



The strategic moral self: Self-presentation shapes moral dilemma judgments



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ABSTRACT

Research has focused on the cognitive and affective processes underpinning dilemma judgments where causing harm maximizes outcomes. Yet, recent work indicates that lay perceivers infer the processes behind others' judgments, raising two new questions: whether decision-makers accurately anticipate the inferences perceivers draw from their judgments (i.e., meta-insight), and, whether decision-makers strategically modify judgments to present themselves favorably. Across seven studies, a) people correctly anticipated how their dilemma judgments would influence perceivers' ratings of their warmth and competence, though self-ratings differed (Studies 1–3), b) people strategically shifted public (but not private) dilemma judgments to present themselves as warm or competent depending on which traits the situation favored (Studies 4–6), and, c) self-presentation strategies augmented perceptions of the weaker trait implied by their judgment (Study 7). These results suggest that moral dilemma judgments arise out of more than just basic cognitive and affective processes; complex social considerations causally contribute to dilemma decision-making.

During the Second World War, Alan Turing and his team cracked the Enigma Code encrypting German war communications. Soon, British High Command discovered an impending attack on Coventry—but taking countermeasures would reveal the decryption (Winterbotham, 1974). Thus, they faced a moral dilemma: allow the deadly raid to proceed and continue intercepting German communications, or deploy lifesaving countermeasures and blind themselves to future attack. Ultimately, the Allies allowed the attack to proceed. Lives were lost, but some analysts suggest this decision expedited the war's conclusion (Copeland, 2014). The moral judgment literature suggests that such decisions reflect a tension between basic affective processes rejecting harm and cognitive evaluations of outcomes allowing harm (Green, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004). But is it possible that self-presentation also factored in? The British High Command may have considered how their allies would react upon learning they threw away a tool for victory to prevent one deadly, but relatively modest, raid.

Moral dilemmas typically entail considering whether to accept harm to prevent even greater catastrophe. Philosophers originally developed such dilemmas to illustrate a distinction between killing someone as the means of saving others versus as a side effect of doing so (Foot, 1967), but subsequent theorists have largely described them as illustrating a

conflict between deontological and utilitarian philosophy (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). The dual process model suggests that affective reactions to harm underlie decisions to reject harm, whereas cognitive evaluations of outcomes underlie decisions to accept harm to maximize outcomes (Greene et al., 2004). Other theorists have described these as processes in terms of basic cognitive architecture for decision-making (Crockett, 2013; Cushman, 2013), or heuristic adherence to moral rules (Sunstein, 2005). Notably, all such existing models focus on relatively basic, non-social processing.

Yet, Haidt (2001) argued that moral judgments are intrinsically social, and communicate important information about the speaker. Indeed, recent work indicates that lay perceivers view decision-makers who reject harm (upholding deontology) as warmer, more moral, more trustworthy, more empathic, and more emotional than decision-makers who accept harm (upholding utilitarianism), whom perceivers view as more competent and logical, with consequences for hiring decisions (Everett, Pizarro, & Crockett, 2016; Kreps & Monin, 2014; Rom, Weiss, & Conway, 2016; Uhlmann, Zhu, and Tannenbaum, 2013).¹ Moreover, social pressure can influence dilemma judgments (Bostyn & Roets, 2016; Kundu & Cummins, 2012; Lucas & Livingstone, 2014). Such findings raise the question of whether people have meta-insight

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¹ Deontological dilemma judgments appear to convey both warmth and morality (Rom et al., 2016). Although these constructs can be disentangled (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2011), in the present context they happen to covary substantially. It may be that different aspects of deontological decisions influence these perceptions (e.g., whether they accord with moral rules; whether they suggest emotional processing), but these aspects overlap in the current paradigm. We focus primarily on perceptions of warmth, which roughly corresponds to the affective processing postulated by the dual process model, and relegated findings regarding morality the supplement. Future work should disentangle warmth trait perceptions from moral character evaluations.

into how their dilemma judgments make them appear in the eyes of others, and whether decision-makers *strategically* adjust dilemma judgments to create desired social impressions. If so, this would provide the first evidence to our knowledge that higher-order processes causally influence judgments, suggesting dilemma decisions do not merely reflect the operation of basic affective and cognitive processes.

1. Moral dilemma judgments: basic vs. social processes

Moral dilemmas originated as philosophical thought experiments, including the famous trolley dilemma where decision-makers could redirect a runaway trolley so it kills one person instead of five (Foot, 1967). According to Greene et al. (2001), refusing to cause harm to save others qualifies as a ‘characteristically deontological’ decision, because in deontological ethics the morality of action primarily hinges on its intrinsic nature (Kant, 1785/1959). Conversely, causing harm by redirecting the trolley saves five people, thereby qualifying as a ‘characteristically utilitarian’ decision, because in utilitarian ethics the morality of an action primarily hinges on its outcomes (Mill, 1861/1998).² Note that utilitarian philosophy technically entails impartial maximization of the greater good, which represents a subset of the broader concept of consequentialism, which advocates for outcome-focused decision-making more generally. We do not wish to imply that making a judgment consistent with utilitarianism renders one a utilitarian—it need not (e.g., Kahane, 2015)—but rather we use the term ‘utilitarian’ in the simpler senses that such judgments a) objectively maximize overall outcomes, b) appear to often entail ordinary cost-benefit reasoning, and c) utilitarian/consequentialist philosophers generally approve of such judgments (see Amit & Greene, 2012).

