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Reports

Moral realism as moral motivation: The impact of meta-ethics on everyday decision-making

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We primed moral realism, the belief that moral facts are like mathematical truths.
- Priming meta-ethical views (realism vs. antirealism) affected actual behavior.
- Priming a belief in moral realism increased charitable giving.
- Moral realism may raise the moral stakes and motivate moral behavior.

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ABSTRACT

People disagree about whether "moral facts" are objective facts like mathematical truths (moral realism) or simply products of the human mind (moral antirealism). What is the impact of different meta-ethical views on actual behavior? In Experiment 1, a street canvasser, soliciting donations for a charitable organization dedicated to helping impoverished children, primed passersby with realism or antirealism. Participants primed with realism were twice as likely to be donors, compared to control participants and participants primed with antirealism. In Experiment 2, online participants primed with realism as opposed to antirealism reported being willing to donate more money to a charity of their choice. Considering the existence of non-negotiable moral facts may have raised the stakes and motivated participants to behave better. These results therefore reveal the impact of meta-ethics on everyday decision-making: priming a belief in moral realism improved moral behavior.

Introduction

Whether there is a fact of the matter about morality has produced much debate in philosophy (Railton, 2003; Shafer-Landau, 2003; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2009), psychology (Doris & Plakias, 2008; Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007; Mikhail, 2011; Prinz, 2008; Royzman, Leeman, & Baron, 2009), and public discourse (Harris, 2010; Marks, 2011; Shermer, 2010). Moral *realists* maintain that objective moral facts exist, treating them like mathematical truths (e.g., $1+1=2$) or scientific facts (e.g., what constitutes physical health). Moral *antirealists* deny the existence of moral facts, maintaining there are no real answers to moral questions, often citing moral disagreement between individuals (Lombrozo, 2009) and between cultures (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Uhlmann, Pizarro, Tannenbaum, & Ditto, 2009) as a reason to doubt realism. Importantly, moral antirealists do not deny the existence and importance of moral *values*; antirealists simply assert that moral values reflect the beliefs of a person or a culture, rather than immutable facts that exist independent of human psychology. In other words, like subjective preferences (e.g., chocolate tastes better than vanilla), rather than objective facts, moral values may depend on the psychology of an individual or a community. Realist and antirealist views alike are found among philosophers (Chalmers & Bourget, 2009) and ordinary folk (Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2012), sometimes depending on the issue or context (Sarkissian, Park, Tien, Wright, & Knobe, 2011). Here, we investigate whether priming realism versus antirealism influences moral decision-making.

Although the effects of meta-ethical views on moral behavior have not been directly investigated, several proposals are on offer. Some researchers suggest there may be no effects, based on observations of how ethicists with different meta-ethical views behave (Schwitzgebel & Rust, 2011). By contrast, others suggest moral realism motivates acts of violence and terror in the real world (i.e., suicide bombings) (Ginges & Atran, 2009, 2011; Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007; Greene, 2002); thus, moral realism may lead to apparently worse behavior.

We hypothesize that priming a belief in moral realism will enhance moral behavior under certain conditions — when the right thing to do is relatively unambiguous (e.g., it is good to be generous). Since "real" moral stakes may be *higher* moral stakes, priming a belief in moral realism may in fact motivate people to behave better and in line with their existing moral beliefs. Indeed, moral beliefs that are perceived as objectively true (just as $1+1=2$) may enhance either participants' sensitivity to potential punishment at the hand of a divine being or social peers

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(Haley & Fessler, 2005; Shenhav, Rand, & Greene, 2011), or participants' intrinsic motivation to do the right thing and to see themselves as morally good agents (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008).

We conducted two experiments to test the hypothesis that priming moral realism (versus moral antirealism) would improve participants' moral behavior. In Experiment 1, participants were primed with realism or antirealism or not primed and then provided with the opportunity to donate money to a charitable organization dedicated to helping impoverished children. Participants' donation decisions were compared across conditions. We hypothesized that participants primed with moral realism would be more likely to make a charitable donation than participants in the antirealism or control conditions. Experiment 2 tested the same basic hypothesis in an online environment.

Experiment 1

Participants were primed with moral realism versus moral antirealism and then given the chance to donate money to a charitable organization. We hypothesized that participants primed with moral realism would be more likely to make a charitable donation.

Method

Participants

138 voluntary participants stopped to speak to an experimenter (A.D.) who served as a street-canvasser for a charitable organization, near subway stations in greater Boston.

Procedure

The canvasser approached potential participants in the sequence of steps detailed below. The basic procedure for soliciting donations was developed by the charitable organization.

