



Utilitarian preferences or action preferences? De-confounding action and moral code in sacrificial dilemmas[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 May 2016

Received in revised form 10 September 2016

Accepted 11 September 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Moral psychology
Moral judgment
Sacrificial dilemma
Methodology

ABSTRACT

A large literature in moral psychology investigates utilitarian versus deontological moral preferences using sacrificial dilemmas (e.g., the Trolley Problem) in which one can endorse harming one person for the greater good. The validity of sacrificial dilemma responses as indicators of one's preferred moral code is a neglected topic of study. One underexplored cause for concern is that standard sacrificial dilemmas confound the endorsement of specific moral codes with the endorsement of action such that endorsing utilitarianism always requires endorsing action. Two studies show that, after de-confounding these factors, the tendency to endorse action appears about as predictive of sacrificial dilemma responses as one's preference for a particular moral code, suggesting that, as commonly used, sacrificial dilemma responses are poor indicators of moral preferences. Interestingly however, de-confounding action and moral code may provide a more valid means of inferring one's preferred moral code.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, psychology and neuroscience have increasingly turned their attention to the study of moral judgment. One of the most common methods used to study moral judgment entails presenting hypothetical sacrificial dilemmas in which participants choose whether to endorse harming one person in service of a greater good (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001). Responses to such dilemmas are frequently used to infer people's relative preferences for utilitarian (i.e., impartial welfare-maximizing) versus deontological (i.e., rights- or duty-based) moral codes (e.g., Lee & Gino, 2015). Such is the level of interest in sacrificial dilemma research that it has even penetrated debates in normative ethics on the relative merits of deontological and utilitarian moral codes (Berker, 2009; Greene, 2003; Singer, 2005).

Despite widespread popularity as measures of moral preferences, there has been a notable lack of research on the construct validity of sacrificial dilemmas as indicators of people's preferred moral code (i.e., whether sacrificial dilemmas can be considered a valid measure of utilitarian vs. deontological preferences). Although sacrificial dilemma responses are frequently still framed as “utilitarian” or “deontological” choices (Lee & Gino, 2015), recent studies suggest that responses to

sacrificial dilemmas do not correlate with other variables in ways expected of a measure of utilitarian versus deontological preferences (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, & Warren, 2014; Duke & Bègue, 2015; Kahane, Everett, Earp, Farias, & Savulescu, 2015; Rosas & Koenigs, 2014). We aim to further this line of research by addressing a largely unexamined issue concerning the construct validity of sacrificial dilemmas: the confounding of the endorsement of utilitarian outcomes with the endorsement of action.

1.1. Confounding action and moral code in sacrificial dilemmas

In standard sacrificial dilemmas, participants choose between two options: *acting* to uphold a “utilitarian” moral code, or *omitting action* to uphold a “deontological” moral code (see Supplementary materials for examples). Thus, the distinctions between endorsing utilitarian and deontological moral codes, and acting versus omitting (referred to as “Moral Code” and “Action” for short) are often perfectly confounded. On no occasion, to our knowledge, have these factors been thoroughly teased apart. Without such de-confounding, it is impossible to know whether responses to these dilemmas are driven by Action- versus Moral Code-related preferences (or both).¹

¹ While previous studies of the action vs. omission effect (e.g., Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006) are suggestive of Action as an important influence on moral judgment, such findings address a qualitatively different question: whether, on average, people judge harmful omissions more favourably than harmful actions. We, on the other hand, ask what proportion of people responding consistently with a given moral code in an action dilemma will respond consistently with the same moral code in an omission dilemma.

[☆] The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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An important implication of this confound is that previous research demonstrating a relationship between some predictor (e.g., emotion, reward sensitivity, or behavioral disinhibition) and sacrificial dilemmas responses (Choe & Min, 2011; Moore, Stevens, & Conway, 2011; Pastötter, Gleixner, Neuhauser, & Bäuml, 2013; Seidel & Prinz, 2012; Strohminger, Lewis, & Meyer, 2011; Valdesolo & Desteno, 2006; van den Bos, Müller, & Damen, 2011), may instead be demonstrating a relationship between that predictor and Action (i.e., willingness to endorse intervention in a situation, irrespective of the implied moral code). Critically, if Action (even partly) drives responses to sacrificial dilemmas, existing results cannot be unambiguously interpreted as reflecting psychological processes underlying the application of, or preferences for, specific Moral Codes. The problem for the field of moral psychology is that the extent to which Action, rather than Moral Code, drives responses to sacrificial dilemmas, remains unknown.

