



Bleeding-heart conservatives and hard-headed liberals: The dual processes of moral judgements



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ABSTRACT

Conservatives differ from liberals in a variety of domains, including exhibiting greater fear and disgust sensitivity. Additionally, experimental procedures to reduce reasoning ability lead to stronger endorsement of conservative views. We propose that dual-process models of moral judgements can account for these findings, with conservatives relying on System 1 (fast, emotional) and liberals relying on System 2 (slow, reasoned) processes. To test this theory, we had liberal and conservative participants respond to moral dilemmas under cognitive load or with no load. As predicted, liberals took longer to respond under cognitive load than under no load, indicating a reliance on controlled reasoning processes. Conservatives' response times were not affected by cognitive load. These differences cannot be accounted for by group differences in logical reasoning or working memory capacity. Instead, as predicted, logical reasoning ability positively predicted the time that liberals, but not conservatives, spent contemplating the dilemmas. These findings suggest that differential reliance on Systems 1 and 2 may be a fundamental aspect of left-right political orientation. They also challenge intuitionist models of morality and politics and suggest a dual-process theory of morality could account for some of the discrepancies in the political psychology literature.

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Conservatives (right-wing) and liberals (left-wing) exhibit a series of cognitive, emotional, neural and physiological differences for which a unifying explanation remains elusive. In the current study we propose that a dual-process approach to moral judgements can parsimoniously account for many of these differences, with conservatives favouring System 1 (intuitive/emotional) and liberals favouring System 2 (logical/reasoned) responses.

Political orientation is linked to individual differences in personality, and physiological and neuroanatomical traits, associated with fear and threat. Conservatives (right-wing) show greater physiological responses to threatening stimuli than do (left-wing) liberals (Oxley et al., 2008), and exhibit greater disgust sensitivity (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011; Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012). They also perceive greater threat in ambiguous facial expressions (Vigil, 2010) and possess more white matter in the right amygdala, a brain area associated with threat and fear processing (Kanai, Feilden, Firth, & Rees, 2011). A meta-analysis of political ideology (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) found that conservatives show greater needs for certainty and cognitive closure, and a greater aversion to ambiguity and complexity. Conservatives are also more conscientious, rule bound and orderly whereas liberals exhibit greater openness to experience (reviewed by Jost (2009) and Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter (2008)).

The theory of motivated social cognition (Jost et al., 2003) postulates that divergent psychological motives to manage threat and uncertainty drive these differences: conservatives, unlike liberals, interpret change and uncertainty as threatening and are thus highly motivated to maintain the social status quo. Consistent with conceptualising conservatism as a cognitive defense against threat and uncertainty, recent life-threatening experiences can increase conservative attitudes (Bonanno & Jost, 2006), and liberals, more than conservatives, can better override habitual responses (Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007). The theory of motivated social cognition, however, does not account for why other situational factors, such as alcohol intoxication, time pressure and cognitive load, all of which challenge reasoning processes by encouraging low-effort thought, increase endorsement of conservative attitudes (Eidelman, Crandall, Goodman, & Blanchard, 2012).

Dual-process theories of moral judgements (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Paxton, Ungar, & Greene, 2012) could parsimoniously account for both the apparent conservative aversion to threat and uncertainty, and the relationship between inhibited reasoning capacity (via low-effort thought processes) and increased conservative attitudes. Dual-process theories explain moral judgements as resulting from an interaction between two systems: System 1 is fast, intuitive and emotionally driven, but can be subsequently overridden by reasoned judgements made by System 2, which is slow and effortful (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Feinberg, Willer, Antonenko, & John, 2012; Greene et

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al., 2004, 2008). If liberals and conservatives differ in the extent to which they rely on Systems 1 and 2, this could account for the apparently fear-motivated behaviours of conservatives (System 1 dominance) and also for the observed increases in conservatism when reasoning abilities (System 2) are challenged.

There is converging evidence that conservatives may well rely heavily on emotional, System 1 processes. Conservatism is related to both chronic and temporary elevations in disgust sensitivity (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011), with these relationships persisting when accounting for education, religious affiliation and other personality factors (Inbar et al., 2012). Moreover, conservatives are more likely to condemn (harmless) taboo sexual acts as immoral and respond to them with negative affect, subsequently exhibiting “moral dumbfounding” – defined as “stubborn and puzzled maintenance of a moral judgement, without supporting reasons” (Haidt & Hersh, 2001, p. 194). This finding suggests that conservatives, more than liberals, tend to rely on emotional/intuitive processes (System 1) when making moral decisions, rendering them less able to articulate logical reasons for their choices (a System 2 process).

There is also evidence for more dominant System 2 function in liberals. Skitka, Mullen, Griffin, Hutchinson, and Chamberlin (2002) showed that although both liberals and conservatives initially blamed individuals for their own socio-economic misfortune, an intuitive System 1 response, only liberals' attitudes were subsequently moderated to take into account external factors (System 2). These findings suggest that, within the realm of moral judgements, at least, conservatives may exhibit more dominant System 1 processes, even in the absence of needs to manage threat and uncertainty (since individuals suffering socio-economic misfortune are not an obvious threat or source of uncertainty), whereas liberals may exhibit more dominant System 2 processes.