(1) *Stopping the passerby*. The canvasser wore a vest, displaying the organization's logo, and carried a binder, displaying the organization's name and logo. The canvasser attempted to engage any passerby who slowed down to read the display. Engagement of the passerby began with a smile and asking the passerby whether he/she had ever heard of the charitable organization. If the passerby continued walking slowly but did not stop, the canvasser asked the passerby to stop for just a minute to help him practice his presentation.

(2) *Building rapport*. If the passerby stopped (thus becoming a participant) the canvasser introduced himself to the passerby and asked how he/she was doing and what he/she was doing in Boston that day. Everyone who stayed for this step was recorded as a participant. All participants remained for the duration of the experiment. Note we did not (and could not) collect data from passersby who did not stop to talk to the canvasser. Most important for the experiment, once the primes were presented, no participants dropped out, and all data were analyzed.

(3) *Presenting the charity*. The canvasser presented information along with visual aids from the binder about the charitable organization: (a) the goals and scope of the charitable organization (e.g., to fight poverty and to help impoverished children worldwide); (b) the percentage of donations going to the needy recipients; from the binder, the canvasser displayed a pie graph representing the percentage (above 90% for many years in a row); and (c) an example of how the charitable organization helps those in need; from the binder, the canvasser displayed pictures of people receiving aid. To make sure that participants paid attention and followed along, participants were asked during this step to affirm the value of the organization's goals (i.e., "Do these seem like worthy pursuits?"), the efficiency of the organization (i.e., "It's important to be efficient, right?"), and the success of the organization's methods (i.e., "We're doing some great things, wouldn't you say?").

(4) *Asking for a donation*. Participants were told that the charitable organization is looking for "consistent monthly donors so that future programs can be effectively planned and funded". Participants who initially declined were asked whether they could "contribute a one-time donation to help [the charitable organization] fund programs".

(5) *Persuading participants to donate*. If the participant initially refused to donate, the canvasser attempted to persuade the participant to donate, focusing on the relatively low cost to the donor and the relatively high gain for the people in need. The canvasser also presented licensing documentation issued by the city of Boston to assure any skeptical participants that the charitable organization was registered with the city, had permission to collect donations, and ultimately that the organization was not fraudulent.

(6) *Close*. If the participant donated, the canvasser thanked the participant and told him/her that in the near future the charitable organization would contact him/her to confirm the donation. If the participant did not donate but expressed a desire to donate in the future, the canvasser asked for contact information so the charitable organization could follow up. Regardless of whether the participant donated, the canvasser ended by thanking the participant for his/her time and telling the participant to have a nice day.

In the control condition, the canvasser moved through the six steps above. Note that the canvasser did not record the duration of the steps. In addition to the control condition were two test conditions, i.e. realism, antirealism, assigned in sequence, in which an additional step was included in between steps 2 and 3. In the realism condition, the canvasser asked the participant a leading question to prime a belief in moral realism: "Do you agree that some things are just morally right or wrong, good or bad, wherever you happen to be from in the world?" In the antirealism condition, the canvasser asked: "Do you agree that our morals and values are shaped by our culture and upbringing, so there are no absolute right answers to any moral questions?" The canvasser asked for a donation from a total of 47 control participants, 46 realism participants, and 45 antirealism participants.

Three key points are worth noting. First, both realism and antirealism primes alluded to *moral* concerns (e.g., "some things are just morally right or wrong" in the realism condition, and "our morals and values" in the antirealism condition); we did not wish to prime morality in one condition and not the other. Second, we selected a behavior that was likely to be perceived as generally good (e.g., helping impoverished children), though specific attitudes toward (and rates of) charitable giving may vary across people and cultures. We note that distinct effects may obtain for moral issues that are recognized as controversial (e.g., suppose the charitable organization had been pro-life or pro-choice) (Goodwin & Darley, 2012). Third, both questions were designed to highlight the key components of both realism and antirealism views — but, importantly, in uncontroversial terms. This approach allowed us to capitalize on the possibility that laypeople endorse certain aspects of *both* realism and antirealism and, more generally, hold somewhat flexible, context-dependent meta-ethical views; other approaches may be better suited to measure individual differences in people's meta-ethical views at baseline (Goodwin & Darley, 2008, 2012). Thus, as expected, participants, with one exception, responded affirmatively.

The primary analyses of Experiment 1 focused on donation rate (e.g., the proportion of participants willing to donate) rather than donation amount for a few reasons (see Supplementary Material). For example, some participants pledged to donate monthly at the time of the experimental session, but we had no way of determining