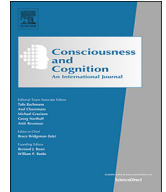




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The interplay between moral actions and moral judgments in children and adults

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ABSTRACT

Do choices about which moral actions to take cohere with subsequent judgments of their outcomes? The first set of experiments ($N = 60$ preschoolers and 30 adults) directly compared whether moral choices and judgments reflect distinct considerations, and whether coherence varies based on the valence of the moral scenario. Participants' responses suggested that moral principles may be applied differently for moral choices and judgments, and that harm-based situations are particularly demanding for children. To determine whether children's difficulty with harm-based situations reflects demand characteristics, a second set of experiments presented forty-three preschoolers and thirty-nine adults with a moral dilemma wherein they could choose to omit an action and maximize harm or act to minimize harm. Both age groups acted to minimize harm when caused indirectly. These results suggest that making choices about harm are not unilaterally demanding for preschoolers, but they struggle to make choices that minimize harm in a forced-choice scenario.

1. Introduction

There is an important difference between making moral judgments and engaging in moral actions. You make moral judgments when you blame yourself for an ethical mistake and when you approve of the efforts of a charitable organization. You *act* on those judgments when you refrain from making the same mistake in the future and when you donate to the charity. The latter behaviors concern moral decisions. If there exists any coarse normative standard of ethical behavior, a good candidate would be that people should make decisions in accordance with their moral judgments; it would be a mistake to act in a way that violates one's beliefs. The current study aimed to determine the extent to which either children or adults practice this principle: Do their choices about which of two moral actions to take cohere with how they judge the outcomes of these actions?

Prior research provides some support for a connection between moral judgments and decisions. For example, Baird and Astington (2004) found that young children could evaluate another individual's moral actions based on their underlying motives. This result suggests that children can use their moral knowledge to provide evaluations of morally charged actions of others. Prior work has also shown that adults and children evaluate moral outcomes based on the intentions of the agent that caused the outcome as well as on the relative utility of the outcome itself (i.e., saving 5 and harming 1 is permissible only if the intentions of the agent carrying out the action are good) (Cushman, Sheketoff, Wharton, & Carey, 2013; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006). However, these findings do not measure children's ability to engage in self-driven moral actions nor do they provide a measure of children's judgments of self-driven moral outcomes.

We believe that it is important to consider one's own moral actions because, as argued by Blasi (1980, 1983), moral actions arise

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from a motivation to maintain consistency between one's own set of beliefs and how one chooses to act. In contrast, moral judgments of outcomes may not hinge upon reconciling differences between beliefs and actions, as these evaluations consider only past events. Given this background, in the present paper, we sought to directly compare how one's beliefs and values are brought to bear when making moral evaluations of outcomes and when making moral decisions about future actions.

In these studies, we recruited both adults and preschool-aged children. Early childhood reflects a distinct time during which children begin to learn and accumulate a set of moral beliefs (Dunn, Cutting, & Demetrious, 2000; Lane, Wellman, Olson, LaBounty, & Kerr, 2010; Smetana, Jambon, Conry-Murray, & Sturge-Apple, 2012). We sought to determine whether these beliefs are utilized differently for moral choices and moral judgments during this formative period of moral development in comparison to adults.

