

## The social psychology of extreme violence

Jeremy Ginges

A prohibition against harming the innocent is a central moral precept across cultures, yet non-combatants are commonly targeted by state and non-state actors. A debate has emerged within social psychology that pits two explanations against each other: is such extremism a result of the suppression of moral concern (e.g., via classic dehumanisation pathways), or the activation of moral concern (e.g., to defend sacred values)? In this chapter we will argue that these processes are complementary rather than competitive. Perpetrator groups typically construct narratives that describe target groups as being both less than human (suppressing moral concern about harm) and as being malevolent threats to the ingroup (activating moral mandates for violence). This duality is reflected in empirical data which shows that support for violence against civilians in active conflict is predicted by measures of dehumanization and devaluation of human life, as well as by perceptions of the target group as an existential threat motivated by hate.