



I appreciate your effort: Asymmetric effects of actors' exertion on observers' consequentialist versus deontological judgments



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ABSTRACT

Moral judgment research has often assumed that when laypeople evaluate a moral dilemma, they focus on answering the question “*Is action X wrong?*” An alternative approach, inspired by virtue ethics, asserts that, in addition, laypeople seek to answer the question: “*Would a good person do X?*” As such, moral observers are sensitive to information that signals character. One important source of character information is the actor's level of exertion. In four studies, participants evaluated an actor who made either a consequentialist or deontological decision. In all studies, when the actor made the decision with little effort, participants rated the deontological decision more moral than the consequentialist decision. However, when the actor made the decision following high effort, this difference was attenuated. In Study 3, the pattern replicated most clearly when exertion was operationalized as effort to gain knowledge (versus emotional strain). These results highlight the important role that moral actors' effort plays on observers' moral and character judgments.

1. Introduction

Kathleen (Kay) Carter suffered from an untreatable degenerative spinal cord condition. As her health deteriorated, she decided that she wanted to end her life before her body “totally collapsed”. However, because physician-assisted suicide was at the time illegal in Canada, Kay Carter was forced to travel to Switzerland to obtain what she desired (Todd, 2015). Cases like this ultimately led the Supreme Court of Canada to rule that physician-assisted suicide should be made legal for individuals dealing with a “grievous and irremediable medical condition” (Carter v. Canada, 2015).

Should a doctor help a terminally ill patient commit suicide? In normative ethics, the deontological position (Kant, 1785/1997) asserts that morally correct acts are those that uphold rules and obligations (e.g., “Thou shalt not kill.”), a perspective that would likely prohibit euthanasia. The consequentialist position asserts that morally correct acts are those that maximize good outcomes even if doing so violates a rule or obligation (Mill, 1863/2010). Thus, the consequentialist position would likely argue that if euthanizing a patient results in more overall good (e.g., reduced suffering, reduced financial burden), it is the

morally correct thing to do.¹

In many of the studies examining how laypeople resolve such dilemmas, participants have read vignettes ostensibly designed to pit deontological inclinations against consequentialist inclinations (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008; Greene, 2013). Previous researchers have assumed that participants generally take an act-centered approach when faced with this type of dilemma. As such, participants' responses to these dilemmas are assumed to be driven by the condemnation or acceptance of the act in question (“Is this act right or wrong?”) (e.g., Uhlmann, Pizarro, & Diermeier, 2015).

A second, comparatively under-examined approach states that observers evaluate not only the *act*, but also what the act indicates about the actor's moral *character* (e.g., Uhlmann et al., 2015). This person-centered approach has been inspired by virtue ethics, a theory of normative ethics that originated in ancient Greek philosophy (Aristotle, 4th Century B.C.E.) and has experienced a revival since the mid-20th century (Hursthouse, 1999). Whereas deontology emphasizes rules and obligations and consequentialism emphasizes outcomes, virtue ethics

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¹ We acknowledge that a deontological argument could be made in favor of physician-assisted suicide and a consequentialist argument could be made against physician-assisted suicide. However, our goal was not to make normative justifications for euthanasia. Instead, our goal was to better understand how laypeople make moral judgments by using a real-life moral dilemma in which people generally intuit that one course of action is motivated by deontological beliefs and the other is motivated by consequentialist beliefs. In the supplemental materials, we provide evidence supporting our claim that individuals do believe that doctor-assisted suicide is motivated by consequentialist beliefs and refusing to perform doctor-assisted suicide is motivated by deontological beliefs. Furthermore, in Study 2B we replicate the effect with the “footbridge” dilemma that has been widely used as the paradigmatic scenario for identifying deontological versus consequentialist thought.

emphasizes the actor's character. To the extent that laypeople take a virtue ethics approach, resolving a moral dilemma like euthanasia hinges not only on the question of the action's intrinsic rightness/wrongness but also on the question of "What kind of a person chooses the deontological (consequentialist) option?" (Uhlmann et al., 2015).

A person-centered approach may provide an adaptive advantage for both actors and observers (Everett, Pizarro, & Crockett, 2016). Individuals who signal to others via their actions that they can be trusted are more likely to be chosen as cooperation partners. Moreover, observers who are motivated to make inferences about an actor's character based on the actor's action are likely to be more successful at choosing beneficial cooperation partners (Everett et al., 2016). In certain situations, people may consider the most appropriate partner to be someone whose character suggests a strong desire to adhere to fundamental, moral rules – no matter the cost. In other cases, however, people may prefer someone whose character suggests a high degree of thoughtful, flexible, competence (Rom, Weiss, & Conway, 2017). To summarize, much of the research literature has treated the act alone as the decisive factor in moral judgments and considered information about the actor's character, reputation, or decision procedure as largely irrelevant. The person-centered approach (e.g., Uhlmann, Zhu, & Diermeier, 2014; Critcher, Inbar, & Pizarro, 2013; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011) asserts that laypeople incorporate inferences about the character of the actor into their decision making calculus. Therefore, holding the act constant, participants' moral judgments should be moderated by information that promotes different inferences about the actor's character.

