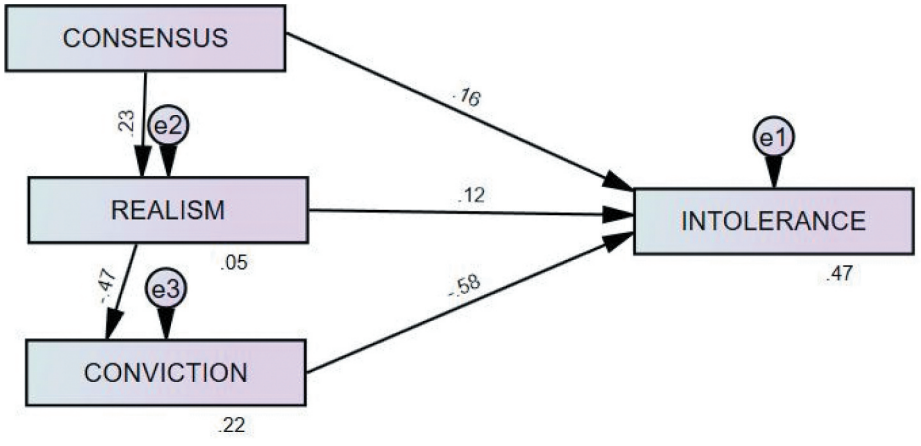

Figure 3. Study 1: Model of consensus, conviction, and grounding.

analysis of our RMSEA confidence interval was non-significant (.183), indicating that the model was a suitably "close" fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; MacCallum et al., 1996). Importantly, we ran a variety of other models, including one in which we removed the regression pathway between realism and intolerance, and this was overall the best fitting model, one that conceptually makes sense.

Discussion

The results from Study 1 support the view that moral judgments are in fact – as the abolitionists suggest – accompanied by more intolerance than other sorts of socially-relevant judgments. Yet, it appears that this increased intolerance is related to only *certain kinds* of moral judgments, namely those given objective (realist) groundings. When people ground moral issues non-objectively (e.g., on their own and their culture's moral beliefs, values, etc.) they do not show the same elevated intolerance, despite viewing the issues as moral. This suggests that the extra intolerance associated with morality may be driven by viewing the rightness/wrongness of moral issues as grounded by objective facts.

Importantly, though, even this isn't the whole story, as our findings suggest that other factors are playing a critical predictive role here. Specifically, people expressed stronger conviction and a greater level of perceived consensus for those moral issues they gave realist groundings than for those they gave anti-realist groundings. And our model supported the supposition that simply viewing issues as objectively grounded *by itself* is not significantly related to greater intolerance.

Specifically, we found that people's perception of shared consensus (most people in my community would agree with me) predicted their tendency to be realist about moral issues, which predicted the strength of their convictions about those issues, which (in turn) predicted their intolerance for divergence. While their perception of consensus also remained predictive of their intolerance (as anyone who disagrees would be seen as an "outsider" not to be tolerated), the degree of their realism did not, suggesting that the connection between realism and intolerance is mediated by people's conviction.

Of course, there are several limitations to Study 1, most of which pertain to our measure of moral objectivity. Elsewhere we argued that the layered disagreement measure that we used in Study 1 is more valid than previous measures for ascertaining people's meta-ethical intuitions (Pölzler & Wright 2020). Nonetheless, it is still vulnerable to a few important objections. In Study 2 we developed alternative measures to accommodate these worries.

First, our original measure provided several ways of being anti-realist, but only one specific way of being realist.[5] This unequal distribution was necessitated by our attempting to discriminate between several dominant anti-realist views.[6] In Study 2 we dropped two of these views: divine command theory and error theory. In a previous study (Pölzler & Wright 2020) and in Study 1 only few participants chose these views, so eliminating them seemed like a straightforward way to make the options more balanced.

A second potential worry concerns the specific formulation of our answer options. Following the interpretation of the presented situation (e.g., "One person is right and the other one is wrong") these options also involved a brief explanation of this interpretation (e.g., "Please note that this could be the case for several reasons: for example, because the truth of the people's sentences is objective, or because it is determined by the dominant moral beliefs in their culture, or because it is determined by the commandments of God"). While introduced to minimize confusion, these explanations could have nonetheless prompted explicit reasoning about moral objectivity or otherwise biased people's intuitive responses. A more implicit measure may introduce less bias (see Pölzler et al.,; Zijlstra forthcoming), so we removed these additional explanations from our answer options.

Another worry is that previous research suggests that perceptions of societal disagreement influence people's metaethical intuitions – specifically, the more society disagrees about a moral issue the more likely the issue is to receive an anti-realist grounding (e.g., Ayars & Nichols, 2020; Goodwin & Darley, 2012; Wright et al., 2013, 2014). Thus, by focusing on moral disagreements, and suggesting a high prevalence of such disagreements, we may have led people to regard item statements as *less* realist than they would otherwise have regarded them.[7] To rule this out, we presented half of Study 2 participants with a task asking them to interpret a case of agreement as well.

Also, in Study 1 participants only received the cross-cultural disagreement task if they answered the intra-cultural tasks in a particular way. While metaethically sensible, from a psychological perspective this might have decreased the salience of cross-cultural moral disagreement. Had this been more salient to participants, they may have answered differently, increasing the frequency of cultural relativism in the cross-cultural tasks. In Study 2 we therefore presented participants with the intra-cultural and the cross-cultural disagreement tasks side by side (see also Sarkissian et al., 2011), and our new agreement measure started with a cross-cultural scenario.

Finally, in our original measure we stated all answer options in terms of the disagreeing parties being "right" or "wrong". These terms are ambiguous. Some participants may not have applied our intended interpretation –

the parties are *correct* or *incorrect* – but instead assumed that the terms express a *moral* evaluation. To avoid this misunderstanding, Study 2 used the terms "correct" and "incorrect".

Study 2

Methods

Participants

We had 259 participants take the survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Eight participants failed over 10% of standard attention checks, leaving 251 participants (116 disagreement condition; 134 agreement condition), 49% male, 51% female; 79% Caucasian, 6% African-American, 5% Asian-American, 6% Hispanic, 3% other. The average age was 37.1 years (SD = 10.7). We felt that a sample at or above 200 participants provided sufficient power for our analyses, given previous research conducted in our lab and the fact that now we had two main between-subject conditions. The methods and results of Study 2 below report all measures and conditions used, as well as all data exclusions.

