

Commentary

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Situated Social Identities Constrain Moral Choices

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Situated Social Identities Constrain Morally Defensible Choices

Commentary on Bennis, Medin, & Bartels (2010)

Philip E. Tetlock¹ and Gregory Mitchell²

Abstract

Conceptual distinctions that loom large to philosophers—such as the distinction between utilitarian and deontic decision norms—may be far less salient to most other mortals. Building on an intuitive-politician model of judgment and choice and on the empirical work reported by Bennis, Medin, and Bartels (2010, this issue), we argue that the overriding goal of most decision makers in the paradigms under scrutiny is to offer judgments that are readily defensible and that reinforce their social identities as both cognitively flexible (responsive to evidence and cost-benefit considerations) and morally principled (prepared to defend sacred values and censure

those who do not). People are best classified neither as utilitarians nor Kantians but rather as pragmatic social beings embedded in complex cultural-political systems.

Keywords

One of William Blake's more widely invoked "Proverbs of hell" was that "you never know you have had enough until you have had more than enough." Bennis, Medin, and Bartels (2010, this issue) make the case that psychologists have now had enough of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) as both a descriptive account of and normative guide for moral decisions in a world in which key probabilities are unknown and utility functions are ill-defined and labile. They argue, perhaps in an intentionally ironic twist, that it is time for psychologist to pay greater attention to the costs and benefits of categorical moral prescriptions and, more generally, to the costs and benefits of non-CBA modes of decision making.

Although we are not sure that we agree with all of the closed-world assumptions Bennis et al. employ when discussing the utility of moral rules¹ (e.g., they seem to shift between individual- and group-based measures of utility/adaptiveness, and their temporal and social scopes for aggregating consequences are unclear), we do agree with what we take to be their core descriptive claim (see also Bartels, 2008): People are flexible decision makers in moral (and nonmoral) domains who employ different decision modes depending on their past learning experiences, the task at hand, the values at stake, and the social-ecological context. Bennis et al. summarize compelling evidence that there is no single privileged approach to moral decisions among laypersons. Consider the ingenious replication and extension of the work of Ritov and

Baron (1999) by Bartels and Medin (2007). The original study explored attitudes toward opening a dam on a river. The proposed act would save 20 species of fish at the cost of killing 2 species. A substantial number of subjects refused to open the dam because they did not want to take responsibility for causing the death of even a single species. They apparently valued their reputation for "doing no environmental harm" more than minimizing actual harm in the world. One theoretical interpretation is that people treat tradeoffs implicating protected values (such as saving endangered species) as taboo. But Bartels and Medin showed that interpretation is far too simplistic, for when they quizzed participants more carefully on just how cost-insensitive they were ("would you change her mind if it would kill 6/10/14/18 species?"), they found that participants concerned with protected environmental values are actually more willing to make tradeoffs than are those less concerned about such values. Other recent work fits with this metaview of moral decisions and behaviors as context sensitive, shifting at different times between seemingly conflicting norms (e.g., Agerström & Björklund, 2009; Hodges & Geyer, 2006; Krebs & Denton, 2005; Nichols & Mallon, 2006; Skitka, 2009;).

One could interpret the response shift found in Bartels and Medin (2007) as evidence that people are hypocrites whose sacred values are really pseudosacred—and that when you make it socially or financially tempting to abandon sacred values, people grab the opportunity. Or one could take the shift as evidence that people are simply confused and give conflicting top-of-the-head answers depending on which thoughts come first to mind in response to conversational primes. The hypocrisy and superficiality interpretations probably both apply to some people at some times, and each interpretation leads to testable predictions about both individual-difference and situational moderator variables of effects. For instance, the hypocrisy interpretation should lead one to expect that Machiavellian respondents should retreat from

sacred values fastest when given material reasons to do so and when there is no audience monitoring their conduct, whereas the superficiality interpretation should lead one to expect big question-wording and framing effects, regardless of the material incentives in play.

