



FlashReport

Psychological distance increases uncompromising consequentialism[☆]Pilar Aguilar^a, Silvina Brussino^b, José-Miguel Fernández-Dols^{a,*}^a Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain^b Universidad de Córdoba, Argentina

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ We hypothesized that psychological distance increases consequentialism.
- ▶ We carried out three different manipulations of psychological distance.
- ▶ All manipulations increased morally counter-normative consequentialism.

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ABSTRACT

Individuals can follow their moral norms, or opt for a means-end, consequentialist reasoning, in which a valuable consequence (e.g., to save the lives of five people) justifies the tolls incurred even if they clash with basic moral principles (e.g., to kill one person). Psychological distance gives rise to an abstract representation of actions that make goals more prominent and can help us ignore their immediate effects. For these reasons, psychological distance should increase consequentialism. Three experiments confirmed that different manipulations of psychological distance increased participants' consequentialist choices, such as the killing of innocent victims in the service of valued ends.

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Introduction

Individuals can follow their moral intuitions, based on moral norms (e.g., “thou shalt not kill”), or opt for a more complex means-end reasoning, in which the moral value of the final consequence (e.g., saving many lives) justifies the toll incurred in the process of attaining such a consequence (e.g., by expending one life). In philosophical terms, these two options are called deontological and consequentialist moralities, respectively. In psychology, Tetlock (2003) has described those individuals who follow moral intuitions as “intuitive theologians” and those who follow a consequentialist rationale as “intuitive economists”.

Researchers also conclude that, in general, the two perspectives can be compatible (e.g., Tanner, Medin, & Iliev, 2008), but when they are not, consequentialist judgments are more rational and beneficial than deontological judgments because “protected values” can cause deontological judgments to take extreme, irrational forms. Protected values (e.g., prohibition of harming or killing living creatures such as endangered species; see Ritov & Baron, 1999) are absolute (i.e., they do not induce concern about the consequences) and

focused on forbidden or obligatory actions, rather than their final outcomes. They convey a strong sense of universal moral obligation, attribute the duty involved in the norm to specific individuals, and resist trade-offs with other desirable outcomes (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000).

Researchers have characterized these uncompromising deontological positions as predicting mental rigidity and moral exhibitionism (Baron & Leshner, 2000, Tetlock, 2003), but also as malleable: a number of contextual factors can undermine deontological moral judgments in general (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Tanner & Medin, 2004), and radical deontological positions in particular (e.g., Baron & Spranca, 1997). People with deontological positions can be made more amenable to consequentialism by inducing them to think carefully about all the consequences of following a deontological principle (e.g., potential counterexamples, exceptions, conflicts between protected values or probabilistic estimates; Baron & Leshner, 2000) or just by rhetorically reframing the choices of the moral dilemma in which a protected value is involved (e.g., by framing a utilitarian decision as vaguely deontological; Tetlock, 2003).

Nevertheless, the implementation of uncompromising consequentialism also raises serious questions about its rationality and moral superiority. For example, a strict application of the principle of overall utility seems to lead to moral skepticism, because it says nothing about which particular decisions are a priori right, only about the objective a posteriori consequences. Furthermore, history shows that defining what overall consequences are valuable, satisfactory or good

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can be very different depending on the actor's ideology (Walter Duranty – an admirer of Stalin – illustrated this problem with his infamous consequentialist motto: “you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs”).

In this article we expand upon these two alternative views of moral judgment by exploring the psychological causes of uncompromising forms of consequentialism, i.e., consequentialist options in strong conflict with moral norms, through moral dilemmas (e.g., is one child's life disposable if it saves the lives of many others?).

Using moral dilemmas

A reasonable objection to the use of moral dilemmas in psychological research is that participants' behavior in a hypothetical situation may well be different from their behavior in an actual situation. Participants in low-impact situations, such as hypothetical vignettes or dilemmas, would make decisions aimed at impression management, following what they assume will please the experimenter (e.g., the normative appropriate rules in the described situation), rather than reflecting their actual reaction in a real dilemma (Lerner, 2003).

Such criticism helps to make clear what can and cannot be inferred from our participants' decisions. Dilemmas do not predict actual behavior, but they can help to disentangle the conflicting cognitive and motivational processes triggered by the mere representation of our being confronted with such dilemmas (Cushman & Greene, 2012). For example, the above-mentioned biblical prohibition (thou shalt not kill) is one of the elements in Abraham's dilemma, in which God commands his son Isaac to be slaughtered, a decision with real consequences.