Design

To save time, we reduced the number of randomly presented issues to 14 (dropping one factual statement). Also, we randomly assigned people to one of the two different meta-ethical scenario options. For the disagreement measure, we used the same design as Study 1, except for removing the Divine Command Theory and Error Theory choice options and presenting the intra-cultural and cross-cultural situations side by side. For the new agreement/disagreement measure, we tried to offset the biasing effects of being exposed to disagreement by starting with a situation in which two people agreed with each other before asking them to consider a situation in which they disagreed.

Option 1: Disagreement measure.

> Consider the following situation. Two people who are members of the same culture or community discuss whether [ISSUE] is okay. One person says that [INSERT ISSUE] is okay. The other person says that [ISSUE] is not okay. Which interpretation of this situation seems most appropriate to you?
>
> (A1) One of these two people is correct and the other one is incorrect
>
> (A2) Both people are correct
>
> (A3) Neither person is correct or incorrect
>
> Consider the following situation. Two people who are members of different cultures or communities discuss whether [ISSUE] is okay. The person who says that [ISSUE] is okay is from a culture or community in which most people believe that this action is

> okay. The person who says that [INSERT ISSUE] is not okay is from a culture or community in which most people believe that this action is not okay. Which interpretation of this situation seems most appropriate to you?
>
> (B1) One of these two people is correct and the other one is incorrect
>
> (B2) Both people are correct
>
> (B3) Neither person is correct or incorrect

For each item-statement we coded meta-ethical positions based on the following choice patterns:

- **Realism**: A1 and B1
- **Cultural Relativism**: A1 and B2
- **Individual Subjectivism**: A2 and B2
- **Non-Cognitivism**: A3 and B3
- **Nonstandard**: any other combination

Option 2: Agreement/Disagreement measure.

> Consider the following situation. Two people who are members of different cultures or communities discuss whether [ISSUE] is okay. They both say that this action is okay.
>
> The first person who says that [ISSUE] is okay is from a culture or community in which most people believe that this action is okay.
>
> The second person who says that [ISSUE] is okay is from a culture or community in which most people believe that this action is not okay.
>
> Which interpretation of this situation seems most appropriate to you?
>
> (A1) The first person is correct and the second person is incorrect
>
> (A2) Both people are correct or both people are incorrect
>
> (A3) Neither person is correct or incorrect
>
> Consider the following situation. Two people who are members of the same culture or community discuss whether [ISSUE] is okay. One person says that [ISSUE] is okay. The other person says that [INSERT ISSUE] is not okay. Which interpretation of this situation seems most appropriate to you?
>
> (B1) One of these two people is correct and the other one is incorrect
>
> (B2) Both people are correct
>
> (B3) Neither person is correct or incorrect

For each item-statement we coded meta-ethical positions based on the following choice patterns:

- **Realism**: A2 and B1
- **Cultural Relativism**: A1 and B1
- **Individual Subjectivism**: A2 and B2
- **Non-Cognitivism**: A3 and B3
- **Nonstandard**: any other combination

Tolerance tasks. Regardless of which meta-ethical option people received, the same tolerance questions were asked as in Study 1. Once again, the order of the metaethics and tolerance tasks was counterbalanced.

Results

Domain classification/Grounding

Table 3 shows the breakdown of the domain classifications for both options: six issues were dominantly classified as moral, three as social, three as personal, and two as factual. Of the six issues classified as moral, two were given dominantly anti-realist groundings and four dominantly realist groundings. Those classified as social and personal were given dominantly anti-realist groundings and those classified as factual were given dominantly realist groundings.

Moral domain as domain of intolerance

We once again created a composite "intolerance" variable by averaging together all the positive and negative tolerance questions for each issue-statement identified by participants as moral into one composite variable (Cronbach's alpha of .88). We then ran a repeated measures ANOVA with *classification domain* (personal/social/moral/factual) and *tolerance type* as within-participants variables (Figure 4). This revealed a main effect for domain, $F(3,696) = 5.9$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .025$, and tolerance type, $F(4,928) = 46.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$, and a significant two-way interaction, $F(12,2784) = 189.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$. Again, participants were more intolerant of divergence for those issues that they had classified as moral. Specifically, they thought prohibition of behaviors was more acceptable, $ts(235) = 2.8–16.3$, $ps < .001$-$.005$, and condoning them was more unacceptable, $ts(235) = 5.5–15.5$, $ps < 001$, when they were considered moral. Participants were also less willing to express positive tolerance, $ts(235) = 8.0–9.8$, $ps < 001$, and more willing to express negative intolerance, $ts(235) = 9.6–22.6$, $ps < 001$ (Figure 4).

When we added *condition* (disagreement/agreement) as a between-participant variable to the analysis, this revealed a main effect for condition, $F(1,231) = 11.3$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, though there were no significant interactions with the other variables. In general, participants who were in the Disagree condition expressed a higher level of intolerance than those in the Agree condition. When compared across the different domains and categories of

Table 3. Domain clasifications and groundings across conditions.

Option 1: Disagreement						
	Personal	Social	Moral	Factual	Anti-Realist	Realist
Selling children on the internet	3%	7%	**87%**	3%	12%	**81%**
Stealing money and/or supplies from the large company where you work	5%	7%	**85%**	3%	21%	**70%**
Consciously discriminating against another person on the basis of gender or race	14%	24%	**59%**	3%	16%	**73%**
Having sex with people other than your spouse or romantic partner (without him/her knowing)	18%	10%	**69%**	3%	35%	**42%**
Refusing to provide help to people who obviously need it	22%	9%	**67%**	3%	**51%**	41%
Eating factory-farmed meat	**64%**	5%	27%	4%	**70%**	15%
Smoking cigarettes in enclosed public space	22%	**45%**	21%	12%	24%	**55%**
Helping terminally ill patients end their lives	16%	7%	**74%**	3%	**54%**	29%
Watching pornographic videos	**66%**	6%	26%	2%	**59%**	28%
Burning the American flag	18%	**52%**	29%	1%	41%	41%
Wearing your pajamas to an important business meeting	33%	**63%**	3%	1%	**56%**	27%
Getting tattoos and/or body piercings	**83%**	7%	7%	3%	**65%**	18%
Boston (Massachusetts) is farther north than Miami (Florida)	6%	4%	3%	**87%**	9%	**84%**
On earth, the chemical formula of water molecules is H2O	3%	3%	2%	**91%**	10%	**84%**
Option 2: Agreement						
	Personal	Social	Moral	Factual	Anti-Realist	Realist
Selling children on the internet	4%	9%	**86%**	1%	13%	**51%**
Stealing money and/or supplies from the large company where you work	9%	9%	**79%**	3%	24%	**42%**
Consciously discriminating against another person on the basis of gender or race	11%	19%	**69%**	1%	22%	**43%**
Having sex with people other than your spouse or romantic partner (without him/her knowing)	20%	8%	**69%**	2%	35%	**37%**
Refusing to provide help to people who obviously need it	23%	14%	**62%**	1%	**42%**	36%
Eating factory-farmed meat	**61%**	13%	21%	4%	**59%**	14%
Smoking cigarettes in enclosed public space	25%	**46%**	18%	11%	38%	34%
Helping terminally ill patients end their lives	22%	13%	**62%**	2%	**57%**	22%
Watching pornographic videos	**67%**	11%	19%	3%	**57%**	20%
Burning the American flag	19%	**50%**	28%	3%	**53%**	22%
Wearing your pajamas to an important business meeting	31%	**60%**	5%	4%	**49%**	22%
Getting tattoos and/or body piercings	**79%**	13%	7%	1%	**50%**	22%
Boston (Massachusetts) is farther north than Miami (Florida)	7%	9%	2%	**82%**	40%	**46%**
On earth, the chemical formula of water molecules is H2O	4%	2%	4%	**89%**	**48%**	43%