Although this confound has been acknowledged in previous work (Baron, Scott, Fincher, & Emlen Metz, 2015; Conway & Gawronski, 2013), only one study has given it any kind of empirical treatment. Baron et al. (2015) presented two studies in which standard sacrificial dilemmas are administered alongside another set of dilemmas (called “rule dilemmas”) in which participants judged the moral acceptability of two different actions: one in which a rule was actively followed, producing a bad outcome, and the other in which a rule was actively broken, producing a (relatively) better outcome. While proponents of standard sacrificial dilemmas would expect a strong positive correlation between the two, across these two studies, Baron et al. observe correlations between these two sets of dilemmas of just 0.20 and 0.31. The small correlations suggest that the standard dilemmas and rule dilemmas may be measuring separate but related constructs (thus affirming concerns about the Action confound). However, the implications of these findings are unclear. Because the two sets of dilemmas were not closely matched on other characteristics (e.g., the nature of the scenario and the magnitude of the consequences of the response options), it is possible that the correlation between these two sets of dilemmas may have been attenuated by other differences between the sets.

1.2. The present studies

A necessary first step in addressing the inferential issues outlined above is to de-confound Action and Moral Code. To achieve this, we conducted two studies in which participants responded to both (a) standard sacrificial dilemmas which required participants to judge the acceptability of performing a sacrificial action themselves (i.e., the “utilitarian” responses required action), and (b) subtly modified versions of the same dilemmas in which participants judged the moral acceptability of stopping a third person from performing the sacrificial action (i.e., the “utilitarian” response required omission). Thus, across the two versions of the same dilemma, responding consistently for one dimension (e.g., Moral Code) required responding inconsistently for the other (Action).

To illustrate, imagine two people: a “utilitarian” whose responses are driven by a utilitarian moral code, and an “interventionist,” whose responses are driven by a preference for intervening in moral situations. Both prefer flipping the switch to save lives in the original Trolley Problem, but in the modified Trolley Problem, their responses diverge: the utilitarian should prefer allowing somebody else to flip the switch, whereas the interventionist should prefer stopping the other person from flipping the switch.² If standard sacrificial dilemmas were valid indicators of one’s preferred moral code (a hypotheses we refer to as the “utilitarian hypothesis” for short), we would expect the manipulation of Action (i.e., whether action or omission leads to the “utilitarian” response) to have minimal effect on participants’ preferred moral code

within two variants of the same dilemma. If, however, participants endorsed different moral codes in different versions of the same dilemma (i.e., they were influenced by Action), our confidence in the utilitarian hypothesis would be undermined.

2. Method

Given the substantial overlap between the methods employed in the two studies, we report all methods and results together.

2.1. Participants

Participants (Study 1 $N = 120$; Study 2 $N = 308$) were United States residents recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Mason & Suri, 2012). One participant from Study 1, and two from Study 2 were excluded for providing incomplete data. Additionally, 24 participants were excluded from Study 2 for failing at least one of two attention-checks (see Supplementary materials). The final sample for Study 1 was 119 (26.1% female, 73.1% male, 0.8% unspecified; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.24$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.75$) and 282 (43% female, 56.6% male, 0.4% unspecified; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.81$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.18$), for Study 2.

3. Materials

3.1. Sacrificial dilemmas

In both studies, after providing informed consent, each participant responded to two versions of three sacrificial dilemmas based on the set of Moore et al. (2008; see Supplementary materials). For standard dilemmas, utilitarian moral code was aligned with acting (as is typical in sacrificial dilemma research). In the modified dilemmas, the number of people at risk, victim characteristics and means of sacrifice were identical to those of the corresponding standard dilemma, however a bystander was about to perform the sacrificial action, and participants decided the moral acceptability of actively stopping the bystander from performing the sacrifice (rather than judging the acceptability of performing the sacrifice themselves). Thus, in this set of dilemmas, utilitarian moral code was aligned with omission. The core features of both dilemma sets are summarized in Fig. 1.

Standard and modified dilemmas were presented in separate blocks with block order randomized. Participants reported how “morally acceptable” they judged action (i.e., either enacting the sacrifice or stopping the bystander from enacting the sacrifice) on a 1 (Absolutely unacceptable) to 6 (Absolutely acceptable) scale.³

4. Results

4.1. Correlational analyses

As a first step, we computed correlations between acceptability judgments for all three dilemma pairs across both studies. Whereas the utilitarian hypothesis would predict strong negative correlations between responses to each dilemma pair, the six correlations ranged from -0.02 to -0.19 , with an average of -0.12 (similar to Baron et al., 2015).

³ An additional set of three modified dilemmas was included in Study 2 for exploratory purposes. In this set, instead of having a bystander about to perform the sacrifice, there was a third person who was about to inadvertently cause their own death in a way that would result in the group’s lives being spared. Participants were asked whether it was morally acceptable to actively stop the person from accidentally ending their own life. The pattern of results from these dilemmas (presented in the Supplementary Materials) is essentially the same as for the modified dilemmas reported in the manuscript. A number of other individual difference variables were measured in Study 2 for an unrelated research project.

² Note that this prediction concerns consistency within two versions of the same dilemma (e.g., comparing responses to the standard and modified versions of the Trolley Problem), rather than across different dilemmas.

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