

How Much Do Thoughts Count?: Preference for Emotion versus Principle in Judgments of Antisocial and Prosocial Behavior

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Abstract

Following important work by Pizarro, Uhlmann and Salovey (2003) on moral judgments of uncontrolled/impulsive versus controlled/deliberate action, we focus on the related issue of the moral evaluation of emotion-motivated versus principle-driven behavior. We examine: (a) the potential lesser blameworthiness of antisocial acts perceived as driven by emotion as opposed to principle; (b) how factors governing the moral evaluation of antisocial acts might extend to the evaluation of prosocial acts; and (c) how overriding a moral emotion in favor of a moral principle affects moral attributions.

Keywords

character, moral emotions, moral principles, prosocial, third-party judgments

Murder committed under conditions of high passion is seen as less blameworthy, and punished less severely, than murder that occurs after careful deliberation. This difference is reflected in most Western legal systems and in people's judgments. Pizarro et al. (2003), for instance, demonstrated that undergraduates rate a negative action as less immoral when caused by out-of-control impulsivity as opposed to careful deliberation. In this article, we expand on this work by exploring a broader distinction—one between emotion-driven and principle-driven moral behavior. We consider: (a) whether emotion invariably moderates moral judgments about antisocial acts; (b) how emotion affects the assessment of prosocial acts; and (c) cases of conflict between emotion and principle.

Emotion and Moral Evaluation of Antisocial Behavior

It is not certain whether the discount in blameworthiness for out-of-control, affectively charged actions (Pizarro et al., 2003) generalizes to emotionally-driven actions more broadly. After all, the distinction between emotion-based and principle-based action does not map perfectly onto the contrast between impulsive and deliberate behavior: some impulsive actions lack a

corresponding emotional component, and some acts that are emotionally driven are not impulsive. It is unlikely, for instance, that someone who murders another person out of a deeply ingrained, enduring revulsion will receive the same leniency as someone who commits a murder in a fit of rage.

In addition, two equally deliberative antisocial acts may be driven by different underlying reasons, and thus may be seen as differentially blameworthy. An antisocial act that results from the misapplication of a prosocial principle may seem less blameworthy than the same act motivated by an antisocial principle, or by no principle. A man who murders his wife in a fit of rage after having witnessed her sleeping with another man may be seen as less blameworthy than a man who (deliberately) murders his wife to receive an insurance payment (no principle), but as no less blameworthy than a man who (deliberately) murders his wife because he believes that she was going to hurt their children. The extent to which emotionally-driven acts are seen as less blameworthy than more deliberative acts will likely depend on the specific moral principles and emotions involved.

One factor that may apply both to emotional and principled causes of action is the extent to which such causes give rise to inferences about an actor's character (see Kupperman, 1991). It may be that emotional causes of immoral action are seen as less

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stable or pervasive than principled causes. Alternatively, it may be that emotions, however transient, are seen as more authentic reflections of the self and, consequently, as better indicators of a person's "true" character. What is at stake is the extent to which an action is seen as truly owned by a person, as opposed to being more contingently connected with him or her (see also, Pizarro et al., 2003; Woolfolk, Doris, & Darley, 2006). Such characterological inferences may play an important role in guiding perceptions of blameworthiness and in mediating the potential differences between emotionally-driven and principle-driven actions.

Antisocial to Prosocial Focus

The information about how people judge emotionally-driven versus principle-driven immoral acts does not directly inform us about how they judge prosocial acts. Indeed, several authors have noted that moral attributions may be based on different sets of principles for prosocial and antisocial acts (e.g., Knobe & Doris, 2010; Wolf, 1980). Pizarro et al. (2003) showed that the praiseworthiness of impulsive positive actions was not discounted relative to deliberate positive actions despite a comparable reduction in the negative domain. The authors explain this asymmetric discounting by citing a difference in the perceived metadesires of the actors: raters may believe that actors reject the impulse that leads to wrongdoing but embrace an impulse that leads to prosocial action. Thus, actors are assumed to be more fully identified with impulsive positive actions than they are with impulsive negative actions. While we acknowledge the importance of this work in emphasizing differences in the evaluation of prosocial and antisocial actions, we caution against generalizing these results to emotion-driven actions more broadly. In the negative domain, we question whether observers tend to assume that conflicting metadesires accompany immoral actions that are motivated by more enduring feelings (e.g., revulsion), as opposed to more fleeting, impulsive states (e.g., anger). In the positive domain, we note that impulsive and overwhelming sympathy may be judged very differently from a more moderate and consistently experienced sympathy. Indeed, Schopenhauer (1841/2009) argued that acts driven by compassion or sympathy deserve *greater* moral credit:

Consequently compassion is the real moral incentive [...] A good deed executed solely out of regard for the Kantian moral principle would, at [the] bottom, be the work of philosophical pedantry. (p. 221)

If lay judgments follow this principle, an emotionally-driven prosocial act would endow its author with as much or even greater moral credit than its principle-driven counterpart. Further, while observers may not discount (or even amplify) the praiseworthiness of actions stemming from compassion, it is unclear how they would react to prosocial behavior motivated by anger, disgust, guilt, or shame. It seems reasonable to presume that actions motivated by in-the-moment, other-directed moral emotions, such as sympathy or compassion, may bestow relatively more moral credit than those motivated by anticipated, self-directed moral emotions, such as guilt or shame.

Cases where Emotion and Reason Conflict

In the examples so far considered, we have invoked one cause as clearly predominant. However, actions are rarely caused either by emotion or principle alone. The most extreme moral attributions may come from cases in which a person's moral emotions and principles align, suggesting greater identification with the resulting action (see Woolfolk et al., 2006). It is often the case, however, that our emotions and principles are in direct opposition. For instance, a person may experience revulsion at the thought of homosexual intercourse, yet override this emotion in coming to a moral judgment that such intercourse is morally permissible. Are such individuals given more or less credit than individuals who arrive at the same judgment without ever having experienced the negative emotional response? We also wonder whether overriding a prosocial emotion (e.g., sympathy or compassion) to satisfy a utilitarian principle produces greater moral credit.

Toward the Future

To address our many questions, we propose a few ideas to motivate empirical studies.

1. Under what conditions are emotionally-driven antisocial actions judged as less blameworthy than principle-driven actions? Does this depend on lay perceptions of the stability and potency of the relevant emotions and principles, and on the extent to which they are seen as reflective of an individual's character?
2. Under what conditions are emotion-driven prosocial actions seen as more or less praiseworthy than the same actions motivated by principle?
3. Is special moral credit allocated to a person who overrides a moral emotion in the interest of a decisive moral reason?

Clearly, we have raised many more questions than suggested answers, but our aim was to stimulate discussion and future research. We hope we have opened inquiry into a new set of problems in the perception of moral actions and character.

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