



We See The Sacred From Afar, To See It The Same

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Abstract

68 reported correlates of treating things as “sacred” are listed, and collected into seven themes. Most can be plausibly explained via two hypotheses. The first, taken from Durkheim, is that treating things as sacred mainly functions to bind groups together via a shared view of it. The second hypothesis, suggested by psychology’s construal level theory, is that humans acquired a habit of seeing sacred things as if from afar, even when they are close, to more consistently see those things the same as others in their groups.

Humans have many important but messy and complex behaviors associated with the words “religion”, “holy”, “sacred”, “revere”, and “awe”. After a careful examination, my judgment agrees with that of many social scientists: the core concept here is “sacred”. And I find myself especially interested in this concept, as I specialize in institution innovation, and the sacred is often invoked to explain why such proposals are infeasible. Let us now focus on the sacred.

Humans have long treated some especially important things in a distinctive special “sacred” way. For example, the following are widely seen as at least somewhat sacred: family, love, charity, courage, honesty, liberty, school, art, music, dance, fiction, innovation, epiphanies, inquiry, religion, spirits, sky, space, nature, sport, talk, friendship, health, medicine, children, democracy, law, sex, death, war, royalty, and nation. While we see wide variation in who treats what as how sacred, almost all of us treat some of these in a similar substantially-sacred way. Yes, we have many good reasons to value such things, but why value them in this special “sacred” way?

I see three obvious questions here:

1. What exactly is this distinctive “sacred” pattern of behavior?
2. Who tends to pick what when for this special treatment?
3. How can we explain why we treat some things in this way, with an explanation that accounts for as many as possible of the details in these patterns?

Over a century ago, Emile Durkheim, founder of the discipline of sociology, offered a few answers. He said that the main social origin and function of the sacred was to create camaraderie and solidarity, in part by inspiring awe, devotion and respect, and

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via creating an emotional state of “collective effervescence”. The sacred, he said, is “the feeling that the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified”. He also said that the sacred is “set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community ... all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1912).

In this paper, I offer a variation on this thesis. I start by collecting 68 reported correlates of the sacred, and grouping them into seven themes. The first three themes are A) on the sacred being valuable, B) on showing others how much we value it, and C) on shared views of the sacred binding groups together. Durkheim’s framework can make sense of these three themes, as groups seeking to bind together via a shared view of something should naturally try to get their members to value that view highly, and have their members show each other that fact.

The other four themes of sacred correlates seem harder to explain. These are D) on how sacred things are set apart, E) on how they are idealized, F) on how we are to feel not think them, and G) on how touching the sacred makes stuff more sacred. In this paper, I try to explain these other four themes by assuming that group members can better achieve social cohesion by seeing their sacred things more the same way, via seeing such things as if from afar regardless of true distance. Let me explain.

“Construal level theory” from psychology says that we have different modes for thinking about things that seem near to us, relative to far away. Things can seem near versus far in space, time, sociality, hypotheticality, and plan or language abstraction. This variation in thinking modes presents an obstacle to groups trying to bind together by seeing sacred things the same. After all, often some of them will see those things up close, while others see them from afar. For example, if you see your upcoming personal medical treatment up close, and I see it from afar, we may as a result have different opinions on your treatment’s value.

A solution here is for group members to change their usual seeing habits for sacred things. Instead of seeing near cases in near mode, and far cases in far mode, as we do for ordinary things, for sacred things we can instead see both near and far cases in far mode. When we do this, we are more likely to see those sacred things the same as others do. For example, if you and I both see your upcoming medical treatment as if from afar, we can more agree on its value.

Construal level theory predicts that seeing things in far mode tends to cause us to idealize them, and also to intuit them instead of thinking about them. In addition, this strategy of seeing the sacred from afar regardless of distance seems most easily accomplished via a discrete mode switch, a switch which thus pushes us to “set apart” the sacred. Furthermore, always seeing a sacred topic from afar plausibly leaves us feeling a deficit of near contact with that topic, a deficit that we can fill by giving extra significance to concrete objects associated with sacred topics. Thus, this see-sacred-from-afar theory can, to varying degrees, plausibly explain all four of the remaining sacred themes listed above.



For example, by seeing our education or career as sacred, we can more see it the same across our lifetime. This lets us feel more strongly connected to a constant personal identity, and gives us an emotional distance that can help us stick to long-term plans in the face of emotionally-potent short-term obstacles. However, this added distance also makes it harder for us to say in as much detail why we prefer our school or career choices.