tolerance, there was very little discernible difference between the two (Figure 5). This suggests, among other things, that our emphasis on disagreement in Study 1 did not overly bias participants' responses in one direction or the other.

Moral realism vs. Anti-realism

As in Study 1, we ran another repeated measures ANOVA with *domain* – personal, social, moral realism, and moral anti-realism – and *tolerance type* as within-participants variables. This revealed a main effect for domain, *F*

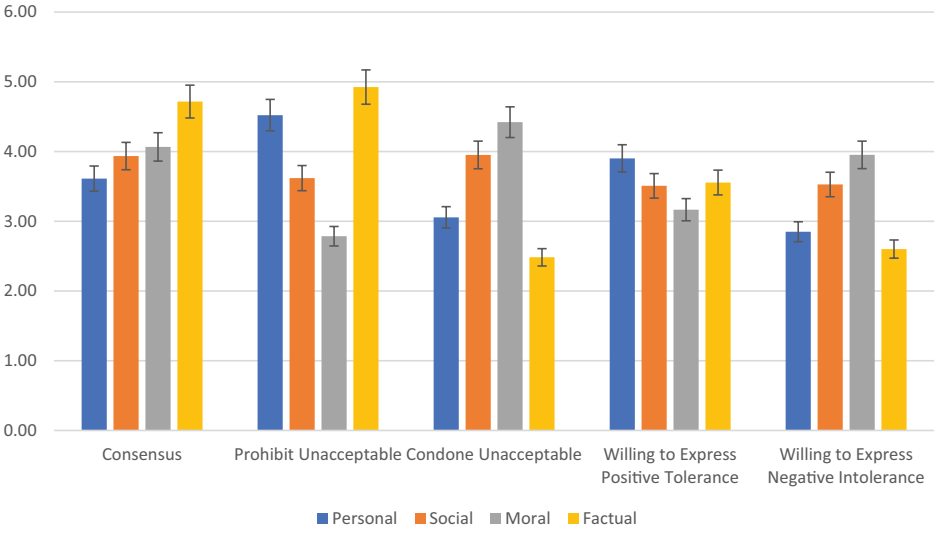

Figure 4. Study 2: Tolerance by domain.

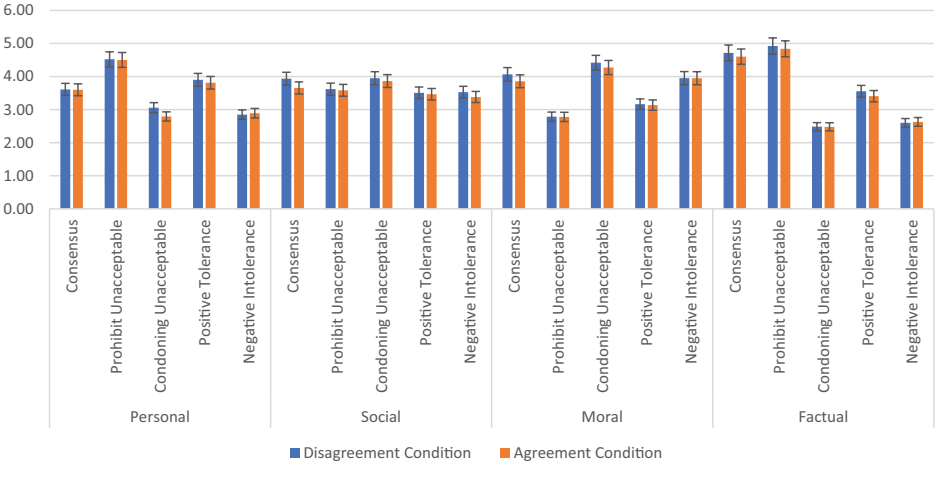

Figure 5. Study 2: Tolerance by domain (Disagreement and agreement options).

(3,267) = 3.2, p= .04, and tolerance type, F(4,356) = 13.1, p< .001, η^2 = .13, and a significant interaction, F(12,1068) = 50.6, p< .001, η^2 = .36. Again, there was an increased intolerance for those issues people had categorized as morally realist, but not anti-realist. People treated the moral issues they had given anti-realist groundings the same as issues they had classified as social. Thus, in line with Study 1, the extra intolerance that abolitionists attribute to moral judgments appears largely to be a function of the relationship between intolerance and grounding moral issues objectively (Figure 6).

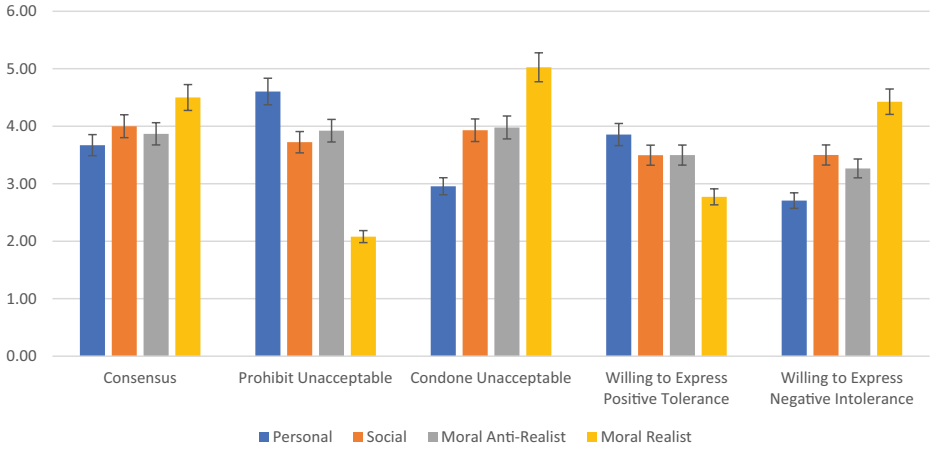

Figure 6. Study 2: Tolerance by domain and grounding.