We cannot predict anyone's behavior if confronted with such a dilemma, but its mere consideration is disturbing and triggers motivational (moral intuitions) and cognitive (moral reasoning) processes that can help us to understand the decisions of people confronted with real dilemmas. Coming back to the example of Abraham's dilemma, philosophers have concluded that the main problem behind it (the command for a human sacrifice on behalf of a morally superior being) is basically epistemic: a command based on a historical or visionary faith raises the suspicion of serious errors or misinterpretations of the deity's supposed commands (revelations cannot be apodictic, see Adams, 1999; Kant, 1960).

Thus, an abstract philosophical discussion about a thought dilemma helps us to understand some of the potential key cognitive factors in real human sacrifices on behalf of a superior deity. For example, terrorism in God's name is not a necessary outcome of specific religious values, but a hideous variation on the epistemic distortions associated with any destructive cult.

From an applied point of view, an additional reason for studying abstract moral dilemmas is that current technological changes have created real decision contexts which, ironically, imitate philosophical dilemmas. Computers, robots, and telecommunication devices have blurred the threshold between the real and the symbolic for an increasing number of professionals whose abstract decisions can be translated, at lightning speed, into real consequences for their invisible targets.

This article is motivated by both concerns: the theoretical understanding of the cognitive processes involved in some forms of consequentialism, and its applied relevance in organizational and political contexts.

Psychological distance and consequentialism

Some philosophers (e.g., Portmore, 2003) have pointed out that the perceived moral costs of adopting uncompromising consequentialist courses of action vary depending on whether the judge is the actor or a neutral witness. For example, the moral dilemma about sacrificing one individual in order to avoid five deaths is dramatically different depending on who is judging such a dilemma: a distant

witness or the actor, i.e., the person whose task is to kill the victim. Sacrificing a person can be an extremely supererogatory demand for the sacrificer, who can see his or her life devastated by the emotional or legal consequences of such an action. In contrast, a killing committed by someone else can be a distasteful but desirable course of action for a person not directly involved in the dilemma.

The translation of this philosophical observation into psychological processes strongly suggests that a key difference between the actor and a neutral witness is psychological distance (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance involves a high-level construal, an abstract representation. Abstract representations are focused on superordinate goals rather than immediate circumstances. An individual in an abstract mindset is less concerned with the problems of a course of action (means) and freer to focus on desirable outcomes (consequences) (see Amit & Greene, 2012). Therefore, helping actors to distance themselves with respect to their actions (that is, to represent their actions at an abstract level) should facilitate consequentialist courses of action.

Our aim across three experiments was to test for a positive causal link between psychological distance and uncompromising consequentialist decisions through different manipulations of psychological distance and measures of consequentialism.

Experiment 1

Students from a university in Argentina volunteered to participate in the experiment (42 females, age $M = 21.12$, $SD = 3.48$). Seven participants were excluded after the experimental debriefings (e.g., for having misunderstood the instructions).¹

We presented the participants with a moral dilemma inspired by a scenario commonly used in philosophical literature on consequentialism (the Transplant Dilemma, Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1985). Doctors have to make up their mind about sacrificing the life of a man by surgically removing a gland that secretes a unique hormone capable of saving the lives of thousands infected by a new, deadly strain of smallpox. We gave participants the choice to kill the person with a number of alternatives that only differed with respect to the guarantee of success regarding the expected payoff (i.e., the guarantee that the hormone would really be successful in saving others' lives). Probability of success ranged from 50% to 1%. After reading the dilemma, participants were asked to fill out and sign a form in which they marked their acceptable level of risk option (see Appendix 1). Our rationale was that an uncompromising consequentialist view would lead participants to adopt a more dismissive attitude toward the victim's death, so that they would indicate a lower threshold for the acceptable level of probability of success.

Our manipulation of psychological distance consisted in describing the final decision as close or distant in time. Temporal distance is a suitable manipulation for studying the effects of abstraction in consequentialism because it induces abstract level construal (Trope & Liberman, 2003; cf. Caruso, 2010). In the Near Future Condition, the surgery had to be performed in the next 48 h; in the Distant Future Condition the surgery would take place two years later.

Finally, the participants were debriefed and informed of the goals of the study. We took special care in helping the participants not to have any negative concerns about their decision in the experimental dilemma by emphasizing the positive side of any choice.

¹ Differences in attrition among experiments were probably due to differences in the recruitment process (volunteers vs. paid participants) and experimental tasks (probability estimates vs. to sign or not to sign). For a complete description of the attrition patterns and their consequences for the significance of these findings, see Appendix 2.

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