As another example, we usually see love as more sacred than sex; today sex mainly gets sacred via its connection to love. While we are pretty clear on what is sex, our attitudes toward sex vary greatly. Those directly engaged in a sex act see it in a near mode, and often see its value quite differently from distant observers. In contrast, we all tend to approve of love, in part because we all see it abstractly, as if from a distance. And this distance can help us stay committed to our love relations during difficult times.

However, even when we have been in love many times, and are currently in a long-term relationship, we often feel that we aren't clear on how exactly that abstract concept applies to our current life. As Joni Mitchell says in *Both Sides Now*, "Its love's illusions that I recall, I really don't know love ... at all." Thus, compared to sex, seeing love as if from afar helps us to unite by seeing it the same. Communities can unite by seeing love as sacred, lovers can unite in their shared love, and each person can feel unified across time in their constant stance toward love. Even if we aren't very sure what exactly love is.

This paper will now first discuss the correlates of the sacred, then summarize construal level theory, and finally discuss how a see-sacred-from-afar theory can help to explain key sacred correlate themes.

Correlates of the Sacred

Below I list 68 beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that seem to correlate with things called "sacred". Note that the strength of many of these correlations is modest; they often have exceptions. Note also that I'm trying harder here to be complete than to avoid redundancies. This section draws from many sources, including (Durkheim 1912; Righetti 2014; Streng 2000; Tetlock 2003), but draws especially heavily from (Belk et al. 1989; Keltner 2023).

The 68 correlates are collected around seven themes, regarding the sacred being valuable, our showing its value to others, groups being united by it, it being set apart, it being idealized, our feeling not thinking about it, and how touching the sacred makes stuff sacred. (Yes, these correlates are not fully summarized by these themes.)

A. It Is Valuable:

1. Sacred things are very highly (or lowly) valued. We revere, respect, & prioritize them.



2. We revere sacred beliefs as well as acts. We feel dirty if thoughts go near illicit beliefs.
3. Sacred is big, powerful, extraordinary. We fear, submit, & see it as larger than ourselves.
4. Sacred things matter for our health, luck, courage, & other results we care much about.
5. We should want the sacred “for itself”, rather than as a means to get other things.
6. Sacred things are either more homogenous, or more unique, whichever is better.

B. We Show That We See It:

7. It induces emotions: awe, joy, admire, serene, entrance, aesthetic, mirth, gratitude.
8. Is sometimes associated with “mystic” experiences: intense, real, unified, transcendent.
9. Makes us feel less: big, distinct, independent, in control, competitive, entitled.
10. Quiets feelings of: doubt, anxiety, ego, self-criticism, status-consciousness.
11. Often makes us feel/express tears, chills, shivers, goosebumps, “whoa”.
12. We get emotionally attached to the sacred; our stance re it is oft part of our identity.
13. We desire to connect with the sacred, and to be more associated with it.
14. To approach the sacred, we use self-control to purify, sacrifice, & commit.
15. We enjoy sacrificing for the sacred, to purify & respect sacred, including via odd beliefs.
16. We feel reluctant to feel sacred joy, awe, etc. if we have not sufficiently earned it.
17. Inputs count more than outputs regarding the sacred efforts, if your heart is right.
18. We find it hard to see utopias as attractive if they lack sacred struggles & suffering.
19. Sacred brings us comfort & consolation in hard times; losing it can feel devastating.
20. We affirm & learn sacred via mythic stories & accounts of how we & it fit in a universe.
21. We find stories that share our sacred values and beliefs nicer and easier to understand.
22. We have rules regarding how to approach sacred stuff, in part to protect us.

C. It Unites Us:

23. Shared views about the sacred bind, define, and distinguish social groups.
24. Shared festivals & synchronized behaviors bind & charge us, & help us to see sacred.
25. We want our associates to share our views of and attachment to the sacred.
26. We get offended when others seem to deny our sacred views, and oft respond strongly.
27. We feel more equal to each other regarding sacred things; status matters less there.
28. Either everyone (e.g. love) or very few (e.g. medicine) are entitled to opinions re sacred.



29. The sacred is less for commoners, or common purposes, and more suited to elites.
30. Charismatic leaders motivate, get acceptance, in part via appeals to sacred issues.
31. Experts of the sacred are prestigious & trusted, & oft allowed to break sacred rules.
32. The sacred makes us feel more prosocial, and sacrificing for it is seen as prosocial.
33. Sacred increases feelings of: safe, curious, cooperative, unified with universe & others.

