"Just think about it"? Cognitive complexity and moral choice

Celia Moore [a,*], Ann E. Tenbrunsel [b]

[a] London Business School, Regent's Park, London NW1 4SA, UK
[b] Mendoza College of Business, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we question the simplicity of the common prescription that more thinking leads to better moral choices. In three studies, we discover that the relationship between how complexly one reasons before making a decision with moral consequences is related to the outcome of that decision in a curvilinear way. Using two different moral decisions and both measuring and manipulating the level of cognitive complexity employed by the decision maker, we find that decisions made after reasoning with low and high levels of cognitive complexity are less moral than those made after reasoning at moderate levels of complexity. These results suggest that the best moral decisions are those that have been reasoned through "just enough". Further, and at least as important, they illustrate the need to expand our study of ethical behavior beyond simple effects, and to gain a deeper understanding of the thought processes of individuals faced with moral choices.

Introduction

A pivotal debate in moral psychology centers on the role of reasoning in making ethical decisions. Moral development theory, derived from Kantian philosophical traditions, is based on the idea that optimal moral action becomes self-evident through rational thought and careful deliberation (e.g., Kant, 1785/1993; Kohlberg, 1975; Rest, 1986). However, a little over a decade ago, Haidt's moral intuitionist perspective (2001) challenged the importance of reasoning in moral choice. Haidt's central claim is that moral decisions are made intuitively, and moral reasoning is only employed as a means to justify, post hoc, decisions already made. His perspective resonates with work on motivated moral reasoning, which argues that individuals can marshal complex reasoning in order to justify morally suspect choices (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009). On the surface, these two research traditions present incommensurate predictions about the role of reasoning in moral choice, with the former advancing that sophisticated moral reasoning will improve moral choices, and the latter proposing that complex reasoning is more likely evidence of the desire to rationalize immoral ones.

How might these two views be reconciled? This paper picks up the conversation about the relationship between reasoning and moral choice, and suggests that while some level of reasoning sophistication likely improves moral choices (as moral development theory suggests), reasoning too complexly may detrimentally

affect them (as theories of motivated moral reasoning claim). Our aim is to add nuance to the conversation about how our moral decision-making processes can be improved through better understanding the role played by the complexity of the reasoning we employ when making these choices. In order to develop our hypotheses, we attend carefully to both of these contradictory traditions within moral psychology, as well as on research on the role of reasoning per se in decision making more broadly. Understanding how our reasoning processes affect moral choices has the potential to help us move beyond simple comparisons that pit reasoning against other types of decision making processes in predicting moral choices (Gunia, Wang, Huang, Wang, & Murnighan, 2012; Ham & van den Bos, 2010; Zhong, 2011), as well as inform how we educate new generations of professionals on how to behave more ethically (Eynon, Hills, & Stevens, 1997; Fraedrich, Thorne, & Ferrell, 1994; Kohlberg, 1975; Treviño, 1992).

In the pages that follow, we develop these competing predictions based on the research traditions from which they emerged, and then offer our alternative view that can integrate both sets of ideas—namely, that the relationship between reasoning and moral choice is curvilinear rather than linear. Competing hypotheses are relatively rare in the organizational sciences (Armstrong, Brodie, & Parsons, 2001), but can be a compelling tool with which to extend theory and reconcile different perspectives. Our ultimate hypothesis not only accommodates both perspectives but also underscores the importance of moving away from simplistic ways of thinking about how the complexity of our reasoning processes affects our moral choices.

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* Corresponding author. Address: Organisational Behaviour, London Business School, Regent's Park, London NW1 4SA, UK.
E-mail addresses: cmoore@london.edu (C. Moore), Ann.E.Tenbrunsel.1@nd.edu (A.E. Tenbrunsel).

More reasoning improves moral choices

Many traditional moral philosophies, including, most obviously, deontology (Kant, 1785/1993), but also utilitarianism (Mill, 1863), assert that reasoning improves moral decisions, and that the highest levels of moral decision making require highly sophisticated reasoning skills. Kohlberg's seminal theory of moral development (1969, 1975, 1984; Kohlberg, Hewer, & Levine, 1983) marries Kantian philosophical frameworks with Piaget's ideas about human development (1965), and outlines a set of developmental stages through which individuals pass as they become ever more advanced moral deliberators. Kohlberg, as well as Rest (1986), who followed in Kohlberg's footsteps, are the primary proponents of the idea that more advanced moral reasoning will improve moral choices.

Kohlberg's theory focuses on the structure and sophistication of an individual's reasoning process rather than on its content or behavioral prescriptions (Campbell & Christopher, 1996). Low (preconventional) stages are characterized by primal, egoistic reactions to outcomes, and moral choices are made on the basis of simplistic calculi. Moderate (conventional) levels of moral reasoning involve the application of internalized moral norms to the decision at hand and interpreting the consequences of one's actions in terms of one's duties to relevant others, rules and laws. Finally, advanced (postconventional) levels of moral reasoning require individuals to independently apply formal and universal principles to a decision at hand (Kohlberg, 1969, 1975, 1984; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999; Treviño, 1992). These stages are hierarchical, both cognitively and prescriptively: more advanced stages require more sophisticated reasoning abilities, and lead to more optimal moral choices. Kohlberg's central claim—that more advanced levels of moral reasoning are linearly and positively related to more ethical choices—has found some empirical support (Colby, Kohlberg, & Speicher, 1987).

