



Moral reasoning and climate change mitigation: The deontological reaction toward the market-based approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 18 March 2014

Keywords:

Deontology
Consequentialism
Moral reasoning
Climate change
Mitigation

ABSTRACT

The research investigated the relation between the individual's deontological stance about environment and the attitude toward a market-based approach to climate change mitigation. We introduced people to the cap-and-trade program which is expected both to reduce the environmental risk and maximize economic benefits. Study 1 showed that the stronger the deontological mandate people held toward nature, the more likely they were to refuse the cap-and-trade mitigation program regardless of its effectiveness. In Study 2 and in Study 3, a similar win–win scenario was adopted to explore whether deontology and consequentialism consist of mutually exclusive orientations. Our results revealed that the deontological approach per se did not preclude the use of the cost–benefit analysis and that consequentialism moderated the relationship between deontology and the attitude toward the cap-and-trade program. Taken together, our findings have relevant practical implications for environmental politics and contribute to theoretical insights into moral reasoning.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, moral philosophy, psychology, and neighboring fields (Gardiner, 2010; Jamieson, 2010; Markowitz & Shariff, 2012; Singer, 2002) have attempted to frame climate change as a moral issue. The moral implications related to climate change fundamentally stem from the abuse of a common and scarce resource—the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb greenhouse gases (GHG)—by a group of people (i.e., developed countries) at the expense of others (i.e., developing countries). The fundamental ethical challenges in climate change concern not only its causes and consequences but also the distribution of the burdens to address it.

A current line of research in political philosophy and economics (Grasso, 2013; Montgomery, 1972; Singer, 2002) indicates that the goal of mitigation may be accomplished effectively by embracing a welfare-maximizing, consequentialist approach based on international systems of tradable emission rights (i.e., emission trading schemes). This approach posits that emission rights, namely the permission to authorize the release of a specified amount of GHG into the atmosphere, should be allocated in inverse proportion to

the marginal abatement costs of countries: the lower the cost the more the emission rights should be proportionally attributed. At the same time, Northern countries, typically with lower initial cutbacks due to their higher marginal abatement cost, should economically compensate Southern countries for their proportionally larger share of emission cutbacks entailed by their lower marginal abatement costs (Grasso, 2013; Montgomery, 1972; Singer, 2002). In relation to mitigation burdens, such a market-based approach would be effective, as environmental and economic analysis shows (that is, a so-called win–win scenario), and morally tenable as utilitarian moral philosophy suggests, thus aspiring to “the greatest good for the greatest number” (Bentham, 1781/1988). However, despite its efficacy, the emission trading mitigation scheme may run into important psychological constraints related to the perception of nature and moral taboos. In particular, it seems to ignore the *sacred value* (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Fiske & Tetlock, 1997) of environmental assets that are here substantially commodified.

The present contribution aims at exploring the psychological moral boundaries that a consequentialist approach to mitigation would face. In particular, we will conduct a set of experiments for analyzing the possible effects of the individual's moral orientations (namely, deontology and consequentialism) on the willingness to accept the cap and trade option. The purpose of this line of research is twofold: first, the examination of the moral reasoning with

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regard to mitigation could be useful in advancing psychological research on moral cognition due to the specificities of such a decisional scenario; second, adjusting the ethics of mitigation with the indications offered by cognitive psychology on moral processes is likely to lessen its controversy.

2. Deontological reasoning on (taboo) trade-offs

According to the normative approach, a compensatory relationship between the amount of money and any goods is always possible, even when the goods consist of moral values such as individual freedom, environmental protection, or human life (Bennis, Medin, & Bartels, 2010). Nevertheless, converging evidence from social psychology and moral cognition studies have shown that people may be extremely reluctant to engage in certain types of trade-offs (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997). Some values, such as those pertaining to human rights or natural resources, are treated as possessing infinite worth that cannot be compared to material values (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000), especially by people with high deontological orientations (Tanner, Medin, & Iliev, 2008). These *sacred* (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997) or *protected values* (Baron & Spranca, 1997) are strictly related to deontological rules and moral obligations that require or prohibit certain actions despite their consequences (e.g., “the old-growth forests cannot be cut; therefore the forest has incommensurable economic value”).