Once again, we added *condition* (disagreement/ agreement) as a between-participant variable to the analysis. This revealed a main effect for condition, $F(1,88) = 8.0$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .08$, with no significant interactions with the other variables. Participants who were in the Disagree condition expressed a higher level of intolerance than those in the Agree condition. When compared across the different domains and categories of tolerance, there was little discernible difference between the agreement and disagreement conditions.

Moral conviction and perceived consensus

We next investigated the relationship between moral realism, conviction, and consensus. Analyses showed that both strength of conviction and consensus were positively correlated with the percentage of moral issues to which they gave realist groundings, $rs(248) = .29$, $p < .001$ and .30, $p < .001$ respectively. Thus, as in Study 1, the tendency to view moral issues as objectively grounded was accompanied by (or accompanied) both stronger conviction and greater perceived consensus; and both conviction and consensus were strongly correlated with participants' intolerance – $rs(248) = .60$, $p < .001$ and .39, $p < .001$ respectively, with this relationship once again being strongest for conviction.

We then used AMOS 26.0 to analyze the same model proposed in Study 1 (Figure 7). This revealed significant relationships between all variables – this time, including one between realism and intolerance. In other words, people's perception of consensus predicted their realism about morality (standardized $\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), which predicted the strength of their moral conviction (standardized $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$). In addition, conviction,

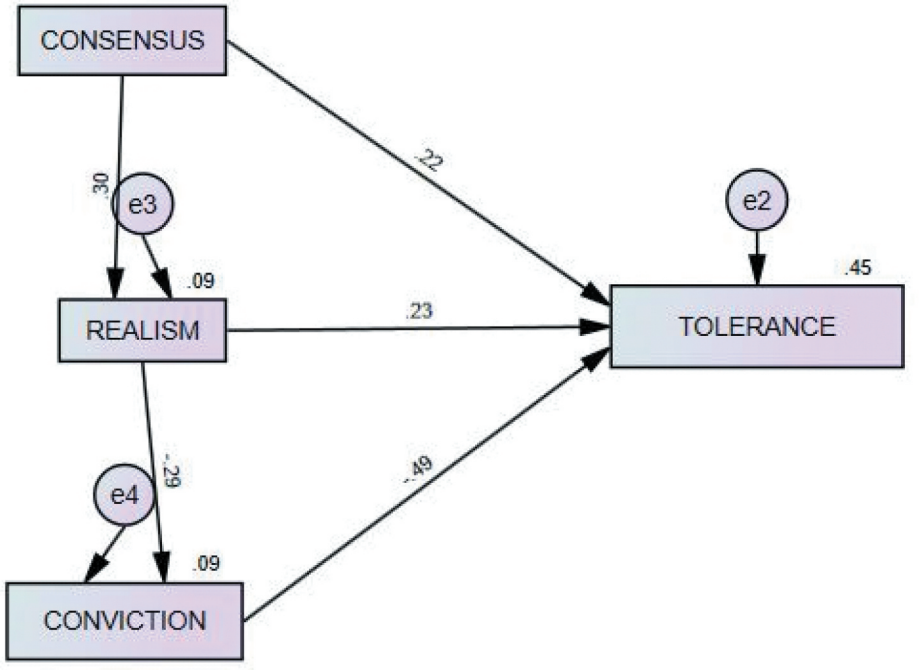

Figure 7. Study 2: Model of consensus, conviction, and grounding.

consensus, and realism all independently predicted intolerance (*conviction*: standardized β = .49, $p < .001$; *consensus*: standardized β = .22, $p < .001$; *realism*: standardized β = .23, $p < .001$).

One issue with this model is that the "goodness of fit" was reasonable, but not as good as in Study 1: X^2,1 = 6.285, $p = .012$, NFI = .97, TFI = .732, and CFI = .973. Our RMSEA score was .15 (lower = .054, upper = .263), with a significant PCLOSE analysis (.043), indicating that the model was not a suitably "close" fit.

Once again, we tested alternative models with these variables, none of which produced a better fit. Thus, we decided to re-run the model with the addition of the "condition" variable included, indicating which condition participants received (Agree/Disagree). Since condition was correlated with both realism ($r = .30$, $p < .001$) and perceived consensus ($r = .30$, $p < .001$), we entered it into the model accordingly. We also found that including a direct pathway between condition and intolerance improved the model fit, so we included that as well, with the final model displayed in Figure 8. This showed that the condition participants received was significantly predictive of *consensus* (standardized β = .15, $p = .018$), *realism* (standardized β = .26, $p < .001$), and *intolerance* (standardized β = .26, $p < .001$). While the betas shifted slightly, all the other relationships between the variables remained the same, and the "goodness of fit" showed a much stronger model: X^2,1 = 6.762, $p = .034$, NFI = .97, TFI = .84, and

