Lecture 07: Moral Psychology

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1. The Question

Could scientific discoveries undermine or support moral principles?

Key source: Greene (2014)

2. An Elaborative Reconstruction

Aim: show that the simpleminded argument *Against Consequentialism* fails.

(Order of handout does not match order of lecture on this page.)

2.1. Against Consequentialism

1. Many spontaneously judge that we should not Drop.

2. Consequentialism implies we should Drop.

Therefore:

3. Consequentialism is wrong.

2.2. Against Against Consequentialism (Greene)

*unfamiliar** problems (or situation) = 'ones with which we have inadequate evolutionary, cultural, or personal experience'

1. Drop is an unfamiliar* situation.

2. Spontaneous judgements are dominated by fast processes.

3. Fast processes are not reliable in unfamiliar* situations.

Therefore:

4. Spontaneous judgements concerning Drop are unreliable.

Drop [...] an empty boxcar rolling out of control [...] moving so fast that anyone it hits will die [...] There is a person standing on the footbridge, and he weighs enough that the boxcar would slow down if it hit him. [...] If Mary does nothing, the boxcar will hit the five people on the track. If Mary pulls a lever it will release the bottom of the footbridge and that one person will fall onto the track, where the boxcar will hit the one person, slow down because of the one person, and not hit the five people farther down the track (Schwitzgebel & Cushman 2015).

2.3. Against Against Consequentialism (Singer)

1. Varying Drop to make it more or less up-close and personal varies how people spontaneously judge Drop (compare Feltz & May 2017).

2. Whether it's up-close and personal is morally irrelevant.

Therefore:

3. Spontaneous judgements in Drop are sensitive to morally irrelevant factors.

Therefore:

4. Spontaneous judgements in Drop are unreliable.

3. Cognitive Miracles

'it would be a cognitive miracle if we had reliably good moral instincts about unfamiliar* moral problems' (Greene 2014, p. 715).

'The *No Cognitive Miracles Principle*: When we are dealing with unfamiliar* moral problems, we ought to rely less on [...] automatic emotional responses and more on [...] conscious, controlled reasoning, lest we bank on cognitive miracles' (Greene 2014, p. 715).

4. Singer's Version

4.1. Strategy

'We can take the view that our moral intuitions and judgments are and always will be emotionally based intuitive responses, and reason can do no more than build the best possible case for a decision already made on nonrational grounds. That approach leads to a form of moral skepticism, although one still compatible with advocating our emotionally based moral values and encouraging clear thinking about them. Alternatively, we might attempt the ambitious task of separating those moral judgments that we owe to our evolutionary and cultural history, from those that have a rational basis' (Singer 2005, p. 351).

4.2. Background

Personal contact influences ethical judgements (see, for example, Feltz & May 2017).

4.3. Singer's Argument

'If [...] our intuitive responses are due to differences in the emotional pull of situations that involve bringing about someone's death in a close-up, personal way, and bringing about the same person's death in a way that is at a distance, and less personal, why should we believe that there is anything that justifies these responses?' (Singer 2005, p. 347).

5. On Second Thoughts

Claim: a fast process is less consequentialist.

> The Central Tension Principle: Characteristically deontological judgments are preferentially supported by automatic emotional responses, while characteristically consequentialist judgments are preferentially supported by conscious reasoning and allied processes of cognitive control' (Greene 2014, p. 699)

5.1. Evidence for the Claim

'participants in the time-pressure condition, relative to the no-time-pressure condition, were more likely to give ''no'' responses in high-conflict dilemmas' (Suter & Hertwig 2011, p. 456). See also (Trémolière & Bonnefon 2014).

5.2. Preliminary Objection to the Claim

'The model detected a significant effect of time pressure, $p = .03$ [...], suggesting that the slope of [consequentialist] responses was steeper for participants under time pressure.[...] participants under time pressure gave less [consequentialist] responses than control participants to scenarios featuring low kill–save ratios, but reached the same rates of [consequentialist] responses for the highest kill–save ratios' (Trémolière & Bonnefon 2014, p. 927).

Contrast Gawronski & Beer (2017, p. 669) argue for an alternative interpretation: The central findings of Trémolière & Bonnefon (2014) 'show that outcomes did influence moral judgments, but only when participants were under cognitive load or time pressure (i.e., the white bars do not significantly differ from the gray bars within the low load and no time pressure conditions, but they do significantly differ within the high load and time pressure conditions). Thus, a more appropriate interpretation of these data is that cognitive load and time pressure increased

[consequentialist] responding, which stands in stark contrast to the widespread assumption that [consequentialist] judgments are the result of effortful cognitive processes.'

5.3. Evidence Against the Claim

Bago & Neys (2019) ask participants to first make a time-constrained judgement under cognitive load and then, subsequently, to make another unconstrained, unloaded judgement about the same scenario.

They reason that if the Claim is true (that is, if a fast process is less consequentialist), then there should be a tendency to first make less consequentialists which are subsequently corrected.

'Our critical finding is that although there were some instances in which deliberate correction occurred, these were the exception rather than the rule. Across the studies, results consistently showed that in the vast majority of cases in which people opt for a [consequentialist] response after deliberation, the [consequentialist] response is already given in the initial phase' (Bago & Neys 2019, p. 1794)

Objection: consistency effects. 'when people are asked to give two consecutive responses, they might be influenced by a desire to look consistent [...] However, in our one-response pretest we observed 85.4% [...] of utilitarian responses on the conflict versions. This is virtually identi-

cal to the final utilitarian response rate of 84.5% [...] in our main two-response study' (Bago & Neys 2019).

'even if we were to unequivocally establish that [consequentialist] responses take more time than deontological responses, this does not imply that [consequentialist] responders generated the deontological response before arriving at the [consequentialist] one. They might have needed more time to complete the System 2 deliberations without ever having considered the deontological response'

'unless you're prepared to say "yes" to [Drop], your automatic settings are still running the show, and any manual adjustments that you're willing to make are at their behest' (Greene 2014, p. 723)

6. Conflicting Evidence

Is a faster process less consequentialist?

- Suter & Hertwig (2011) : yes

- Trémolière & Bonnefon (2014) : yenos

- Bago & Neys (2019) : no

References

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