D. Is Set Apart:

34. Sacred things are sharply set apart and distinguished from the ordinary, mundane.
35. Sacred things do not fit well with our animal natures, such greed, status, competition.
36. Re sacred, we fear slippery slopes, so that any compromises lead to losing it all.
37. We dislike mixing sacred and mundane things together.
38. We dislike money prices of sacred, & trades to get more mundane via less sacred.
39. We dislike for-profit orgs of the sacred, relative to non-profits or government agencies.
40. We prefer discrete rules re sacred over continuous goals to achieve (Berns et al. 2012).
41. Sacred feelings are elusive, unusual, other-worldly, spiritual, hard to describe.

E. It is Idealized:

42. Sacred things feel less limited by physics, & can seem to have unlimited possibilities.
43. Sacred things really matter, fill deepest needs, complete us, make us pure, make all one.
44. Sacred things last longer, and decay or break less. Sometimes eternal and unchanging.
45. Sacred things are purer and cleaner, and closer to the ultimate core of existence.
46. Sacred things have fewer random coincidences; their patterns mean something.
47. Sacred values have fewer conflicts with each other; you can have them all at once.
48. It is harder to judge the relative value of sacred things, compared to mundane things.
49. Sacred things more resist precise definition and measurement.
50. Sacred view is wider, expansive, enveloping; we are a small uninfluential part.
51. We are reluctant to end sacred ventures or jobs, or to change their processes greatly.
52. We are most willing to end or change sacred ventures and jobs in a sudden big crisis.
53. The things treated as most sacred for the longest are furthest from experience.



F. Feel Not Think It:

54. We see the sacred poorly using words, cognitive rational analysis, and numbers.
55. We see the sacred better using intuition, flow, creativity, music, images, & aesthetics.
56. Often a “noetic” source of insight that can’t be put in words or defended via reason.
57. Intentional efforts to control the sacred are often counter-productive.
58. Talk of the sacred uses vaguer terms, focusing on general impressions not details.
59. We like “profound” sayings that hint at deep sacred insights but don’t directly give them.
60. We are less open to arguments that might criticize the sacred.
61. How sacred things seem is less misleading; you can more trust their appearances.
62. The sacred is mysterious, unlikely and even incoherent. Who are we to question it?
63. Sacred makes us stand outside ourselves, feel ecstasy, transcendence, different reality.
64. We do not make or control the sacred; it makes and transforms us.
65. Beliefs supporting sacred behaviors tend to be less conditional.

G. Touching Makes & Shows It:

66. Stuff (objects, dates, people, words, sounds) that touches the sacred gets sacred itself.
67. We connect to sacred themes better via more frequent contact with sacred stuff.
68. Over time, stuff that we connect to often tends to become sacred via nostalgia.

Construal Level Theory

Human brains seem to be organized in part by levels of abstraction. Input signals are passed first to layers that look at very local sensory features, and then on up through layers that examine increasingly wider-scale situation features. These then feed into high-level decisions, which feed back down into increasingly concrete layers, layers which translate signals into increasingly specific directives, ending in very particular motor controls.

Construal level theory says that this affects how we think; we have different mental modes for thinking abstractly versus concretely, and a continuum of modes between (Adler & Sarstedt 2021; Liberman & Trope 2003; Liberman & Trope 2008; Trope & Liberman 2010). At any one moment, we typically consider only a few important things up close, and many less important things far away. For things up close we can attend carefully to their many concrete details, but for things far away we make do with fast crude calculations using sparse representations using only a few broad descriptors per item. (Math “abstractions” are different; they are calculated exactly and carefully.)



Things can be close versus far in many ways, including via time, spatial distance, social distance, category breadth, chance (certainty is closer), plans (constraints are close, goals are far), and language (tone, style, general impressions are far). We presume that things which tend to be close (or far) in some ways are also close (or far) in others. We expect our theories to fit reality better for far things than for close. We plausibly use near mode more to choose our literal direct actions, and we use far mode more symbolically, and to improve our social impressions.

