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Have you ever thought that your most morally upright coworkers, friends, or family members are too serious for their own good? While Mark Twain long ago quipped that “there is no humor in heaven,” new research provides initial evidence there may be something to the common intuition that highly moral individuals are less humorous.

A collaborative research project conducted by researchers at the National University of Singapore, the University of Washington, Oregon State University, and INSEAD has found preliminary evidence suggesting that thinking about your own morality can have unintended consequences for your sense of humor. Across six studies conducted within the U.S. and China, the investigators found that research participants who routinely prioritized their own morality or were directly reminded of their moral identity were less likely to appreciate and produce humor. Moreover, in workplace surveys highly moral managers and employees were also perceived as less humorous by their coworkers.

“The current dominant theory of humor is called Benign Violations Theory, which suggests that for something to be funny, it often has to violate a norm, while also not causing any real harm” says Sam Yam, lead author on the paper. “Because morality sensitizes us to social norms and generally serves to place boundaries around our social behavior, we reasoned that moral concerns would place limits on the sort of things people found funny, as well as the jokes they’d be willing to tell.” In other words, people who are focused on their own morality might lean towards gentle or wholesome humor (such as that found in the comic strip ‘the Family Circus’), and may eschew more risqué material that would draw bigger laughs.

In one of the experiments, the researchers had participants either write about a time where they behaved in a particularly moral way, or simply write about what they had done the day before (a neutral control condition). In a second part of the study, participants were asked to rate 18 jokes and captioned images for their humorousness. The researchers found that individuals who had been asked in the first part of the study to remember their own moral behavior were less likely to appreciate jokes in general, and that this effect was most true for those off-color jokes that violated social taboos (e.g., “dirty” jokes). A follow-up study found that study participants who thought of themselves in moral terms were also worse at producing humorous captions for photos (as rated by an on-line panel) than those who did not think of themselves in terms of their moral identity.

The researchers also found practical implications beyond the simple enjoyment of a good joke: in two studies focusing on workplace outcomes, individuals who ranked themselves as high in a trait known as “moral identity” were rated as less humorous, and to the extent this was true also less likeable, by their coworkers. However, this finding doesn’t relegate moral do-gooders to loner status at work: the researchers found that while those especially moral employees paid a likeability penalty for being less funny, this penalty was fully offset by greater perceived trustworthiness.

As with all initial behavioral research on a topic, the authors caution that these results are early and preliminary, and that further studies with larger samples will be necessary to both replicate

these initial findings and better explain the complex relationship between morality and humor. In the meantime, the researchers emphasize that those who prioritize their morality shouldn't abandon their moral identity. Yam notes that "while thinking about morality might tend to inhibit humor to some extent, highly moral individuals might maximize their effectiveness by recognizing that they are at risk of being seen as lacking in humor, and set the goal of coming across as relatable and likeable in addition to ethical and trustworthy." In other words, stay true to your values, but also know how to take a joke. The article, titled "Why So Serious? A Laboratory and Field Investigation of the Link between Morality and Humor," will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.