Work that elaborates the difference between System 1 (affective and intuitive) and System 2 (deliberative and rational) thinking (Stanovich & West, 2000a, 2000b) suggests that developing and engaging System 2 will help us overcome conflicts of interest (Moore & Loewenstein, 2004) and minimize sub-optimal moral decisions (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011), even if our natural inclination is for System 1 processing. For example, Alter and colleagues found that reading information in a difficult font or while furrowing one's brow triggered deliberative (as opposed to automatic) processing, reducing the effect of heuristics and default responses on judgments and improving decisions (Alter, Oppenheimer, Epley, & Eyre, 2007).

Complex reasoning ability is considered a key capacity individuals need to develop in order to optimize their decision-making ability more generally as well (Lohman & Lakin, 2011; Nickerson, 2004). For example, strategies such as creating checklists of necessary steps for complicated procedures like surgery improve outcomes and reduce errors in judgment by increasing the extent to which individual think through their decisions and behavior in advance (Gawande, 2010; Weiser et al., 2010). Similarly, people make better decisions when they weigh options jointly rather than separately (Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999), a strategy that requires more sophisticated reasoning capacities.

Additional research approaches the relationship between reasoning complexity and decisions from the flip side, and shows that the absence of reasoning or deliberation undermines decision quality. For example, mindlessness—inattention to the elements or consequences of a prospective behavior or decision (Langer, 1989; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000)—has been studied at the trait level as a predictor of unethical behavior (Ruedy & Schweitzer, 2010). Similarly, organizational scripts—schema-based knowledge of behavior and behavioral sequences—facilitate cognitively simplistic behavioral responses in given situations (Gioia & Poole, 1984). In the 1970s, safety concerns about the Ford Pinto car ought to have triggered a recall. It was not, and Dennis Gioia, a recall coordinator at the time, blames scripted behavior with the morally problematic outcome of leaving a dangerous car on the road. The organizational script he was following caused him to make an automatic choice, without reasoning through to its potential consequences, leading him to ignore the warning signs about the car's safety records, with fatal moral consequences (Gioia, 1992).

In another recent paper, Gunia et al. (2012) find that participants who have been asked to contemplate their decisions in advance lie less in a deception game than those who are asked to make immediate decisions, without the time to engage reasoning processes. Along similar lines, again following an argument that time provides the opportunity to deliberate, Shalvi, Eldar, and Bereby-Meyer (2012) manipulated the length of time participants had before an opportunity to lie (for money) about the outcome of a die roll. Consistent with Gunia's findings, participants with more time lied less about the die roll outcome (Shalvi et al., 2012).

While the understanding and manipulations of reasoning in these studies differ, they all view increasing the extent of deliberation or the degree of reasoning sophistication in advance of making a decision as a positive influence on decision outcomes. Together, this literature implies a positive and linear relationship between increasing levels of reasoning and moral choice.

H1. There is a positive and linear relationship between reasoning and moral choice.

More reasoning impairs moral choices

The research documenting a linear and positive relationship between moral reasoning and moral choice has not been as empirically robust as researchers fully embedded in the rationalist tradition expected (Rest et al., 1999). This suggests that the relationship between reasoning and moral choice may not as simple as this tradition supposed. From a social intuitionist perspective, reasoning processes are triggered after intuitive decisions have already been reached (Haidt, 2001). This post hoc reasoning may include sophisticated logic marshaled in order to support the intuitively formed behavioral preference. If one's reasoning capacity is only engaged to justify an intuitively formed behavioral preference, one is motivated to use reasoning to rationalize this preferred course of action rather than use it to deliberate through to the most optimal course of action.

Though the social intuitionist model rejects the possibility that moral reasoning during the decision making process will affect the ethicality of one's choices, the idea that the role of reasoning in moral choice is to justify commitments to a predetermined course of action dovetails nicely with work on motivated moral reasoning (Ditto et al., 2009) and moral rationalizations (Tsang, 2002). These bodies of work suggest that elaborate cognitive processes may be enlisted to help justify engaging in immoral actions without their attendant negative consequences. This tradition suggests that reasoning processes are used selectively and elegantly to bolster rationalizations for preferential courses of action prior to undertaking them (though perhaps after pre-committing to them).

This understanding of the role that reasoning plays in moral choices directly contradicts the assumption about how reasoning works in the Kohlbergian world. While moral development theory sees complex reasoning as an effort to objectively determine morally optimal action, theory on motivated moral reasoning sees complex reasoning as part of what one does in order to subjectively justify morally sub-optimal choices. Put simply, when one is conflicted about a potential course of action—when the choice