For example, if you think in detail about your plans for tomorrow, you can see many practical obstacles to those plans, and also how hard it might be to judge if your plans are ethical. But if you instead think about your plans for an event years in the future, you will less notice practical obstacles nor ethical complications. So you will instead see your plans as easier to execute, and place them in simpler moral categories. These tendencies get even stronger if this event will also happen far away in space, be done by someone else, or only happen given some unlikely preconditions.

The following are some of the many distinctions and axes reported to correlate with near vs. far: here vs. there; now vs. then; me or us vs. them; important vs. unimportant; past vs. future; down vs. up; warm vs. cold; red vs. blue; bright vs. dark; awake vs. asleep; morning lark vs. night owl; taste or touch vs. see or hear; slang or grunt vs. polite speech; more vs. less politically polarized; fast detailed repetitive vs. slow echoey novel music; voice or picture vs. words or faces; more vs. less intense affect; fear or sadness vs. anger, guilt, shame, pride, or regret; dislike or low mood vs. like or high mood; sex vs love; tempted vs. self-restrain; dominance vs. prestige; unsure, persuadable, seek info vs. confident, stubborn; conforming vs. independent; support authority vs. support underdogs; low power via acts vs. high power via associates; math/logic analysis vs. creative analogy; case-based comparable how con reasons vs. feature-based unique why pro reasons; uncertain vs. overconfident; theory/trend breaking vs. following; common likely real local event consequences vs. rare unlikely unreal global event causes; concrete, contextual, detailed, incidental relations vs. abstract, schematic, context-free, core, coarse, goal-related properties; narrow vs. broad categories; familiar vs. novel task/event; feasible safe vs. desirable risky acts; buy vs. sell; conflicted secondary local practical plan constraints vs. coherent central global symbolic ideal moral plan concerns; means or obstacles vs. ends; strong female vs weak male emotions; socially-near folks with unstable traits in small groups vs. socially-far folks with stable traits in big groups.

Explaining The Sacred Themes

We usually have good reasons to value the many things that we see as “sacred”. But we also have many good reasons to value other things that we do not treat as sacredly. So the key question is: why do we treat sacred things differently, as described by the 68 sacred correlates listed above, collected into seven sacred themes?



I suggest that we can, to varying degrees, explain all seven of these themes by assuming that we see some things that we value in a sacred manner, in order to better bind us together into social groups and personal identities, and to distinguish those units from others. (Such a functional explanation can allow for other kinds of coexisting explanations, such as byproduct, evolutionary, developmental, or mechanistic explanations.)

This hypothesis requires that different social groups see a somewhat different mix of things as sacred, and that individuals have ways to show each other what they see as sacred. And these facts seem, by themselves, sufficient to explain the first three sacred correlate themes: on seeing the sacred as valuable, on showing that fact to others, and on groups binding together via shared views of the sacred.

The four other sacred themes seem harder to understand in these terms: sacred things being idealized, being set apart, being intuited more than deliberately thought, and rubbing off on more concrete “stuff”. Why could not groups bind together by using deliberate thoughts to value often-flawed things that are often mixed up with other things, and that don’t rub off on stuff?

Yes, we might see each of these themes as expensive demands made of our sacred behavior, where by paying such extra costs we show stronger commitments to our sacred things. But this seems a weak explanation, as it could “explain” most any expensive behavior. Can we find stronger explanations?

I say “yes”, in the human tendency, described by construal level theory, to think differently about things that are up close versus far away. Because this tendency can be a substantial obstacle to group members seeing the sacred the same. And so I suggest that, to avoid this obstacle, humans acquired a habit of more consistently seeing some things in a relatively far mode, even when those things were actually near.

When using such a habit to consider the sacred value of something nearby, we should experience an unusual ease in making confident overall abstract judgments, but also an unusual difficulty in connecting such overall judgments to the details of the cases before us. Such as when we ask ourselves if we are really “in love”. This strategy seems easier to implement as a discrete change of habits, replacing our usual habit of seeing things via modes that match their perceived distance. Thus this see-sacred-from-afar hypothesis can at least weakly explain why sacred things are discretely “set apart” from non-sacred things. Also, using discrete categories better allows us to impose and enforce discrete behavioral rules, and seeing sacred things as not fitting with self-interest or competition can encourage pro-group behavior.

Things we see in far mode are given sparser mental representations, with fewer broad descriptors per item. They are thus naturally idealized. And as they are associated with large space and time scales, they are seen as varying less over smaller scales. They are given simpler descriptions with fewer varying details, details that would be needed to represent defects, limitations, random coincidences, deviations from theory



expectations, and misleading appearances. As a result, far-seen things have fewer of these features. And looked at from far enough away, even the differences between different kinds of sacred things may fade and seem negligible.

