



Case Report



Doing good vs. avoiding bad in prosocial choice: A refined test and extension of the morality preference hypothesis[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Prosociality is fundamental to human social life, and, accordingly, much research has attempted to explain human prosocial behavior. Capraro and Rand (Judgment and Decision Making, 13, 99–111, 2018) recently provided experimental evidence that prosociality in anonymous, one-shot interactions (such as Prisoner's Dilemma and Dictator Game experiments) is not driven by outcome-based social preferences – as classically assumed – but by a generalized morality preference for “doing the right thing”. Here we argue that the key experiments reported in Capraro and Rand (2018) comprise prominent methodological confounds and open questions that bear on influential psychological theory. Specifically, their design confounds: (i) preferences for efficiency with self-interest; and (ii) preferences for action with preferences for morality. Furthermore, their design fails to dissociate the preference to do “good” from the preference to avoid doing “bad”. We thus designed and conducted a preregistered, refined and extended test of the morality preference hypothesis ($N = 801$). Consistent with this hypothesis, our findings indicate that prosociality in the anonymous, one-shot Dictator Game is driven by preferences for doing the morally right thing. Inconsistent with influential psychological theory, however, our results suggest the preference to do “good” was as potent as the preference to avoid doing “bad” in this case.

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1. Introduction

People often pay costs to benefit others; they behave *prosocially*. Fundamental to human social life (Fehr & Gächter, 2002; Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2003; Nowak, 2006; Tomasello, 2014), prosocial behavior is often explained by appeal to reciprocity. If I pay a cost to help you today, you – or others who learn about my behavior – are more likely to help me tomorrow (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005; Rand & Nowak, 2013; Trivers, 1971). Defying explanations of this kind, however, prosocial behavior is frequently observed in contexts where opportunities for reciprocity are absent. For example, in anonymous, one-shot interactions, individuals often forego some amount of self-interest to the benefit of strangers (Camerer, 2003).

Behavioral economists have classically sought to explain such behavior by assuming that individuals have preferences for minimizing inequity or maximizing efficiency (i.e., social welfare) (Bolton &

Ockenfels, 2000; Capraro, 2013; Charness & Rabin, 2002; Engelmann & Strobel, 2004; Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). According to these influential frameworks, prosocial individuals derive utility – psychological benefit – from particular social *outcomes*; thus, realizing those outcomes offsets the cost of behaving prosocially.

A recent alternative perspective is that individuals derive utility from performing *actions* they perceive to be morally right (Bicchieri, 2005; DellaVigna, List, & Malmendier, 2012; Huck, Kübler, & Weibull, 2012; Krupka & Weber, 2013). This perspective accords with evidence from social psychology that individuals derive utility from seeing themselves in a positive moral light (Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Dunning, 2007) and, in addition, that prosocial individuals in particular view opportunities for prosocial action in moral terms; for example, by considering what the morally “right” action is (Liebrand, Jansen, Rijken, & Suhre, 1986; Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004).

Building on these converging lines of evidence, recent experimental work advanced the hypothesis that a *generalized morality preference* – rather than preferences for minimizing inequity or maximizing

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efficiency per se – drives prosocial behavior in anonymous, one-shot interactions (Capraro & Rand, 2018). In other words, that a simple preference for doing (what is perceived to be) the morally “right” thing underpins individuals’ prosociality in these contexts.

In their key experiments, Capraro and Rand (2018) used a “Trade-Off Game” (TOG) to empirically dissociate the hypothesized morality preference from outcome-based social preferences for equity and efficiency. In the TOG, participants made a unilateral choice about how to allocate money between themselves and two other (passive) people. While one choice minimized inequity – all participants earned the same amount – the other choice maximized efficiency – participants earned different amounts, but, together, the group earned more. This design effectively pitted preferences for equity and efficiency against one another; creating a decision context where the morally “right” choice was ambiguous. The researchers found that, framing *either* choice as the morally appropriate one dramatically affected participants’ choices, such that the majority chose the option framed as morally appropriate; be that the equitable *or* efficient choice.

To support the inference that these moral considerations drive prosociality, however, required additional evidence. To that end, participants also completed, in addition to the TOG, a canonical prosocial choice task; either the Dictator Game (DG), or the Prisoner’s Dilemma (PD). In the latter tasks, participants made a unilateral choice about how much money to donate to a new (passive) person (DG), or a simultaneous bilateral choice whether to cooperate with a new person (PD), respectively.