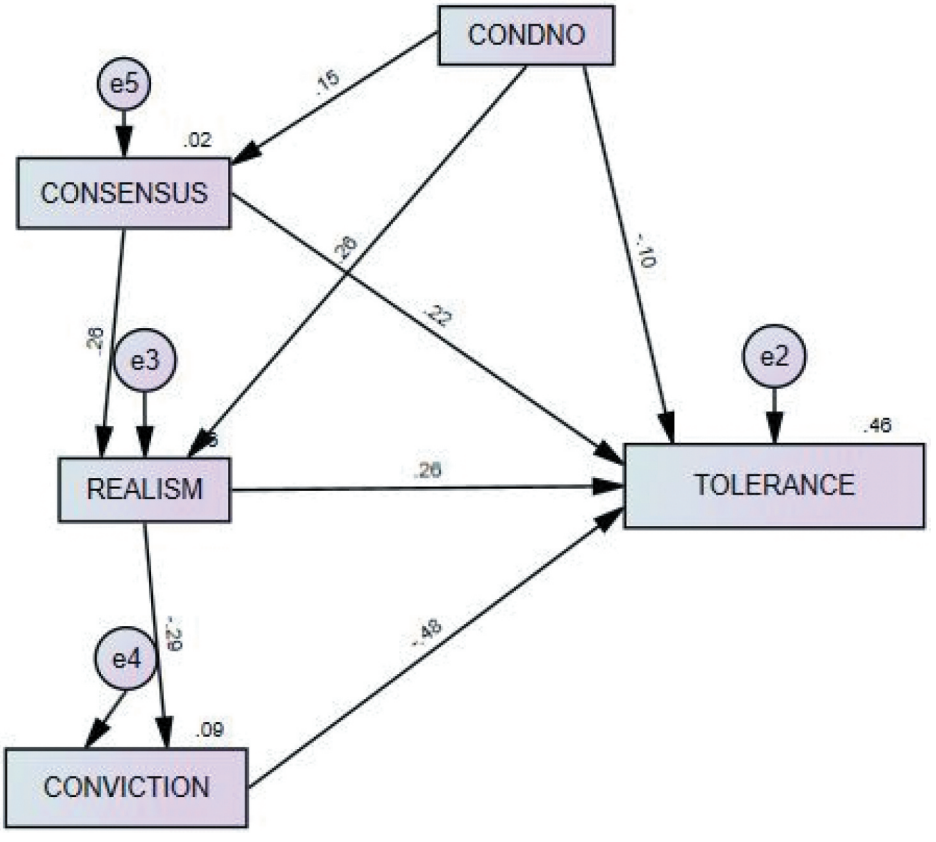

Figure 8. Study 2: Model of consensus, conviction, and grounding W/ condition.

CFI = .98. Our RMSEA score was .098 (lower = .023, upper = .183), with a non-significant PCLOSE analysis (.119), indicating that the model is not a suitably "close" fit.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1, even after addressing several potential methodological concerns, with the noted exception of only a partial mediation model, since realism remained independently predictive of intolerance. Nonetheless, once again, we found that people's perception of shared consensus predicted their tendency to be realists about moral issues, which predicted the strength of their convictions about those issues – and both independently predicted tolerance.

Across both studies, conviction was by far the strongest predictor of intolerance. This raises the following question: What is the nature of the relationship between realism and conviction, and why is it so strongly related to increased intolerance? One insight comes from a discussion of the vice of moral arrogance – or "smugness" (Lenman, 2014) – that often

accompanies realism (even though it is not necessitated by it; Brink, 1989). Here, the thought is that realism engenders an unwarranted sense of certainty and superiority over one's interlocuter(s). This means that not only do realists (by definition) hold that for every case of moral disagreement, only one side can be right; they also assume that if they happen to be involved in any of those disagreements themselves, then they can feel confident that *they* (not the other parties) are the ones that are right. If this is correct, then it suggests a reason why conviction is a much stronger predictor of intolerance than perceived consensus – and that is because while believing that everyone else agrees with you is clearly relevant to whether or not you have to tolerate an "outsider", being morally arrogant about your own views would likely foster intolerance regardless of whether you happen to think everyone else agrees with you or not.

One recommended remedy for such "smugness" in the face of moral disagreement is a healthy dose of humility, which involves the acknowledgment of one's fallibility and proneness to error, embracing the incompleteness and fragility of one's understanding of the world, resulting in an openness to new information and divergent views (Brink, 1989; Tangney, 2000).

In other words, protecting against the socially problematic intolerance that comes with realism may not necessarily require that we cease to be realists, only that we cultivate traits that combat the pernicious effects that accompany it, i.e., an inflexible mind-set, closemindedness, a sense of infallibility, feelings of superiority, etc. In short, we need to cultivate a healthy level of humility.

As Lenman writes:

> I don't often catch myself thinking, I think wanton cruelty is wrong but maybe I'm wrong about that. And I don't think I am much at fault not thinking this. On the other hand, I shouldn't make things too easy for myself by exploiting too readily the emotional buttons [i.e., that generate intolerance for divergence] I know examples like this must press. I know too, after all, that history is full of people who held, with equally unshakably confidence, moral beliefs that I no less confidently reject. (p. 10)

As strongly as we may feel about our moral views, they need to always be accompanied with a healthy dose of humility; understanding that, in the end, it may turn out that we are wrong, as so many other of our epistemic peers have been in the past. We are, after all, no more immune to fallibility and error than they were.

But is it indeed the case that humility mitigates the intolerance that accompanies strong conviction and moral realism? If so, then we should expect dispositional humility to predict reduced intolerance, even for those moral issues people ground objectively.

Of course, even if this were the case, there are several distinct possible pathways through which humility and decreased intolerance are related. It could be, for example, that humility is directly related to intolerance – the higher someone's humility, the less intolerant they are of moral disagreement, even for issues they view as objective and for which they have strong conviction. But it could also be that humility is related to weaker conviction; thus, people high in humility feel less conviction toward moral issues they view as objective, which (since conviction mediates the relationship between realism and intolerance) explains their lower intolerance. Or, finally, it could be that humility is related to decreased realism: people high in humility are more anti-realist, and thus less intolerant.

To investigate the relationship between humility, realism, conviction, and intolerance, we conducted a third study that included the *Dual-Dimension Humility Scale* recently developed by Wright et al. (2018) to measure people's dispositional humility.

Study 3

Methods

Participants

We had 100 participants take the survey through Amazon Mechanical Turk. No participants failed over 10% of the attention checks, leaving all 100 participants, 52% male, 48% female; 74% Caucasian, 13% African-American, 6% Asian-American, 5% Hispanic, 2% other. The average age was 35.4 years (SD = 10.6). Once again, we felt that a sample at or above 100 participants provided sufficient power for our analyses. The methods and results of Study 3 below report all measures and conditions used, as well as all data exclusions.

Design

The survey was identical to the one used in Study 1,[8] with the inclusion of the *DDHS* scale (Wright et al., 2018).

Results

First, we repeated all the analyses run in Studies 1 and 2 to confirm that the same effects of, and relationships between, realism and conviction were present. These analyses confirmed the same pattern of results: i.e., increased intolerance for issues classified as moral, which was driven by the moral issues given realist groundings. And once again, people's conviction was related to both their realism and intolerance for moral divergence.

We then turned our attention to the relationships between humility and realism, conviction, and intolerance.

Humility as tolerance-increasing

The reliability of our humility scale was high (α = .91). As hypothesized, it was related to decreased intolerance, $r(100) = -.32$, $p = .001$. We ran a repeated measures ANOVA with *domain* and *tolerance type* as within-participant variables and *humility* (low vs. high, based on a mean-split, $M = 3.02$) as a between-participants variable. This revealed a main effect for domain, $F(3,270) = 20.3$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$ and tolerance type, $F(3,270) = 9.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, and a significant 2-way interaction between domain and tolerance, $F(9,810) = 56.8$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .56$. There was also a significant 2-way interaction between tolerance and humility level, $F(9,810) = 1.9$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Specifically, participants high in humility reported less intolerance than those low in humility, across all domains, *t*s(98) = 1.8–2.2, *p*s = .029-.041 (Figure 9).

