

Morals do not Conquer all in Decision Making

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Is morally-motivated choice different from other kinds of decision making? Previous research has implied that the answer is yes, suggesting that certain sacred or protected values are resistant to real world tradeoffs. In fact, proposed tradeoffs between the sacred and the secular lead to moral outrage and an outright refusal to consider costs and benefits (e.g. “You can’t put a price on a human life”).

Previous theory in moral decision making suggested that if people are guided by protected values, values that equate to rules like ‘do no harm’, they may focus on the distinction between acting—*doing* harm—versus not acting—*allowing* harm, paying less attention to consequences. People who make choices based on these values, thus show “quantity insensitivity” relative to people without protected values for a given situation. For example:

A convoy of food trucks is on its way to a refugee camp during a famine in Africa. (Airplanes cannot be used). You find that a second camp has even more refugees. If you tell the convoy to go to the second camp instead of the first, you will save 1,000 people from death, but 100 people in the first camp will die as a result.

If one’s protected values guide decision making, they are obligated to serve their original camp and will do so despite the opportunity to save ten times as many lives. Thus it appears people’s value-driven decisions are less sensitive to the consequences of an action than choices not about protected values.

But an article published in the January issue of *Psychological Science* suggests that these value-guided decisions may not be as rigid as previously thought. According to Northwestern University psychologists Daniel Bartels and Douglas Medin, morally motivated decision makers may indeed be sensitive to the consequences of their choices

Using two procedures to assess quantity insensitivity, Bartels and Medin found that protected values don’t always produce quantity-insensitive choices. They replicate previous results in a context that focuses people on an action that may cause initial harm but will ultimately maximize benefits (as in the example above).

However, if attention is directed towards the net benefits, the trend actually reverses. That is, protected values relate to *increased* quantity sensitivity—morally motivated decision makers appeared to achieve the best possible outcome.

The willingness to make tradeoffs then depends not only on whether protected values are involved, but also on where attention is focused, a factor that varies substantially across contexts.

Thus it appears that previous findings suggesting that people who really care about an issue not only fail to maximize their utility—or that they might not be taking stock of the consequences at all—may be off the

mark. “The present findings importantly qualify this theory, suggesting that in some contexts, morally-motivated decision makers are *more* sensitive to the consequences of their choices than non-morally-motivated decision makers.”