The key finding in Capraro and Rand (2018) was that participants who made the choice framed as morally appropriate in the TOG – be that the equitable choice *or* the efficient choice – were consistently more prosocial in the DG and PD; donating and cooperating (respectively) more than participants who chose otherwise in the TOG. Crucially, this result is *inconsistent* with stable outcome-based preferences for equity or efficiency as explanations for prosociality, which do not predict an association between moral framing in the TOG and prosociality in a different task, such as the DG/PD. The result is instead consistent with the morality preference hypothesis, which predicts that individuals sensitive to which choice is morally right in the TOG – as revealed by the moral framing of those choices – are also revealed to be more prosocial in the DG/PD; where, in contrast to the TOG, the morally right choice is *unambiguous* (Krueger & Acevedo, 2007; Krueger & DiDonato, 2010).

The implication of Capraro and Rand’s (2018) findings is important: They suggest their data renders the classic approach to understanding prosocial choice through social preferences insufficient and, in particular, that an account based on a fluid preference for “doing the morally right thing” is superior. However, their key evidence derives from an experimental design that contains several prominent methodological confounds, and leaves open important questions regarding the mechanism of the hypothesized morality preference. Below we expand on these issues.

1.1. Self-interest

Consider the choice outcomes in the TOG. The *equitable* choice always provided the participants – the chooser, and two passive recipients – the same allocation; 13 Monetary Units (MU) each. The *efficient* choice, in contrast, always provided the chooser with 15 MU, and the passive recipients 23 MU and 13 MU, respectively. Thus, while the efficient choice clearly results in greater overall gains for the group – at the cost of equity, as intended – it also results in *greater gains for the chooser themselves*. In other words, the choice option meant to reveal a preference for efficiency is confounded with self-interest. A plausible consequence of this confound is an *overestimate* of the proportion of individuals with a preference for efficiency. An overestimation of this kind may have affected the key result – an association between TOG choice and prosociality in the DG/PD – in two ways.

First, it may have *inflated* the association between TOG choice under the *equitable-is-moral* frame, and prosociality in the DG/PD. Specifically, this association may not have been driven by participants with a genuine morality preference – who choose the equitable option under this TOG frame, and the prosocial option in the DG/PD – but, rather, by self-interested participants – who choose the *efficient* option under this TOG frame, and the *self-interested* option in the DG/PD. Indeed, in the worst case, the behavior of self-interested participants could *fully account* for the observed association between TOG choice under the equitable-is-moral frame, and prosociality in the DG/PD.

Second, by the opposite logic, the overestimation of individuals with a preference for efficiency may have *deflated* the association between TOG choice under the *efficient-is-moral* frame, and prosociality in the DG/PD. This is because some participants making the efficient choice under that TOG frame did so *not* because of a general morality preference nudged by the framing, but, rather, for their own self-interest. Crucially, these participants would *not* have chosen prosocially in the DG/PD, thereby deflating the observed association between the two choices.

These issues directly affect the key evidence – an association between TOG choice and prosociality in the DG/PD – supporting the morality preference hypothesis. A remedy to these issues is to remove self-interest from the equation by design.

1.2. Action-inaction asymmetry

Not only do the *efficient-is-moral* and *equitable-is-moral* frames differ in the labels used to describe the two choice options, but, in addition, they differ in which is the *active* choice and which is the *passive* choice. Specifically, in the *efficient-is-moral* frame, participants start with an equitable allocation (13 MU each), while in the *equitable-is-moral* frame they start with an efficient allocation (15, 23, and 13 MU, respectively). In other words, the moral choice is always framed as an *active* choice to change these initial allocations. Choice frame is thus confounded with active/passive frame.

A substantial body of work in social, moral, and decision-making psychology indicates that humans perceive *inaction* differently than *action* (Baron & Ritov, 2004; Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 1991). For example, regret is greater for actions that lead to negative outcomes than for *inactions* that lead to the same negative outcomes (Feldman & Albarracín, 2017; Zeelenberg, van den Bos, van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002); individuals are biased towards maintaining the status quo in decision-making (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988); and, in moral judgment, harms caused by *action* are considered worse than the same harms caused by *inaction* (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006). Finally, most relevant here, action framing influences engagement in prosocial behavior (Teper & Inzlicht, 2011), and there is considerable variation in *who* exhibits action-inaction asymmetries (Baron & Ritov, 2004).

Given this evidence, it is probable that the confounding of choice frame with active/passive frame over- or under-estimated the proportion (and types) of individuals choosing the morally-framed option in the TOG; with unknown consequences for the key association between TOG choice and prosociality in the DG/PD. Decoupling these frames is necessary to make clear inferences about the effect of choice frame in the TOG.

1.3. Doing good vs. avoiding bad

An influential hypothesis in social psychology is that immoral, negative, or otherwise “bad” stimuli weigh more heavily than their “good” counterparts in human cognition and behavior (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008; see Corns, 2018 for a recent critique).

Consistent with this hypothesis, recent evidence suggests that “self-righteousness” – manifested in, for example, the *average person* rating themselves morally superior to the average person (Tappin & McKay,

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