Moral realism vs. Anti-realism

Humility was also related to decreased intolerance for both anti-realist and realist moral divergence, *r*s(100) = .27 and .26, *p*s = .011 and .032. We ran a repeated measures ANOVA with *moral grounding* (realism/anti-realism) and *tolerance type* as within-participant variables and *humility* (low/high) as a between-participants variable. This revealed no main effect for grounding, $F(1,54) = .27$, *ns*. But there was a main effect for tolerance type, $F(4,216) = 45.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .46$, and a significant 2-way interaction between tolerance and grounding, $F(4,216) = 58.2$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .52$.

There was also a significant 2-way interaction between tolerance and humility level, $F(4,216) = 2.9$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Specifically, participants high in humility reported that the prohibition of moral divergence was more unacceptable, whether objectively or non-objectively grounded, *t*s(68–84) = 2.3–2.5, *p*s = .014-.024, and they were less willing to express negative

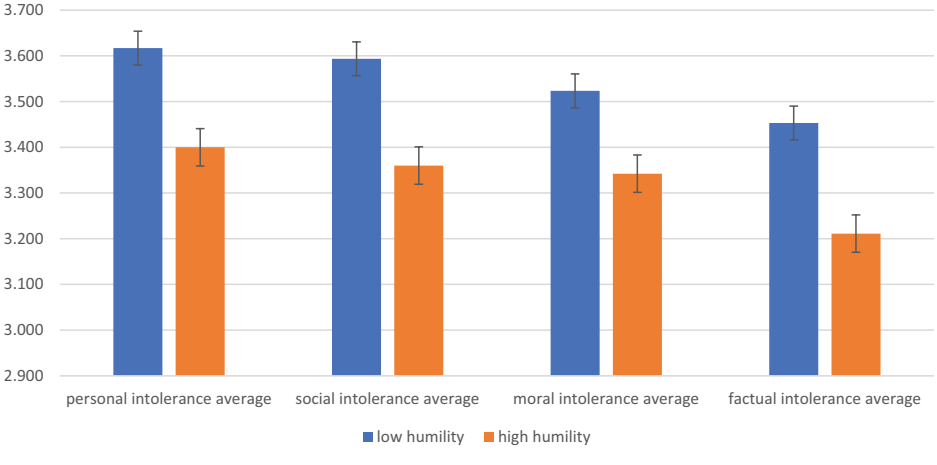

Figure 9. Study 3: Tolerance by domain and level of humility.

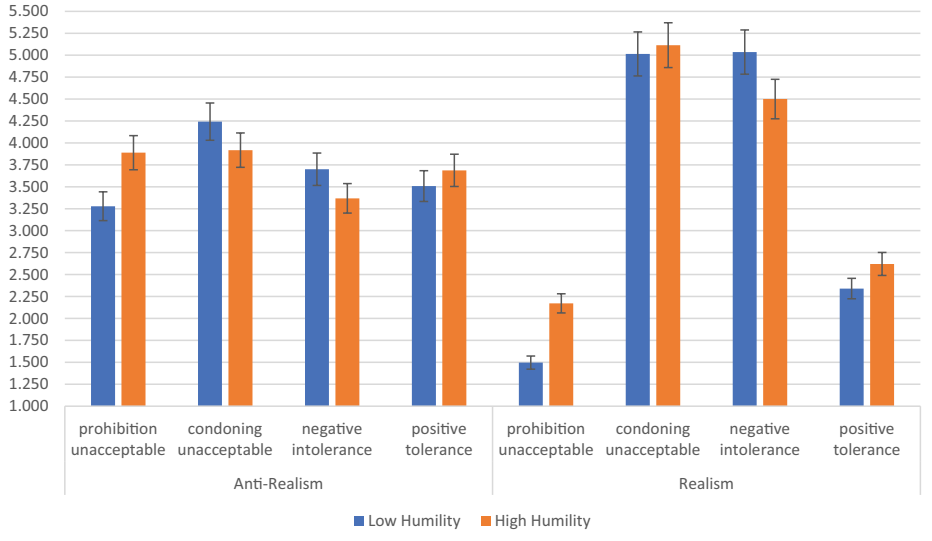

Figure 10. Study 3: Tolerance by grounding and level of humility.

tolerance for objectively grounded moral divergence, *t*s(68–84) = 2.2–2.5, *p*s = .014-.022 (Figure 10). In other words, people high in humility were less likely to want to prevent people from expressing and practicing their divergent moral views, and also less willing to shun, shame, or punish those who held them (even when they regarded these views as being objectively grounded).

Moral conviction

Thus far, we have established that humility is related to reduced intolerance, especially for those moral issues given objective groundings. But is this a direct effect? Or is this because humility is related to the reduction of either conviction or realism – or both?

To answer this, we used AMOS 26.0 to analyze a model in which we assumed that, once again, realism predicted conviction, which predicted intolerance. Then we regressed humility onto all three: realism, conviction, and intolerance. The best fitting model showed indeed that realism predicted conviction (standardized β = .49, $p < .001$), which predicted intolerance (standardized β = .57, $p < .001$). Interestingly, humility independently predicted reductions in all three (*conviction*: standardized β = .32, $p < .001$; *realism*: standardized β = .24, $p = .012$; *intolerance*: standardized β = .21, $p = .009$). Goodness of fit indices indicated a good fit for the model: X^2,1 = 2.085, $p = .149$, NFI = .983, TFI = .945, and CFI = .981. In addition, the RMSEA score was .10 (lower = .00, upper = .310), with the corresponding PCLOSE analysis being non-significant (.198), indicating that the model