But there is a psychologically plausible and less pejorative interpretation for why people appear to respond inconsistently to moral dilemmas that touch on sacred values: The questions posed are terribly hard and activate clashing intrapsychic values (internalized-audience pluralism) and clashing external normative demands (external-audience pluralism). If the question seems to be testing their fealty to sacred values—if they feel that their reputations for being morally principled are on the line—we should expect strong affirmations of the sacred status of sacred values and punitive responses toward those who break ranks as well as metanorm punitive responses to those who fail to punish those who break ranks. If the question seems to be testing their awareness of resource constraints—if their reputations are on the line for being sensible adults who realize that they cannot always get what they want—we should expect much more open acknowledgement of the need for tradeoffs.

From this standpoint, far from being either clueless or duplicitous, people function like thoughtful intuitive politicians (Tetlock, 2002) who try to decode the normative cues for appropriate conduct in their social world: Is this conversational constituency signaling that it is or is not permissible to engage in overt utilitarian reasoning (e.g., money for lives), in covert utilitarian reasoning (one hard-to-quantify set of values against another), or in no utilitarian reasoning whatsoever? In the ideal-type case of maximum political astuteness, decision makers are thoroughly fluent in the situated identity implications of the response options on offer and of how various constituencies will see them if they go down one path or the other. In the domain of

moral dilemmas, the situated-identity possibilities can be organized into a Peabody plot that permits disentangling the denotative and connotative meanings of the key identity dimensions at stake: unprincipled and immoral versus flexible and realistic on the one hand, and principled and moral versus rigid and dogmatic on the other hand. The implicit internal reasoning would run along the following lines: "If I am being lured into compromising a sacred value and if I take the bait and engage in cost-benefit reasoning, I risk of looking like a weak supporter of the sacred value under siege (be it endangered species or national honor). But if the conversational invitation to be utilitarian is genuine and not a trap, and I accept, then I will simply look like a reasonable flexible citizen grappling with a noxious choice. Conversely, if the invitation is a trap and I reject trade-off reasoning, then I will look like a principled defender of a sacred value. But if the invitation is genuine and I reject it, I will look like a doctrinaire, self-righteous idiot."

Tetlock's (2002) collection of social-functionalist metaphors for judgment and decision making offers one organizing framework for how people navigate their identity through different moral and social dilemmas, but it is not the only approach that fits within the larger situated-identity approach. Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, and Felps (2009), for instance, recently presented research showing how moral identity interacts with situational primes and incentives to produce different moral judgments and behaviors, and Warren and Smith-Crowe (2008) presented a model of morality in the workplace that emphasizes the role of material incentives and social accountability to motivate reconsideration of moral stances. The common thread in these works is a macrosocial psychological perspective that stresses the efforts of social beings to preserve their claims to desired identities in the eyes of the constituencies to whom they feel accountable. This perspective calls for moral decision making to be modeled using a mixture of tools drawn from game theory and symbolic interactionism, in which much hinges on the

attributions that we expect our conversational partners will make for our answers and questions and the attributions that our conversational partners expect us to make for their questions and answers. In this view, moral decision making is a mutual face-saving dance—and we observe only one step of one partner in the typical research paradigm.

Bennis et al. call for greater open-mindedness in the choice of normative standards used to evaluate behaviors in the moral domain, but we see an equally pressing need for open-mindedness about why people may shift between decision modes.² People may be confused, unprincipled, or uncaring when they engage in what may appear to be hapless, biased, or inconsistent moral behaviors, or they may be attuned to considerations that the experimenter's closed world is missing. Before we designate behaviors suboptimal and in need of change (or not worthy of respect), we should consider whether people are achieving the goals they have set for themselves and how those goals and associated modes of decision making shift across persons and situations. So, whether moral rules are, in some evolutionary or collective sense, adaptive or wise is an interesting question that psychologists' studies may shed light on, but for our money the most illuminating questions concern why and when people shift between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist modes of thinking in making decisions with moral implications.

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¹As Hammond (2000) and others have noted, any coherence-based normative system, such as economic utility-maximization models, must operate as a closed system (i.e., given certain premises, certain conclusions should be reached if rational decision-making processes are followed). Thus, that CBA must operate on closed-world assumptions is not a problem per se, but the possible mismatch between researchers' assumptions and those of the subject does pose a serious challenge.

²Indeed, if we had to pick one domain within judgment and decision-making research in which researchers have been the most open-minded about nonconsequentialist norms, it would be the moral domain (consider, for example, commentary published with Sunstein's, 2005, effort to justify a utilitarian norm for evaluating moral heuristics).