The current study directly tests the notion that liberals and conservatives differ in the relative extents to which they rely on System 1 and System 2 processes when making moral judgements. We applied a design inspired by Greene et al. (2008). Greene and colleagues who presented participants with a series of moral dilemmas in which the agent has the option of taking an action that will result in the death of a specified individual, but will also avert the death of several other people.

To detect whether logical reasoning processes (System 2) were involved in generating responses to the dilemmas, Greene et al. used a cognitive load manipulation requiring participants to attend to numbers scrolling along the bottom of the screen, responding whenever they saw a ‘5’ digit. Such manipulations only delay responding on other tasks when those other tasks are under the control of so-called “cognitive” processes: the logical reasoning (System 2) processes (Eidelman et al., 2012; Greene et al., 2008). Hence, our measure of the extent to which participants' responses to the dilemmas reflected logical/reasoned (System 2), rather than emotional/intuitive (System 1) processes, was the difference in response time to the dilemmas between the load and no load conditions.

We replicated Greene et al.'s (2008) basic design, recording response times to moral dilemmas under both cognitive load (using a similar cognitive load induction procedure) and no-load conditions. If liberals exhibit a greater propensity to rely on System 2 and conservatives a greater propensity to rely on System 1, the cognitive load induction should slow liberals' response times to the dilemmas (relative to the no load condition), with no difference in conservatives' response times between the load and no-load conditions. Note that, consistent with the reports of Greene et al. (2008), we do not predict that responses under System 1 control, should be generally faster than responses under System 2 control, and so we make no predictions about the overall tendency for liberals (or conservatives) to respond more slowly (or quickly) overall.

Since the differences we are proposing between liberals and conservatives are differences in the propensity to rely on System 1 (intuitive)

versus System 2 (logically reasoned), not a difference in logical reasoning ability per se, it's important to account for individual differences in logical reasoning ability. Hence we included a logical reasoning task. We also included a working memory capacity task, as a proxy for intelligence (Conway, Kane, & Engle, 2003), given the complicated relationship between political orientation and intelligence: intelligence is positively associated with conservatism in people with low political interest, but negatively so in people with high political interest (Kemmelmeier, 2008), although Rindermann, Flores-Mendoza, and Woodley (2012) report a positive association between intelligence and political centrality.

If the cognitive load induction selectively increases liberals' response times, but not those of conservatives, then the differential effect of load should not be explicable by liberal/conservative differences in reasoning ability or intelligence. We also predicted that logical reasoning ability should correlate positively with response time for liberal, but not conservative, participants, as a result of liberals' reliance on System 2, and conservatives' reliance on System 1, processes.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

This study was approved by the Charles Sturt University HREC (under approval number 113/2013/08) and was conducted in accordance with the provisions of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. One hundred and twenty-four participants completed the online study. Five were subsequently removed due to long response times (see Results) leaving a sample of 119 participants (41 males) aged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 34.2$, $SD = 12.8$), of which 108 identified as Australian. Participants were either first year psychology students ($n = 58$, 41 liberals), who participated in return for course credit, or members of the general public ($n = 61$, 44 liberals). Eighty-five participants (29 males) aged from 18 to 59 years ($M = 32.7$, $SD = 11.4$) self-reported as liberal, and 34 (13 males) aged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 37.2$, $SD = 15.6$) self-reported as conservative.

1.2. Stimuli and procedure

The experiment was conducted online, with presentation controlled by Inquisit Software (Millisecond Corp.). Participants first responded to a series of moral dilemmas, half under cognitive load, and were then given a working memory capacity test, a logical reasoning test and, lastly, provided their political orientation.

1.2.1. Moral dilemmas

The set of moral dilemmas was the “personal moral dilemmas” of Koenigs et al. (2007). This set of dilemmas is used frequently in studies of moral judgements (e.g., Greene et al., 2004, 2008; Feinberg et al., 2012; Koenigs et al., 2007) and involve an agent weighing up whether to harm one person for the benefit of several other people. As in Greene et al.'s (2008) experiment, a utilitarian answer (deciding to harm one to save many) is always in the affirmative. For example, in the submarine dilemma, participants are told they are on a submarine and an onboard explosion has injured a crew-member and left the rest of the crew with insufficient oxygen. The participant is then asked whether it is morally permissible to kill the injured crew-member, who would not otherwise survive anyway, to preserve oxygen for the remaining crew. Participants were first provided with the body of the dilemma and given unlimited reading time. Once the question was revealed (at the participant's indication), they had 30 s to respond, after which on-screen instructions indicated their time was up and that they had to answer now.

We used 19 dilemmas, 10 arbitrarily allocated to set-A and 9 to set-B. Half of the participants completed set-A under load and set-B under no-load (blocked and counter-balanced for order and reversed for the other

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