Several studies have demonstrated that character inferences often carry at least as much, if not more, weight in perceivers' minds than the rightness/wrongness of the act itself. For example, participants were more likely to judge a driver as the cause of an accident if he was speeding home to hide cocaine versus to hide a present for a loved one (Alicke, 1992). In more recent work, participants rated an actor who made a prosocial decision quickly more favorably than an actor who made the same decision slowly (Critcher et al., 2013). At the same time, participants rated an actor who made an immoral decision quickly (vs. slowly) more negatively. In a third set of studies, participants were more willing to hire a more expensive CEO when a less expensive candidate requested a self-aggrandizing (but harmless) perk as part of the compensation package (Tannenbaum et al., 2011). The second CEO candidate's frivolous request was perceived as diagnostic of negative moral character, which deterred participants from hiring him – even at a financial cost to the company (for a conceptually related finding, see Uhlmann et al., 2014).

In other words, lay perceivers appear to make a clear distinction between an act's moral rightness/wrongness and the moral character signified by the act. Such findings are consistent with other research indicating that humans place special importance on morally-relevant character information (Goodwin, 2015; Rom, Weiss, & Conway, 2017).

1.1. Deontological and consequentialist actions and character

How do observers view the character of actors who pursue deontological versus consequentialist courses of action? In many cases, lay observers appear biased toward judging deontological actors to be more moral than consequentialist actors (Everett et al., 2016). For example, in several studies, participants judged throwing a dying man out of a lifeboat to prevent it from sinking (thereby saving several others) as the correct course of action; at the same, they judged the thrower to possess a more negative character (Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2013). Similarly, observers rated individuals who made consequentialist arguments more negatively (Kreps & Monin, 2014) and less trustworthy (Everett et al., 2016) than those who made deontological arguments.²

Kreps and Monin (2014) suggested that the deontological bias in moral character occurs for three reasons. First, whereas deontological claims generally invoke abstract principles (e.g., "Thou shalt not kill."), consequentialist assertions tend to contain more concrete detail (Eyal & Liberman, 2012). As such, consequentialist claims are less likely to match people's mental model of a general moral principle. Second, compared to deontological claims, consequentialist assertions often show a willingness to violate rules that may be considered sacred (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Violation of sacred values may (a) signal that an actor does not share important emotional responses toward potential harms and (b) raise questions about the actor's commitment to moral principles (Everett et al., 2016). Third, consequentialist claims may superficially resemble a self-interested perspective (Kreps & Monin, 2014). Failure to honor normative values may signal that an actor is not trustworthy, which may raise doubts about a consequentialist actor's motives (Kreps & Monin, 2014; Everett et al., 2016). Indeed, participants rated consequentialist claimants to be less authentic and less committed to the issue at hand (Kreps & Monin, 2014).

As a philosophy, however, consequentialism is a morally motivated position that cares deeply about benefitting society. John Stuart Mill (1869/1984), an important defender of consequentialism, specifically utilitarianism, is admired for being ahead of his time in the high value he placed on freedom of expression, tolerance (Mill, 1859/1955) and equal rights for women (Mill, 1869/1984). In more modern times, Peter Singer has used consequentialist arguments to express a need to address global poverty (Singer, 1975/1990) and the treatment of animals (Singer, 1979/2011). Given that several consequentialist positions have come to be widely accepted in the public sphere, certain types of information may encourage observers to overcome their default moral qualms about consequentialist actors.

For instance, studies have demonstrated a reduction in the deontological moral bias if the harm required was caused indirectly (i.e. by flipping a switch; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Greene et al., 2009), if the consequentialist option was the will of the people in the scenario (Robinson, Joel, & Plaks, 2015), or if the decision to cause harm was difficult for the actor (Everett et al., 2016). In this paper we explore another source of information that may reduce the deontological bias: information about the actor's level of exertion.

1.2. The signaling function of effort

Quick decisions cause moral acts to appear more moral and immoral acts more immoral (Critcher et al., 2013). This is presumably because people hold the lay theory that immediate, 'gut' responses reflect the actor's authentic, unguarded self. The present studies build on this idea by examining the other side of the coin: deliberate, methodical effort may at times signal something positive: sincere conflict, as the person struggles toward the 'right answer.' If so, it may be possible to reduce the greater negativity assigned to consequentialist actors by providing information about the actor's high effort.

Several strands of evidence provide indirect evidence for this idea. Classic cognitive dissonance studies demonstrated that suffering creates value (Aronson & Mills, 1959); participants who underwent a severe group initiation (e.g., social embarrassment) subsequently rated that group more highly than those who underwent a mild initiation. More recent data demonstrated that participants were willing to donate more money to participate in a high-effort charity event (charity run) than a low-effort charity event (picnic). Thus, the amount of effort required to participate in the charity event altered the perceived value of the event itself (Olivola & Shafir, 2013). More generally, how a decision is made

(footnote continued)

character. For example, Rom, Weiss, and Conway (2017) and Uhlmann et al. (2013) have identified specific trait dimensions (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion) on which deontological actors tend to be rated more favorably.

² Note that this deontological bias does not necessarily extend to traits beyond moral

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