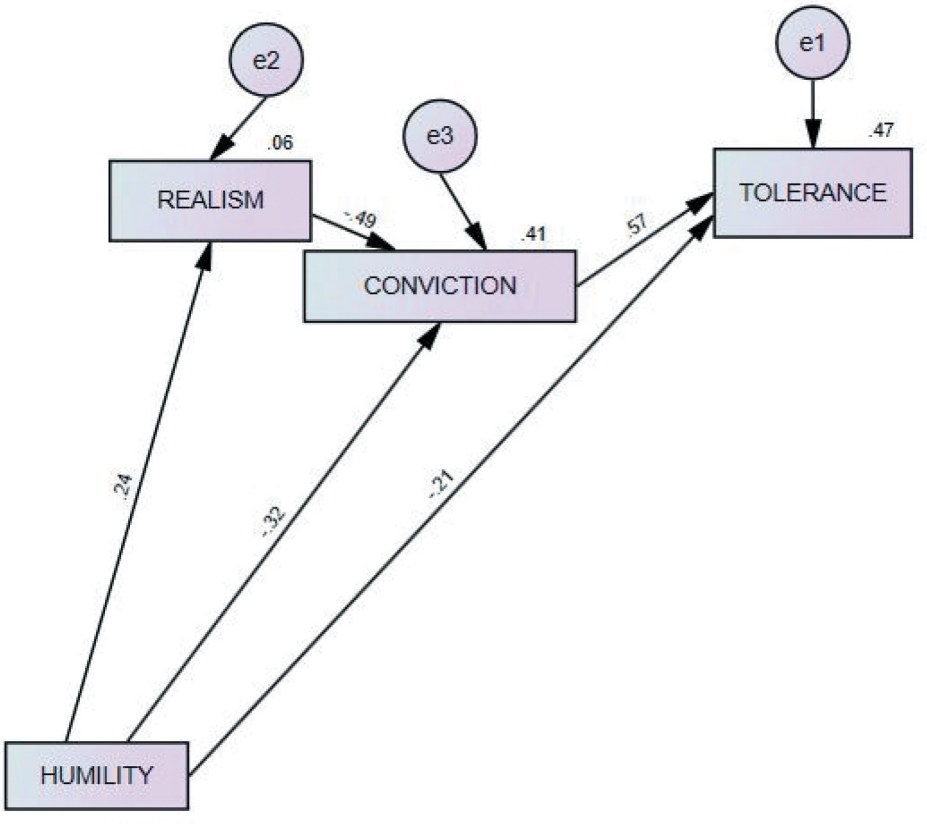

Figure 11. Study 3: Model of realism, conviction, and humility.

was a suitably "close" fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; MacCallum et al., 1996). In short, the answer to the question of whether the relationship between humility and intolerance is direct or indirect is that it is *both* (Figure 11).

Though humility was not significantly correlated with perceived consensus, $r(100) = .173$, $p = .09$, we nonetheless ran one additional model that included consensus, assuming the same relationships with realism and intolerance found in Studies 1 and 2, in order to see if this further improved model fit. This model showed that consensus was indeed still predictive of *realism* (standardized $\beta = .19$, $p = .046$) and *intolerance* (standardized $\beta = .20$, $p = .004$). Overall, this improved the model fit: $X^2,1 = 4.972$, $p = .174$, NFI = .964, TFI = .949, and CFI = .985. In addition, the RMSEA score was .08 (lower = .00, upper = .204), with the corresponding PCLOSE analysis being non-significant (.264), indicating that the model was a suitably "close" fit (Figure 12).

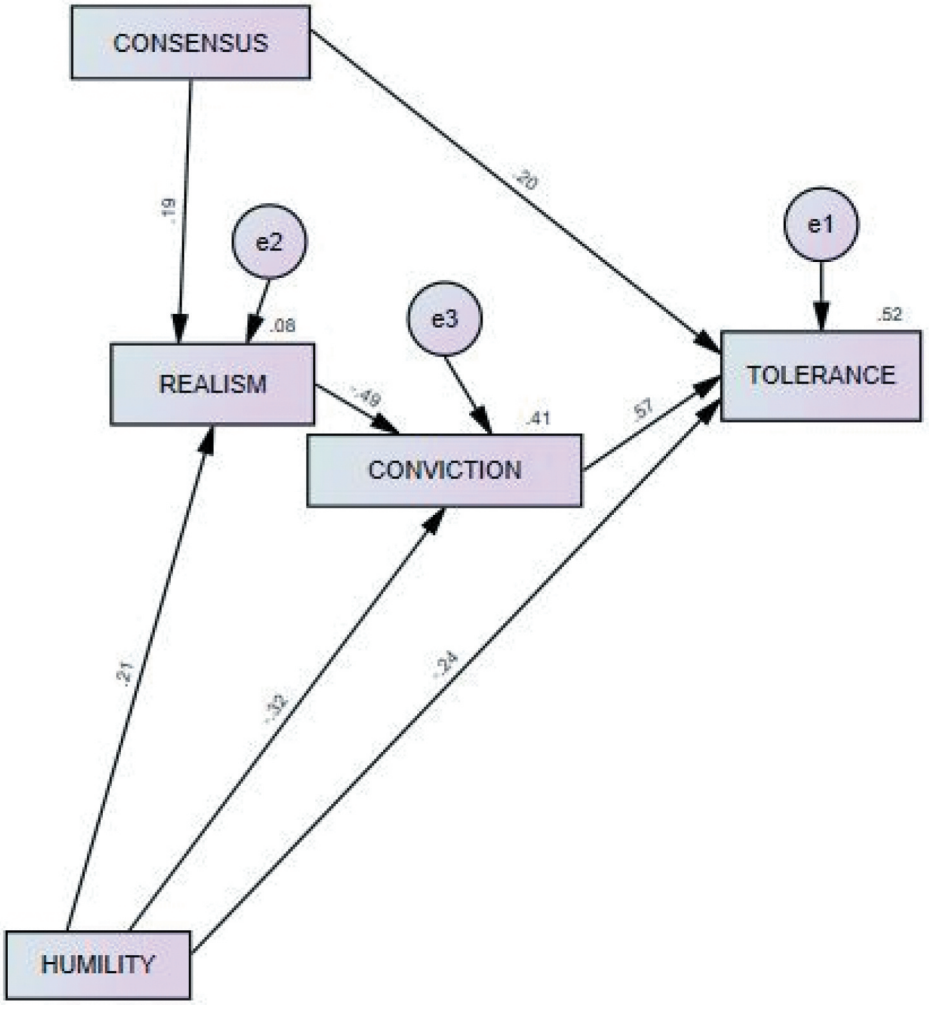

Figure 12. Study 3: Model of consensus, realism, conviction, and humility.

Discussion

The main take-away from Study 3 is that humility does indeed have a palliative effect on intolerance, both directly and indirectly. First, it was directly related to reduced intolerance – an effect that did not go away when other variables were added to the equation. Second, humility was indirectly related to intolerance through conviction (which was directly related to intolerance), and through realism (which was in turn related to intolerance through conviction). It hence turned out that humility is indeed related to reduced intolerance, both directly and indirectly, by predicting weaker conviction and less realism, which in turn, predicted reduced intolerance.

