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Puritanical moral rules as moral heuristics coping with uncertainties (Preprint of commentary for Behavioral and Brain Sciences)

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Puritanical moral rules as moral heuristics coping with uncertainties

Author: Rasim Serdar Kurdoglu, PhD (Assistant Professor)

Bilkent University, Ankara/Turkey

Email: r.s.kurdoglu@bilkent.edu.tr

Url: <http://fba.bilkent.edu.tr/rasim-serdar-kurdoglu/>

Abstract: As the cultural evolution of a puritanical moral norm in Turkey illustrates, puritanical moral norms are not developed by nonrational reasoning concerned with purity and cleanliness. People utilize puritanical moral rules as moral heuristics for making intendedly rational decisions about whether to cooperate or not when the commitment of the counterparty is uncertain.

Main text:

A striking example from Turkey can be helpful to set the scene for my theoretical discussion of Fitouchi et al. (2022). Turkish women are traditionally expected to keep their virginity until marriage (Frank, Bauer, Arican, Korur Fincanci, & Iacopino, 1999). The female virginity norm cannot be explained by purity concerns, as Turkish men are not averted by having sex with nonvirgin women (Ozyegin, 2015). Turkish men seem to care about it only for marriage as a cue of future fidelity. As such, it exclusively functions as a moral heuristic to ensure faithfulness: If a woman can control her sexual urges before marriage, she can also faithfully control them after marriage. Besides, if a woman is brave enough to violate the virginity rule, men can think similar bravery exists for cheating after marriage. However, that can only work if it is widely adopted. That is to say, in a country where virginity is unimportant, being nonvirgin would not imply such bravery to cheat.

The salience of the virginity rule has recently decreased in Turkey, along with changes in societal conditions (Askun & Ataca, 2007; Ozyegin, 2015). Some historical trends can explain this decline. The marriage age has increased for both men and women, while many women have their first marriages in their early 30's or later (Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu & Ergöçmen, 2014). Hence, expecting virginity becomes an unreasonable demand. Moreover, it creates new cooperation problems. While men can expect faithfulness by relying on the virginity rule,

they must marry their wives without testing their sexual compatibility. Thus, while the virginity norm may decrease the uncertainty of faithfulness, the uncertainty of marital satisfaction increases. Couples were not concerned with such issues in the past as marriages were often arranged by families with limited private interaction between partners before marriage. Furthermore, as an insurance policy, men could resort to polygamy (the polygamy rate was only around 2 %) (Behar, 1991), which was, however, abolished long ago and became socially unacceptable (except in a few rural regions) in Turkey. The adoption of the Western lifestyle, particularly in affluent circles of big cities and coastal areas, significantly changed the conditions against the relevance of the virginity norm. The virginity norm also becomes less meaningful due to medical techniques that restore virginity. The issue may have complications, but its essence is illustrative enough (for a paper that is not on sexuality in Turkey), as it serves as a meaningful example to support Fitouchi et al. (2022) and illustrate how puritanical moral rules are utilized under uncertainty of cooperation.

Fitouchi et al. (2022) argue that puritanical moral rules prohibiting apparently harmless hedonic actions are preemptive measures to ensure cooperation among people whose self-interests can urge for non-cooperative action. I hold the supporting view that puritanical moral rules, such as the virginity rule, are utilized as moral heuristics (i.e., short-cut solutions) for intendedly rational decision-making under uncertainty (cf. Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011) as people need to decide whether to cooperate with their counterparties when the commitment of the counterparty is uncertain. By referring to intended rationality, I mean people make decisions in a calculative manner to achieve their desired ends despite limitations of knowledge and cognitive capacity (Simon, 1990).

As illustrated in my opening example and as compatible with Fitouchi et al.'s (2022) moral disciplining theory, people use puritanical norms in an intendedly rational way in their daily struggles for cooperation as supported by these observations:

- 1) People selectively apply a puritanical norm (e.g., Turkish men are unlikely to use the virginity rule as a moral heuristic when they marry a woman from another country where virginity is not a meaningful cue of future fidelity).
- 2) People are open to relaxing a puritanical norm when it creates new uncertainties or becomes irrelevant for uncertainties (e.g., the declining salience of the virginity norm in Turkey because of changing conditions).
- 3) People pay attention to a puritanical norm only when cooperation is at stake (e.g., Turkish men seek virginity only for long-term partner choices but ignore the virginity norm when it comes to short-term partner choices).

However, people can use moral heuristics unwisely (Sunstein, 2005). Besides, people are not always intendedly rational in their moral reasoning. As my research (Kurdoglu, 2019, 2020; Kurdoglu & Ateş, 2022) indicates, moral issues can be resolved heuristically (by practical reasoning aiming at accuracy in problem-solving) as well as eristically (by pretentious reasoning aiming at the arbitrary exercise of power, personal taste or whim). Heuristic reasoning provides intendedly rational solutions to moral problems. In comparison, eristic reasoning is nonrational as it aims at asserting personal preferences to others with self-serving biased inferences (Kurdoglu & Ateş, 2022). Because of its self-serving nonrational nature, eristic reasoning produces superficial and unconvincing arguments.

Hinting at eristic reasoning in moral justifications, Haidt (2012) states that when faced with hypothetical scenarios where there is no apparent harm or violation of consent, people usually fail to provide reasonable justifications for moral taboos prohibiting bizarre sexual acts (e.g., incest). Accordingly, Haidt makes a generalization that puritanical moral rules are dogmatically defended and suggests that these rules are nonrationality infiltrated into personal tastes concerned with purity and cleanliness. Yet, Haidt conflates innate individual moral preferences with collectively formed moral norms. As Haidt only focuses on the nonrationality of individual preferences, his moral foundation theory misses the intended rationality of collective moral norms and their relevance for self-control, cooperation and social harm. In this sense, moral foundation theory fails to notice that taboos like incest are established heuristically to ensure the self-control and cooperation of people with *unusual* sexual urges. Similarly, it misses that puritanical moral norms like the virginity norm concern the self-control and cooperation of people with usual sexual desires.

In sum, while moral reasoning is not devoid of nonrational (eristic) processes at the individual level, Fitouchi et al. (2022) strikingly demonstrate that moral reasoning is intendedly rational at the social level of moral norm formation and the interpersonal level of moral norm utilization.

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