The respect of these specific values is conceived of as a moral rule that works as a categorical imperative (Kant, 1785/1959) during reasoning and decision-making processes (Baron & Spranca, 1997). In these terms, choices about values such as nature are deontological because people decide whether or not to act according to moral obligations or prohibitions, regardless of the possible consequences of that action or omission (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Tanner et al., 2008). Hence, the sacralization of some values and a deontological orientation during moral reasoning are likely to intertwine (Tanner et al., 2008). People with high deontological orientation (Skitka, 2002) will reject material compensation for environmental assets because they are particularly prone to thinking about this type of trade-off as a taboo and moral outrage, seriously downgrading their social identity and their self-perception as moral beings (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Tetlock et al., 2000). Consistent with this idea, Tanner and colleagues (Tanner, 2009; Tanner et al., 2008) demonstrated that people with high deontological orientation are more likely to sacralize these type of values.

Related to deontology, recent research has shown the relationship between moralized values and a lack of concern for consequences (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Bartels & Medin, 2007; Tanner & Medin, 2004; Tanner et al., 2008). For example, Baron and Leshner (2000) suggested that when facing taboo trade-offs people are prone to incomplete thinking that does not consider all of the possible outcomes. Tanner (2009) also demonstrated the effects of *zero thresholds* and insensitivity to incentives (see also Kessler et al., 2010). Hence, people are inclined to protest trade-offs because they consider some values incommensurable and many actions simply impermissible no matter how great the benefits.

3. Deontological reasoning and market-based approach to mitigation

This strand of research traditionally focused on the trade-offs between sacred values and secular values. These trade-offs traditionally implied that economic advantages are related to a derogation of moral principles and therefore to a violation of rules (Hanselmann & Tanner, 2008; Tetlock, 2003; Tetlock et al., 2000).

For example, if we deforest in order to obtain money, we contravene the moral norm that requires respect for the environment.

However, beyond these decisional trade-offs, theoretical analysis has identified a variety of win–win scenarios in which both ethical concerns and material interests can be preserved (Nielsen, 2009). Therefore, in a win–win solution, the commodification of a moralized value will lead to material advantages but, at the same time, the material rewards will come along with respect for the moral rule. If the relationship between deontological orientation and sacred values has been broadly analyzed (e.g., Baron & Spranca, 1997; Tetlock et al., 2000), the literature has neglected the individual's deontological reaction when dealing with such a win–win scenario. The present study is therefore aimed at addressing this neglected issue.

As a case in point, the cap and trade scheme for climate change mitigation perfectly fits this definition of the win–win scenario. In fact, although it is market-based, it is likely to reduce the environmental risks by reducing GHG emissions in the atmosphere on one side and maximizing the economic benefits on the other side (Grasso, 2013). Indeed, the present study concentrates on exploring the response in front of such a proposal in relation to the individual's deontological orientation. In particular, we hypothesized that although the cap and trade program is morally tenable and does not pose a threat to the environment, it is likely to elicit a rejection from people that hold a deontological stance about the environment because of the commodification of natural assets. The understanding of a cap and trade scheme as a win–win solution, as well as the tuning of the consequent response, may require a deep cognitive analysis. As previous research on moral cognition and moral neuroscience has suggested (Bartels, 2008; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Sunstein, 2005), deontology-consistent judgments would be intuitive, automatic, and based on a set of mental heuristics consisting of a match between decision options and moral rules. Regardless of the consequences, a reasoning which implies the comparison between sacred and secular values is perceived as indecent conduct from a deontological perspective and may lead to acts of moral cleansing (Tetlock, 2003; see also Hanselmann & Tanner, 2008). Under these conditions, people with a high deontological mode of thinking may be likely to protest the market-based option without initiating an analysis to differentiate a “true” from an “apparent” trade-off between money and moral value (Lichtenstein, Gregory, & Irwin, 2007).

More specifically, and in line with our hypothesis, the present research tested whether or not a high deontological standpoint on the environment would prevent people from accepting a market-based approach to natural resources, even when the exchange is advantageous from both an economic and an environmental point of view (e.g., a win–win scenario). Thus, in the specific case of a cap and trade scheme, we hypothesized that the greater the deontological stance, the more likely the case that people would be reluctant to support it. In fact, although this approach would lead to greater environmental and economic benefits, it is likely to be perceived as a moral outrage because of the projected monetary compensation for the release of GHG into the atmosphere, which can be regarded as the sacrilegious commodification of natural resources.

4. Overview

We tested our hypothesis across three studies. Study 1 explored whether an individual's deontological way of thinking was related to the attitude toward the cap and trade scheme for mitigation and specifically, to proposal derogation. Moreover, we investigated whether or not such an attitude was a result of insensitivity to consequences, which is considered a disregard for positive ultimate benefit.

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