



Judging those who judge: Perceivers infer the roles of affect and cognition underpinning others' moral dilemma responses[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined perceptions of people who make moral dilemma judgments.
- Targets who rejected causing harm were rated as warmer but less competent.
- These effects were mediated by perceptions of affect and cognition.
- Participants predicted the effect of affect and cognition on dilemma judgments.
- People associate affect with harm reaction and cognition with harm acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

Whereas considerable research examines antecedents of moral dilemma judgments where causing harm maximizes outcomes, this work examines social consequences: whether participants infer personality characteristics from others' dilemma judgments. We propose that people infer the roles of affective and cognitive processing underlying other peoples' moral dilemma judgments, and use this information to inform personality perceptions. In Studies 1 and 2, participants rated targets who rejected causing outcome-maximizing harm (consistent with deontology) as warmer but less competent than targets who accepted causing outcome-maximizing harm (consistent with utilitarianism). Studies 3a and 3b replicated this pattern and demonstrated that perceptions of affective processing mediated the effect on warmth, whereas perceptions of cognitive processing mediated the effect on competence. In Study 4 participants accurately predicted that affective decision-makers would reject harm, whereas cognitive decision-makers would accept harm. Furthermore, participants preferred targets who rejected causing harm for a social role prioritizing warmth (pediatrician), whereas they preferred targets who accepted causing harm for a social role prioritizing competence (hospital management, Study 5). Together, these results suggest that people infer the role of affective and cognitive processing underlying others' harm rejection and acceptance judgments, which inform personality inferences and decision-making.

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“Non-violence, which is the quality of the heart, cannot come by an appeal to the brain.”

[–Mahatma Gandhi]

“The sign of an intelligent people is their ability to control their emotions by the application of reason.”

[–Marya Mannes]

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Imagine a passenger jet has been hijacked by terrorists, and is now heading towards a densely populated urban center. Is it acceptable to shoot this plane down—including the innocent civilians on board—in order to prevent it from wreaking widespread carnage? In 2003 the German government decreed that doing so was acceptable. However, in 2006, the German courts overruled this decision, arguing that the German military is forbidden from harming civilians regardless of circumstances (Whitlock, 2006). Imagine a discussion where one person

supported the government's position, and another supported the court's position. What impressions do these decisions convey about each person: Who is warmer, and who is more competent? Who should be selected to work with children, and who to run a large organization?

The hijacked airplane dilemma is one example of a class of conundrums where causing harm maximizes overall outcomes. Philosophers (Foot, 1967) and lay people (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001) disagree over whether causing harm to maximize outcomes is the appropriate course of action. According to the dual process model, resolving such dilemmas depends on two psychological processes: affective reactions to harm drive harm rejection—consistent with deontological ethical positions where the nature of an action defines its morality (Kant, 1785/1959). Conversely, cognitive deliberation regarding costs and benefits drives harm acceptance—consistent with utilitarian ethical positions where the outcome of an action defines its morality (Mill, 1861/1998). Hence, in the hijacked airplane dilemma, people disapprove of shooting down the airplane based on their affective reactions to that gruesome thought (e.g., sympathy for the victim, horror at the thought of committing murder).¹ Conversely, people approve of shooting down the airplane based on an abstract cost-benefit analysis regarding the total lives saved in each case, thereby logically deducing that causing harm results in the lesser of the two evils. A great deal of research supports the dual-process model of moral judgment (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Nichols & Mallon, 2006; Suter & Hertwig, 2011; c.f. Mikhail, 2007). However, researchers have examined primarily the antecedents of such judgments—comparatively little is known regarding their consequences, including social consequences.

One consequence may be that people's dilemma judgments influence how others perceive them. Haidt (2001) argued that moral judgments are social in nature: they communicate important information about the speaker. Are listeners picking up on this information, and inferring psychological processes behind the speaker's moral judgments? People appear quite sensitive to psychological factors driving other kinds of moral decisions (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Weiner, 1985). Recent work suggests that perceivers are indeed drawing personality inferences from others' dilemma judgments (Everett, Pizarro, & Crockett, 2016; Kreps & Monin, 2014; Uhlmann, Zu, & Tannenbaum, 2013). However, the question remains as to whether lay people infer the *processing* behind others' judgments—do they surmise that affect compels people to reject and logic motivates people to accept outcome-maximizing harm?

