People Attribute Minds to Robots, Corpses That Are Targets of Harm

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As Descartes famously noted, there's no way to really know that another person has a mind — every mind we observe is, in a sense, a mind we create. Now, new research suggests that victimization may be one condition that leads us to perceive minds in others, even in entities we don't normally think of as having minds.

This research, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, shows that people attribute minds to entities they perceive as being targets of harm, even when the entity in question is a robot or a corpse.

"People seem to believe that having a mind allows an entity to be part of a moral interaction — to do good and bad things, or to have good and bad things done to them," says psychological scientist Adrian Ward, who conducted the research at Harvard University.

"This research suggests that the relationship may actually work the other way around: Minds don't create morality, morality creates minds."

Ward, together with Daniel Wegner of Harvard University and Andrew Olsen of the University of Pennsylvania, conducted five studies that investigated the relationship between morality and mind. The results consistently revealed that participants attributed 'more' mind to entities portrayed as targets of intentional harm.

For example, participants who read a story about a nurse who intentionally unplugged the food supply to a patient in a persistent vegetative state attributed more mind to the patient than those who read that the nurse performed her job satisfactorily. Participants also attributed more mind to a corpse when they read that it had been the target of harm.

Participants even attributed more mind to a George, a "highly complex social robot," when they read that George had been stabbed with a scalpel by a research scientist.

Surprisingly, people attributed "full" minds to entities when they were the targets of moral harm — minds capable not just of experiencing harm, but also capable of experiencing emotions, feeling hunger, exerting self-control, and planning for the future.

Ward believes that the findings may help to explain how two people can look at the same entity — for example, a fetus, a comatose patient, a gorilla, or a lab rat — and see completely different capacities for thinking, feeling, and general consciousness:

"When these entities are thought of in moral terms, they're attributed more mind — it seems that people

have the sense that something wrong is happening, so someone must be there to receive that wrong."

Importantly, the results of the final study suggest that the effects of harm may depend on the preexisting mental status of the victim in question.

Participants who read that Sharon, a fully conscious adult human, was physically abused by her boss attributed *less* mind to Sharon than participants who read that her boss behaved normally. They attributed less ability to experience pain and less mind overall to Sharon, falling in line with previous research on dehumanization.

"Victimization may cause people to dehumanize other entities — but only when these entities have a mind to begin with; entities with absent or liminal minds, in contrast, seem to gain minds as a result of victimization," the researchers write.

The research may have implications for hot-button issues centered on morality and mind, including issues surrounding animal rights, abortion, and end-of-life decisions. If moral intuitions lead to subjective perceptions of minds, investigating the objective realities of mental capacities is unlikely to resolve moral disagreements over what the 'right' course of action is.

Ward hopes to further explore how the so-called harm-made mind might influence actual decision making:

"Exploring this relationship will allow us to understand how different ways of presenting and discussing information about minds and morality may help people see eye-to-eye on contentious issues, and potentially come to a place of mutual understanding."