1.1. Moral reasoning, moral actions, and their co-development

Children internalize moral principles in early childhood (Smetana, 1981, 1985; Turiel, 1978). For example, preschoolers distinguish moral rules like "don't hit other people" from conventional rules such as "don't wear pajamas to school" judging only the former as universally bad (e.g., Leslie, Mallon & DiCorcia, 2006; Nucci, 1985; Smetana, 1981, 1985; Turiel, 1978). In addition, young children understand the role of intention, judging that breaking ten cups is worse than breaking two, for example, but breaking a cup as a result of helpful intentions is better than breaking it as a result of rule violations (Surber, 1977; see also Núñez & Harris, 1998; Siegal & Peterson, 1998). In fact, past work has shown that in early childhood development, young children begin to weigh intentions over outcomes in their moral evaluations (Baird & Astington, 2004; Cushman et al., 2013; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2010; Zelazo, Helwig, & Lau, 1996). Because these rules and principles reflect children's growing knowledge about abstract moral situations, they reflect a form of semantic knowledge that can be accessed during moral evaluations. That is, preschoolers evaluate morally charged events based on a set of semantic knowledge about moral rules and principles (Gall, 1985; Smetana, 1983; Wellman, Larkey, & Somerville, 1979). These results are consistent with other work showing that preschoolers can use semantic information to think about themselves in the future in non-moral situations, as well (Atance & Meltzoff, 2005; Hudson, Shapiro, & Sosa, 1995; Prabhakar & Hudson, 2014).

But can preschool-aged children use moral knowledge to organize self-motivated actions in a morally-charged future scenario? Some recent work has shown that by five years of age, children begin to use moral principles in guiding their decisions about how to allocate resources. For example, while three-year-old children display knowledge about the principles of fairness, they do not tend to allocate resources fairly between themselves and others (Blake, McAuliffe, & Warneken, 2014; Shaw & Olson, 2012). It is not until the age of five that children begin to divide allocations that reflect their own moral principles of fairness. These studies suggest that children under five may be hesitant to act in a manner that would result in a disadvantage to themselves, even if it violates known moral principles of behavior.

Choices that result in a personal disadvantage reflect one possible consequence of a violation between a moral principle and moral decision. However, not all moral decisions have an immediate tangible impact on the self. For example, choosing not to help a friend who is being bullied may not result in a disadvantageous outcome to the self, but it likely contradicts certain moral principles and expectations one holds. Furthermore, whether children choose to withhold help may diverge from their judgment of their own action afterwards. In the present study, we examined the moral principles children bring to bear when the consequences of one's own action do not impact the self. We compared the principles that guide children's actions to those used to evaluate the outcomes of the actions. While preschool-aged children can reason about their own freedom of choice in ways that impact their moral decisions (Kushnir, Wellman, & Chernyak, 2009), these results do not necessarily indicate that they understand how the outcomes of these choices should be judged (see also Chernyak & Kushnir, 2014). The current study, which compares choices about and judgments of the same actions, complements this previous research on children's ability to evaluate past outcomes and behaviors by asking children to engage in a forward-looking process where moral outcomes are determined by their own choices and actions and not by a third-party agent.

1.2. The interaction of moral decision making with future thinking

In the current studies, we employ a modified version of the classic thought experiment known as the trolley problem (see Foot, 1978; Thomson, 1986). In this problem, a trolley is headed down a track towards five people. A bystander could pull a switch to divert the trolley to another track, thereby saving the five individuals. However, this action will cause one individual on the other track to be run over and killed. Most adults and children think it is morally permissible for the bystander to pull the switch in this situation to minimize harm (Cushman et al., 2006; Cushman, Knobe, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2001; Pellizzoni, Siegal, & Surian, 2010). In contrast, they judge an alternative scenario where a bystander can push an individual with a heavy backpack over a footbridge, killing this individual to save the other five, thereby also minimizing harm, as morally impermissible. These two opposing judgments suggest that adults and children's moral evaluations are sensitive to the manner by which the outcome was achieved. Furthermore, they indicate that these individuals recruit moral principles to make choices for others.

However, it is not yet clear whether individuals recruit these same moral principles when they themselves are deciding which outcomes they will be responsible for. This is the focus of the two experiments presented here and its primary departure from previous work: to directly distinguish between one's personal moral actions and one's judgments of the outcomes of these same actions. Thus, our first aim was to determine whether there was any consistency in how children chose to act and how they evaluated the outcomes of those actions. We assessed actions and evaluations of outcomes on whether children's behavior when faced with two options of differing moral value cohere with utilitarian principles. This is not to say that a utilitarian perspective is the sole

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