

## 1.5

### Convincing people to change their moral behaviour

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Research shows that people have a strong motivation to consider themselves as moral persons. They try to do what they consider morally right, also if this means that they have to abandon their personal preferences. The desire to be moral is a very important motive – people attempt to do what is moral, even when they know this will make them seem less friendly or less smart.

The drawback of this desire is that people find it aversive to consider the ways in which their behaviour may be lacking in morality. When we monitor their brain activity, we see that people carefully attend to their moral lapses. When we consider their physiological stress responses we see that they are quite upset by their moral shortcomings. Yet when we ask them to explain what they did, they tend to justify their behaviour, or deny its moral implications. Why? Precisely because they care so deeply about being moral, confronting people with their moral short-

comings easily induces a sense of threat and raises defensive responses. Hence, insisting that their behaviour is lacking in morality may not be the most productive way to get people to *change*. It only makes them unhappy, hostile, and defensive.

How can we use this knowledge to convince people to change their moral behaviour? Feelings of threat are alleviated when people are explicitly invited to *improve* their moral behaviour. Asking them to focus on the moral ideals and possible solutions to achieve these, helps them engage and plan for ways to be more effective in doing what they consider to be morally right.

Further, people are most likely to do what is moral when their behaviour is monitored by others who are important to them. They hope to earn respect and social inclusion by acting in ways that are morally approved by these others.