Furthermore, we naturally find it harder to compare distances between things far away, compared to things. As, according to construal level theory, non-instrumental values seem further than instrumental values, we naturally find it harder to judge the relative magnitudes of non-instrumental values. Thus seeing sacred things as if from afar can explain many ways in which the sacred is idealized.

Close things usually have more details available to study, and we usually care more about close things. Furthermore, there are usually more far things to consider, compared to fewer near things. We thus tend to pay closer deliberate calculating attention to the details of near things, while for far things we tend to make much cruder faster more-intuitive judgments (Torr & Craig 2013; Zhang et al. 2021).

This tendency of far mode thought to be more intuitive, combined with our hypothesis of seeing the sacred from afar, helps explain why the sacred is said to be better understood via intuition and aesthetics rather than via deliberate thought. And why we tend to talk about the sacred using more vague less analytic language, and have distinctive hard-to-explain sacred experiences. The act of seeing near things using far mode must also just feel different somehow from seeing near things using near mode. This habit thus plausibly induces a sense that the sacred is a different reality, and so it induces us to “transcend” or “stand outside ourselves”.

Construal level theory says that more unlikely or impossible things are seen as further away. So a habit of seeing sacred things from afar will tend to make sacred things seem a priori unlikely or impossible. And so our see-sacred-from-afar hypothesis also helps explain why the sacred is often seen as able to defy the usual physical or animal constraints.

We expect to see types of things that vary in their actual distance also vary in how close they feel to us. And we like to be closer to things that we value. If so, a habit of seeing sacred things as if from afar, even when they are near, might plausibly make us feel a lack of near contact with such sacred topics. In which case we might plausibly seek to emphasize the occasions when we are near concrete objects (or people, rituals, dates, sounds, etc.) associated with those topics. So we might especially treasure near contact with a love letter or anniversary date, as icons of a sacred love, or near contact with a flag or national holiday, as icons of a sacred nationalism. Thus our see-sacred-from-afar hypothesis can help explain why sacred value often rubs off on associated concrete stuff.

If we are wary of seeing the details of sacred things, as that might result in our seeing those things differently from associates, then when we must see details we should prefer to see “detached” details that less risk such conflicts. For example, our methods



of collecting memory scrapbooks tend to avoid such conflicts, and we trust fiction authors to fill their stories with details that do not contradict our sacred far views.

Finally, here are some more reported correlates of far mode, relative to near mode, that are also reported to be correlates of the sacred: awe (Septianto et al. 2021), politeness, self-control, serenity, symbolism, high mood, confidence, creativity, novelty, sleep, prestige (vs. dominance), world/universe (vs. smaller units), and values (vs. decision constraints).

Conclusion

While we humans vary greatly in which things we treat as how “sacred”, we associate a consistent and distinctive pattern of attitudes and behaviors with such things. This paper lists 68 reported correlates of the sacred, and suggests that most of them can be plausibly explained via two key hypotheses. The first hypothesis, taken from Durkheim, is that the main function of treating some things we value as sacred is to bind groups together via a shared view of the sacred. The second hypothesis, suggested by construal level theory, is that humans acquired a habit of seeing sacred things as if from afar, even when they seem close, in order to more consistently see those things the same as others in their groups.

Note that this account doesn’t yet explain why different communities treat different things as sacred. Note also that instead of the general ability to treat things as sacred posited above, some instead posit that one special thing, such as the one perfect God, is naturally well-suited to be treated as sacred, and we humans only treat other things somewhat like this special thing due to their similarities to it, and due to our searching for it. Hopefully, we will find ways to empirically test this paper’s account against alternatives such as this one special thing account..

Note also that if we see the sacred concept as itself sacred, then the usual norms of the sacred would disapprove of our analyzing that concept using so much contextual detail, explaining the sacred as an instrumental, rather than ultimate, value, or explaining it at all, instead of leaving it as a deep awe-inspiring mystery. Thus to study the sacred, we must to some degree defy it.

The expert “priests” of a sacred area, such as religion or medicine, must often use deliberate thought to attend to details regarding that area. This raises the question: do such priests somehow manage to still see their sacred area details as if from afar, or do they fail at this, and the rest of us then either accept this failure or pretend otherwise? My guess is the latter; we pretend that they still see it as if from afar, when they mostly don’t.