We propose that people infer how affect and cognition underpin others' moral dilemma judgments, and use this information to draw inferences about others' warmth and competence. Specifically, perceivers should rate targets who make characteristically² deontological judgments (i.e. *causing harm is inappropriate regardless of outcomes*) as relatively warm, because they appear to experience stronger tenderhearted affective reactions to the thought of harming someone (consistent with research linking harm rejection judgments to empathic concern, e.g., Conway & Gawronski, 2013). Conversely, perceivers should rate targets who make characteristically utilitarian judgments (i.e. *causing harm is appropriate when it maximizes overall outcomes*) as relatively more competent, because they appear to engage in more dispassionate, outcome-

focused cognitive processing that weighs various outcomes and selects the most favorable ones (consistent with research linking harm acceptance dilemma judgments to individual differences in reasoning and deliberation, e.g., Bartels, 2008; Royzman, Landy, & Leeman, 2014).³ However, these perceptions should only pertain when causing harm maximizes outcomes, rather than when people accept non-outcome-maximizing harm.

Moreover, we predict that inferences flexibly operate in the other direction as well: people are capable of predicting dilemma decisions based on information about target processing styles. Specifically, people should expect sensitive, affective targets to reject harm, but rational, logical targets to accept outcome-maximizing harm. Finally, we predict that these inferences will influence subsequent social decision-making. For example, people should select targets who reject harm for social roles prioritizing warm, but select targets who accept harm for social roles prioritizing competence. We tested these hypotheses across six studies.

1. Warmth and competence: fundamental dimensions of social perception

Traditionally, researchers have argued that perceptions of personality (e.g., Wiggins, 1979) and behavior (e.g., Wojciszke, 1994) involve two fundamental dimensions: how *warm* and how *competent* the target is (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Although researchers use somewhat different taxonomies to describe these dimensions (e.g., communion/agency, Bakan, 1956, sociable/intellectual, Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968, other-profitable/self-profitable, Peeters, 1983, and morality/competence Wojciszke et al., 1998), they all appear to cohere with core warmth and competence constructs (Imhoff, Woelki, Hanke, & Dotsch, 2013).

Classically, warmth perceptions are theorized to track how benevolent targets appear to be, whereas competence perceptions generally track how effective targets appear to be at reaching their goals (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006).⁴ Importantly, people tend to link warmth-related constructs—such as empathy, emotional expressivity, emotionality, and popularity—with an affect-laden, intuitive thinking style characterized by heuristic processing and emotional reactivity (Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996; Shiloh, Salton, & Sharabi, 2002; Norris & Epstein, 2011). Hence, when determining whether someone is warm, people may consider how much that person appears to experience affective reactions to the thought of causing harm, such as sympathy and compassion for victims or outrage at contemplating becoming a murderer. If so, then people may infer that a target is warm when that target makes judgments consistent with such affective reactions to harm (i.e., rejecting causing harm regardless of outcomes).

Conversely, people generally link competence-related constructs—such as ego strength, creativity, academic achievement, and self-

¹ Note that we are not endorsing the strong version of dual process theory, which proposes that affective reactions occur quickly by default, and cognitive evaluations occasionally over-ride default them; it seems incorrect (e.g., Baron, Gürçay, Moore, & Starcke, 2012). We are endorsing the softer version of the dual-process model which suggests that affective reactions to harm and cognitive evaluations of outcomes independently predict dilemma judgments, regardless of temporal order (Conway & Gawronski, 2013).

² The term 'characteristically' must be used because the terms *deontology* and *utilitarianism* refer to a variety of related philosophical perspectives that may not always align with this classification. Nonetheless, most theorists agree that deontological positions typically entail avoiding causing harm and utilitarian positions typically entail accepting causing harm on dilemmas where causing harm maximizes outcomes (Foot, 1967; Greene et al., 2001), so we retain this terminology.

³ If the dual-process model is correct, responses to classic moral dilemmas do not perfectly 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 experience both extensive affect and extensive cognitive processing, 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 inference is effective as a rough heuristic, so long as researchers recognize that it does not perfectly describe moral dilemma processing.

⁴ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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