Although dilemmas originated in philosophy, research in psychology, neuroscience, and experimental philosophy has aimed to clarify the psychological mechanisms driving dilemma judgments. Most prominent among these is the dual process model, which postulates that basic affective and cognitive processes drive dilemma judgments (Greene et al., 2001). Other theorists have argued judgments reflect decision-making systems focused on immediate action versus long-range goals (Crockett, 2013; Cushman, 2013), heuristic adherence to moral rules (Sunstein, 2005), or the application of innate moral grammar (Mikhail, 2007a, 2007b). We do not aim to adjudicate between these various claims, nor do we dispute the contribution of such processes. Rather, we simply note that these models focus on basic, nonsocial processes.

Research has largely ignored the possibility that higher-order sophisticated social processes might causally contribute to dilemma judgments. Yet, morality appears intrinsically social (Haidt, 2001), and most real-world moral judgments involve publicly communicating with others (e.g., Hofmann, Wisneski, Brandt, & Skitka, 2014). We expect the same is true of dilemma judgments. Although the best-known dilemmas are hypothetical (such as the trolley dilemma), many real-world decisions entail causing harm to improve overall outcomes (e.g., launching airstrikes in Syria to prevent ISIS from gaining momentum, punishing naughty children to improve future behavior, imposing fines to prevent speeding). As decisions in such cases align with either deontological or utilitarian ethical positions, they correspond to real world moral dilemmas. Moreover, lay decision-makers employ verbal arguments that align with deontological and

utilitarian ethical positions (Kreps & Monin, 2014). Hence, social consideration of dilemma judgments is not restricted to responses to hypothetical scenarios, but forms an ordinary part of communication about common moral situations.

Kreps and Monin (2014) examined deontological and utilitarian arguments in speeches by Presidents Clinton and Bush, among other politicians. Lay perceivers viewed speakers as moralizing more when they framed arguments in terms of deontology rather than utilitarianism. These findings align with work on hypothetical dilemma decisions: perceivers rated and treated decision-makers who rejected harm (upholding deontology) as more trustworthy than decision-makers who accept harm (upholding utilitarianism, Everett et al., 2016), as well as more moral, more empathic, and less pragmatic than harm-accepting decision-makers (Uhlmann et al., 2013). Likewise, Rom et al. (2016) found that lay people appear to intuit the dual process model: they rated targets who rejected harm as relatively warm, and inferred that such judgments were driven by emotion. Conversely, perceivers rated targets who accepted harm as relatively competent, and inferred that such judgments were driven by cognitive deliberation.³ Moreover, perceivers preferred harm-rejecting decision-makers for social roles prioritizing warmth, such as social partners or their child’s doctor, but preferred harm-accepting decision-makers for roles prioritizing competence, such as hospital administration (Everett et al., 2016; Rom et al., 2016). Hence, decision-makers face a warmth/competence tradeoff when presenting their decision to others. The current work examines whether decision-makers are aware of this trade-off, and whether they strategically adjust their decisions to present themselves favorably.

2. Meta-perceptions regarding dilemma judgments

We propose that lay perceivers hold fairly accurate meta-perceptions into how others will view them based on their dilemma decision. People care deeply about their moral reputation (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Everett et al., 2016; Krebs, 2011) and the moral reputations of others (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Clearly, the research described above on perceptions of decision-makers indicate that dilemma decisions can affect moral reputation, suggesting that people should be attuned to what messages their judgments convey. Moreover, past work suggests that people can be reasonably accurate when gauging how others perceive them. For example, narcissists appear aware that others view them less positively than they view themselves (Carlson & Furr, 2009; Carlson, Vazire, & Furr, 2011). Self- and social-ratings particularly converge when the underlying traits entail public behaviors (e.g., loquaciousness signals extraversion) rather than inner states (e.g., neurotic feelings, Vazire, 2010). Sharing one’s dilemma judgment entails a clear public behavior, suggesting relative accuracy in meta-perceptions.

³ If the dual-process model is correct, responses to classic moral dilemmas do not reflect the degree to which decision-makers experience affective reactions or engage in cognition in an absolute sense. If classic moral dilemmas place affect and cognition in conflict, and ultimately judges may only choose one option, then judgments reflect the *relative* strength of each process. For example, accepting harm that maximizes outcomes may occur either due to strong cognition coupled with strong but slightly weaker affect, or weak cognition coupled with weaker affect. Hence, a judgment to accept causing harm does not reveal whether the judge experienced strong or weak affect—only that cognition outweighed whatever degree of affect they experienced. Nor does such a judgment guarantee that the judge engaged in strong cognition—only that whatever cognition they engaged in outweighed their affective experience. Some people may engage in extensive affect and cognition, whereas others engage in little of either. In order to estimate each processes independently, it is necessary to use a technique such as process dissociation (see Conway & Gawronski, 2013). However, in the current work we are not interested in the actual processes underlying dilemma judgments so much as lay perceptions of these processes. To that end, lay people, like many researchers, equate harm avoidance judgments with strong affect and harm acceptance judgments with strong cognition. This intuition is effective as a rough heuristic, so long as researchers recognize that it does not accurately describe moral dilemma processing.

² Following Greene et al. (2001), we use the term ‘characteristically’ deontological/utilitarian, because there are many variants of each theory that do not all agree. Nonetheless, this terminology is widely employed currently, and so we follow in this terminological tradition despite its limitations. Note that we are not arguing that making a given dilemma decision implies that decision-makers ascribe to abstract philosophical commitments. Rather, we argue simply that ‘utilitarian’ judgments qualify as such because they tend to maximize outcomes, regardless of decision-makers’ philosophical commitments. Just as one need not be Italian to cook an Italian meal, accepting outcome-maximizing harm on a dilemma does not make one a utilitarian. Hence, these terms reflect only to the content of judgments, rather than the qualities of judges (see Amit & Greene, 2012).

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