The obvious policy tradeoff here is that treating an area of life as sacred adds more energy to that area, and binds groups who do so together more strongly, but all at the expense of hindering related tradeoffs, distorting via idealization, and discouraging



change and thoughtful attention to detail in that area. While it seems most of us must treat some areas as sacred, we should try to direct that energy to areas of life where it does the most good, and the least harm. Math, cosmology, and our distant descendants seem to me promising candidate areas.

Gardener Comments

The author responds to all comments in the next section.

Sander Van de Cruys (postdoctoral researcher in psychology):

I think the piece is interesting (and the topic definitely deserves more attention in psychology) but it focuses too much on the social aspects, as well as on one particular theory from social psychology (construal level theory). I would recommend looking into predictive processing theory which I think allows a better articulated perspective on sacred beliefs. For accessible introductions to this theory, see e.g. Andy Clark's recent books. Predictive processing argues cognitive systems (and by extension cultural ones) are aimed at reducing uncertainty (relative to embodied models) or, equivalently: maximize model evidence (formally: accuracy minus complexity). What is specific to sacred beliefs is that they are unconditional or context-independent, unlike virtually all our other beliefs (they are more similar to homeostatic 'beliefs' in that sense. Note that I use 'belief' here in the Bayesian sense, used in the predictive processing/active inference literature). These are (informationally) simple beliefs, in that sense they provide great clarity or uncertainty-reduction, and are easily applied in decisions about actions (cf. self-evidencing). See e.g. Van de Cruys & Heylighen 2020 "The dark side of thinking through other minds" for a very brief discussion of this. I think this actually may be what the author is gesturing at when saying (metaphorically) that it is as if we see sacred things from afar (as 'sparse mental representations'). But it can be described less metaphorically and with a better grounding in an hypothesis for why sacred beliefs are a core part of mental models (as well as easily transmitted in social communities) using predictive processing. Such reasoning would also connect in an interesting way to many items in the lists given by the author. I'm not at all against a thorough characterization of a phenomenon in lists (it's often a necessary step), but it would be nice to go beyond that, and I don't think the construal level theory or a purely social logic is up to that task. I hope these thoughts help in revising the manuscript.

Andrew Neff (psychology professor):

I support the publication of this article, although I have limited knowledge of the cited literature and the novelty of the argument. I see two main ideas addressed here:

Idea 1 is that we should revise our definition of the construct of sacred experiences/behaviors/attitudes, emphasizing the centrality of "seeing things from a distance". If the author's description of sacred experiences is more valid than existing attempts to describe similar experiences (e.g. mystical experiences), then we could develop better measurement instruments, which could lead to 1) stronger correlations with neurobiology and 2) more consistent relationships between these new



measurements and other variables. For instance, if we differentiate between 'distanced perspectives' and 'mystical experiences,' we might discover that substances like LSD or psilocybin have a more consistent impact on the former, and consequently, we can more accurately predict the causal structure of the world.

Idea 2 is that we can understand the causal processes surrounding the generation of sacred experiences/behaviors/attitudes, in terms of the motivation of an individual to forge group bonds & individuate themselves. Ultimately, I think the author's concluding statement is most important: "While it seems most of us must treat some areas as sacred, we should try to direct that energy to areas of life where it does the most good, and the least harm". But I don't think the paper provides enough of a detailed prescription of how to shift social conventions about what's sacred. For example, understanding why the American political right reveres guns or the right to self-protection could empower those on the opposite side of the spectrum. However, this paper does not provide a detailed prescription for specific cases, and it seems like it would be hard to identify a prescription at this level of abstraction.

Ted Wade:

One can ignore the theoretical aspects in this paper and here is what remains. There are many disparate kinds of things that humans seek out and accept uncritically, and we can call those "sacred". Sacred things tend to be associated with particular collections of humans, and often the collections are defined by the sacred things.

The paper speculates that the sacred serves to bind human groups. It further speculates that this connection is stronger (or must occur?) when humans adopt a particular cognitive stance toward the sacred. The stance is defined as a construct from construal level theory: "seeing" from far rather than near, i.e. a sort of psychological distance from a subject.

It seems that almost any pair of distinguished categories can, by suitably picking one's evidence, be assigned to the far vs near axis. The collection of pairs includes red vs blue and slang vs polite. I nominate dog vs cat.