General discussion

Moral abolitionists claim that we ought to stop judging things as being morally right/wrong, good/bad, etc. One of their most influential arguments for this recommendation – the one we focused on in our studies – is the argument from intolerance. Proponents of this argument hold that morality must be abolished because it makes us less tolerant; it "inflames disputes" by tending to "excite and confuse the parties involved", as Garner (2007, p. 502) put it; inducing an unreasonable and worrisome smugness toward those who disagree.

But is this argument empirically supported? Does morality really decrease tolerance? While the studies we reported here do suggest that moral classification and intolerance for divergence are related, they also support the hypothesis (endorsed by Goodwin & Darley, 2012; Wright, 2018; Wright et al., 2013, 2014) that this effect is not so much due to the classification of an issue as moral, but rather to the associated metaethical grounding. Even using our improved measures of moral realism, participants who regarded moral issues as being objectively grounded showed higher attitudinal and behavioral intolerance than participants who were anti-realists in their moral grounding.

Importantly, though, we also showed that the intolerance associated with realism is at least partially mediated by conviction – people tend to feel more strongly about those moral issues they ground objectively and thus, are more prone to feel morally "smug" toward those who disagree with them. One remedy for this that has been recommended is humility, which we found is indeed related to a reduction of intolerance, in part indirectly through a reduction in realism and moral conviction, and in part through a direct reduction in intolerance, perhaps by helping people to keep in mind the bigger picture.

In sum, our results provide a substantive empirical challenge to the moral abolitionists' argument from intolerance. They suggest that morality, by itself, is *not* necessarily related to an increased intolerance for divergence. Moreover, they suggest that the psychological forces related to intolerance (namely, realism and moral conviction) can be counteracted, in particular, by cultivating humility.

Perhaps, then, we can both eat our moral pie and have it too. Given the right kind of upbringing, education, information, etc., a "tolerant morality" can and should be realized, and may further our social interests more strongly than completely abolishing the practice of making moral judgments.

Of course, challenging an argument against the abolition of morality is not the same thing as providing an *argument for* morality. Is there such an argument to be made? While the answer may not be found in the data we reported here, we nonetheless think that there is plenty of research

suggesting that it can. For example, Wright et al. (2013) found – as we found here – that people did not completely agree with each other about which issues should be classified as moral, but they nonetheless strongly agreed with one another about *why* they held their classifications. Specifically, these studies revealed that whenever people classified something as moral, they focused their attention on the potential *harm* and *injustice* to innocent others associated with the issues under consideration (e.g., rape, discrimination against minorities, etc.) – outcomes that they wanted to prevent. And arguably, these sorts of considerations are not only important to consider, there are times when they need to be highlighted and brought to the forefront of our social deliberations.

In other words, morality may serve the critical role of bringing into focus issues of harm and fairness – and the potential for people to be harmed and treated unfairly – so that we can make course corrections (where warranted) to protect and promote our individual and collective wellbeing. While "moralizing" an issue comes with the potential risk of inflaming people's righteous indignation (their refusal to tolerate divergence), there have been times in our history when this was a risk worth taking, especially since we appear to have ways of managing and mitigating it.

There is one additional cautionary note worth mentioning, though, and that is the fact that perceived consensus predicted intolerance, both indirectly, by increasing realism (which in turn, increases conviction, and, therefore, intolerance), and directly. One thing this suggests is that intolerance for divergent beliefs, values, and practices can easily breed in small, homogenous groups; groups whose members all share the same views. This suggests that one additional step we must be careful to take is to widen our group identities to include a wide swath of beliefs, values, and practices. The more diversity in views we are exposed to, the more tolerant of those differences we will become.

Notes

1. Proponents of abolitionism are not only critical of morality's effects on our well-being, but also of its philosophical soundness. Most often they have argued that it rests on a flawed presupposition – namely, that while moral judgments purport to represent moral facts (or more specifically, facts of a certain kind, e.g., objective and categorically prescriptive facts), the world is devoid of such facts, making our moral judgments necessarily false. Like astrology or discourse about witches or phlogiston, morality rests on a fundamental error – it presupposes things that do not exist (see Mackie, 2011 for the classic formulation of this error theoretic or nihilist stance). Yet, even if one accepts that there are moral truths one may still harbor doubts about the value of moral judgments. And it is coherent to hold that we would be better off if we ignored them (for a discussion of the possibility of "realist" abolitionism see Ingram, 2015).

2. The tasks given for the three factual statements were altered to reflect disagreements not about the acceptability of actions, but about the truth of the statements themselves (e.g., whether the earth is flat, with one person believing it is and the other person not believing that it is).
3. Once again, the tolerance questions for the three factual statements were altered to reflect not the acceptability of action, but the acceptability of belief (e.g., whether you agree that the earth is flat, how willing you would be to condone/prohibit the belief, support or shun others who believe it, etc.).
4. While it might be surprising that only 55–64% classified the factual statements as "realist", some people are anti-realists (or believe they are anti-realists) with regard to all matters, including factual ones. Moreover, other studies (e.g., Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Nichols, 2004; Pölzler et al., 31) show similar results for these kinds of statements.
5. This might be one explanation for why the factual issues received lower realist classifications that one might expect (see also footnote 4).
6. Even so, our measure only captured a few of the subjectivist metaethical views, namely cultural relativism, individual subjectivism, and divine command theory. But there are other more sophisticated views of this kind that we did not test for (e.g., ideal observer theory and constructivism). In Study 2 we did not account for this particular objection – both because there are good theoretical reasons to believe that only few people are drawn toward more sophisticated subjectivist views, and because testing these views via our preferred measures is pragmatically infeasible. We did make a small amendment with regard to cultural relativism, though. While previously we had tested whether participants regard moral truth as being dependent on the dominant moral beliefs of their culture, Study 2 tests a relativization to "cultural communities", i.e., potentially smaller social units than cultures as a whole.
7. In a different way we might also have biased people in favor of realism. Our original measure involved the term "disagreement". At the end of each task, for example, we asked participants "Which interpretation of this disagreement seems most appropriate to you?" On a common interpretation, persons morally disagree with each other if and only if they believe logically incompatible moral propositions, i.e., moral propositions that cannot both be true, or false (Strandberg, 2004; Wedgwood, 2014). Critics may thus argue that we biased people toward realism. In response to this worry we substituted the term "disagreement" with the metaethically neutral term "situation".
8. The data for Study 3 was collected before we made the revisions to the methodology discussed in Study 2. Since we did not find any striking differences in results between Studies 1 and 2, we decided not to recollect the data with the revised methodology – we felt it would be an unnecessary expense of research funds and time.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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