My point is that construal level theory can explain anything, but probably can predict nothing. Nor does it add anything to the already circular idea that we uncritically accept certain things, which happen to be the ones that we, in fact, so accept.

At a time when uncritical beliefs are a big problem, and a lot of effort is being made to understand this, saying it's all near and far is not helpful. There must be a huge number of reasons why different things become sacred. Perhaps the best theories will find that there is mutual feedback between the originating of a sacred idea and the formation or maintenance of groups to which it is sacred. And this will probably, at least sometimes, have to do with human needs for relatively stable identities (a point to which the paper does allude), itself a huge and ancient topic.



My opinions of the theories aside, is it possible that the paper offers any novel insight about the material, something that might lead to progress in understanding identity, uncritical beliefs, or the concepts in construal level theory? While trying to understand the paper I did a search for [construal level theory, sacred]. There were 84,000 hits, so it would probably take a lot of work to determine whether there is novelty or not.

I don't think the paper qualifies as a seed of science.

Josh Randall:

This article attempts to tie construal level theory from psychology to the colloquial conception of sacred. It has several issues which I think would require intense revision.

1. As a sociological question of 'sacred', this article does not attempt to determine if sacred as a concept varies significantly across cultures. Further, I do not think it really attempts to determine if closeness/farness also vary with cultures. There is a note that proximity can be temporal, spatial, and linguistic but these should be more central to any claims about the meaning of sacred. 2. As a non-sociologist and non-psychologist, I am unaware of construal level theory outside of this article, and I am unconvinced that it is an accurate portrayal of human minds. 3. I am unsure of the importance of themes surrounding the sacred. I would say every single statement in the list of correlates needs additional evidence. I think they are all sourced from other authors, but are these their opinions or survey data? 4. There is a mention of policy value for the sacred. What is the value in idealizing the world outside of our own personal experiences? Shouldn't science be directed toward making our perceptions of the world more precise? This is itself subject to philosophies of science, but I don't see many uses for increased sacredness in particular.

Jack Arcalon:

This research should be encouraged, and will become more important as we strive to understand and manipulate top-level values in AI systems. Something as complex as "sacred" could have a simple structure we don't know yet.

Joe R:

The only reference to real-world testing I was able to find in this article was "Hopefully, we will find ways to empirically test this theory." The two hypotheses put forward by the article are interesting ways to think about the concept of sacredness, but I can't tell what effects we should expect if they are true vs false. Also, I am not sure that the many references in the article all point in the same direction, let alone at those two specific hypotheses. Does binding groups together serve an evolutionary advantage that encourages a sacredness instinct in subsequent generations? It's an interesting idea, but I think it needs a bit more condensing and clarification.

Dr. Payal B. Joshi (PhD in chemistry):

The article is based on a unique idea, yet why has the author taken up this study is not quite clear. The objective of penning on sacred-ness should be clarified in the



Introduction. Overall 64 reports were studied is a good reference data set and is appreciated. Also, authors have presented the hypothesis in a clear manner, hence there is no particular scientific flaw. I enjoyed reading the article and also learnt something on sacred and other related behavioral traits. I recommend publication of the article only post- minor revision.

Roger's Bacon:

I wholeheartedly recommend this article for publication – it provides a novel hypothesis about an important psycho-social phenomenon and meets all of the criteria for a “seed of science”. Two comments

1) As evidenced by many ancient cosmogonies, the first things that humans ever regarded as sacred – the sun, the sky, the ocean – are all extremely vast and/or far away. Not sure exactly what should be made of this, but it seems relevant. Did they provide a kind of template for the sacred and/or god? (seemingly) infinite or infinitely far away, appearing the same to everyone, giving life to the entire world through energy or water.

2) There is a strain of mystical thinking in various religions where God becomes so sacred as to become wholly unknowable, and thus only approachable by negation – apophatic theology. Consider the following quote by French sociologist/theologian Jacques Ellul:

"Faith in God-in a God who does not incarnate some natural force or who is not the abstract and hypostatized projection of one of our own desires or aspirations or values (Feuerbach), faith in a God who is different from all that we can conceive or imagine--cannot be assimilated to belief. For this God cannot be assimilated to one of the representations that we might easily multiply. If God is God, God is inevitably different from all that polytheists call god. Each of those gods can be described and defined; each has its own function and sphere of action. But the God of faith is inaccessible and inassimilable. God is so fundamentally other (if God were not, if God could be measured against one of our values or beliefs, God would not be God) that we can neither define nor contemplate God. The God of faith is totally inaccessible. The affirmation of Feuerbach, that God is an absolutized value, was simplistic and puerile. For one thing, we have no idea of what the absolute or the infinite is. We cannot say anything about it or assimilate it. To talk about an absolutized value might be to talk about God, but it is not possible for human beings to absolutize anything." (Essential Spiritual Writings)

In terms of this paper's hypothesis, we could say that Ellul is presenting an image of god that is so far away, so completely distant to the human, that we cannot even see it or begin describing it.

Tyler Cowen and Reza Azlan had a discussion on Tyler's podcast that also touches on this theme:



COWEN: What do you think of the Kenneth Cragg argument that, at least in many branches of Sunni Islam, the distance between man and God is simply too great, and there's something cold or alienating about it?

ASLAN: I love Kenneth Craig a lot, by the way. I've got to be honest, it appeals to me.

COWEN: The distance appeals to you.

ASLAN: The distance appeals to me... I always had a hard time with this idea that Jesus was my best friend, that God is my buddy. It's a joke that my friends and I do all the time, but they gave us this little card with Jesus's picture on it, and it said, "Jesus in my pocket," and you were supposed to keep it in your pocket all the time. I remember thinking to myself, "Do I want Jesus in my pocket? There's something that doesn't feel right about that."

When I went to college, I happened to go to a Catholic university, and I thought, "Oh, I don't know anything about Catholicism. I'll go and check out this mass." There, Jesus wasn't in your pocket. Jesus was way up there on the cross, and you went to him with fear and trembling and distance. I've got to say I liked it. It appealed to me. Maybe it's because of the fact that I was raised Muslim, even though at the time, I wouldn't have really understood what that meant. But there's something about that notion of the distance between man and God that I like. I want to approach God with that level of reverence, that makes God other, in a sense. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's just my personal opinion on it."

The idea of a distant god very much resonates with me as well, and if I had to characterize my own preferred modality of thinking it would be much more towards the "far" end of the spectrum. Maybe this doesn't necessarily speak to the "sacred-as-far" hypothesis, but I wonder if it offers some kind of opportunity for testing it: does favoring a "god as distant/other" perspective correlate with certain views on the nature of the sacred and preferences for "far" thinking?

Author's Response to 8 Seeds of Science Reviews

My paper makes three moves. First, it tries to define "sacred" as a cluster concept in terms of 68 correlates, collected into seven themes, and thus sets our task as explaining why these correlate. Second, it accepts Durkheim's account as explaining three of those themes. Third, it suggests a way to combine psychology's Construal Level Theory (CLT) with Durkheim's account to explain the other four themes.

None of the eight reviewers seem to question any of the particular correlates offered, their grouping into themes, Durkheim's account of the sacred, or any of my particular stories for how Durkheim's account or CLT could account for the themes.



Two reviewers seem to just reject my attempt to define “sacred” as a cluster concept. For example, Van de Cruys defines it in terms of beliefs being unconditional, and Wade in terms of what we seek out and accept uncritically.

Three reviewers quickly dismiss CLT, though without citing any critiques of CLT. Randall rejects CLT because he is unaware of it. Wade rejects CLT because many correlates of its key concept have been reported; it therefore “can predict nothing”. (And because CLT came up in many web searches, he can’t see that my paper has any novelty.) Van de Cruys states without elaboration that CLT isn’t up to the task of explaining things, and suggests that the theory in which he has specialized does better, though he only seems to try to explain one of the 68 correlates.

Two reviewers want the paper to include more things, things that I agree would be valuable contributions, but which I see as beyond the scope of this effort. Joe R wants more concrete empirical tests to be offered. And Randall wants me to show how sacred and construal-level correlates vary across cultures, and give much more evidence regarding each correlate.

Neff seems to say that I propose to define sacred in terms of seeing things from afar. But CLT says we often see most everything from afar. The difference I’m proposing is that for sacred things we see them from afar even when they are close.

Some reviewers have suggested additions to my list of correlates. I’ve added Van de Cruys unconditional beliefs, and Bacon’s tendency to be especially far from experience.

Joshi wants me to say why I’m interested in the topic; I added that to the introduction.

At Neff’s suggestion, I now say a bit more about how to shift the sacred to areas where it might do less harm.

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