

The Pervasive Impact of Moral Judgment

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Abstract

A series of recent studies have shown that people's moral judgments can affect their intuitions as to whether or not a behavior was performed intentionally. Prior attempts to explain this effect can be divided into two broad families. Some researchers suggest that the effect is due to some peculiar feature of the concept of intentional action in particular, while others suggest that the effect is a reflection of a more general tendency whereby moral judgments exert a pervasive influence on folk psychology. The present paper argues in favor of the latter hypothesis by showing that the very same effect that has been observed for intentionally also arises for deciding, in favor of, opposed to, and advocating.

Keywords: intentional action; folk psychology.

Intentional Action

People ordinarily distinguish between behaviors that are performed 'intentionally' and those that are performed 'unintentionally.' At first glance, this distinction seems to be a perfectly familiar part of our ordinary approach to understanding the mind, right alongside the concepts of belief and desire. In other words, the concept of intentional action appears to be one aspect of *folk psychology*.

Yet recent experimental work has revealed a surprising fact about the way in which people ordinarily apply this concept. It seems that people's ordinary intuitions about intentional action can actually be affected by their *moral judgments*. In particular, there seem to be cases in which people's intuitions about whether a behavior was performed intentionally depend in some way on their moral appraisal of the behavior itself. What we have here, then, is a case in which people's moral judgments appear to be influencing their folk-psychological intuitions.

A question now arises as to whether this effect is telling us anything of general significance about the relationship between folk psychology and moral judgment. Is the effect just due to some quirk in the process by which people attribute intentional action, or is it a manifestation of some more general mechanism whereby moral judgments can have an impact on folk psychology? Here, one finds a striking divergence of views – with researchers dividing off into two basic camps.

On one side are researchers who suggest that the effect can be understood entirely in terms of certain special features of the attribution of intentional action in particular (e.g., Machery 2008; Nichols and Ulatowski 2007). These

researchers propose to explain the effect by positing a process that would apply only to attributions of intentional action and would not be expected to arise for any other aspect of folk psychology.

On the other side are researchers who think that the effect can be explained in terms of some very general fact about the relationship between folk psychology and moral judgment (e.g., Alicke forthcoming; Knobe 2006; Nadelhoffer 2006). These researchers then proceed by constructing general theories about the ways in which moral judgments impact folk psychology. The guiding hope is that, if one can arrive at the correct general theory, the specific facts about intentional action will be seen to be just one aspect of a far broader pattern.

Our aim here is to provide experimental and theoretical support for this second view. On the theory we develop here, the surprising results obtained for intuitions about intentional action do not really have anything to do with the distinctive features of the concept of intentional action in particular. Rather there is a perfectly general process whereby moral judgments serve as input to folk psychology, and the effects observed for intentional action should be understood as just one manifestation of this broader phenomenon. If we are right about this, the impact of moral judgments is not merely a peculiarity of the concept of intentional action, but instead is a pervasive feature of the theory of mind.

Background

Consider a paradigmatic case of intentional action. The agent wants to bring about an outcome, she performs a behavior specifically for that purpose, and everything proceeds exactly as planned. In a case like this one, people's intuitions will be more or less independent of moral considerations. Regardless of whether the behavior is morally good or morally bad, almost everyone will say that the agent brought about the outcome intentionally.

Now consider a behavior that is paradigmatically unintentional. The agent has no interest in bringing about the outcome, she doesn't even know that her behavior might bring it about, and she only ends up acting as a result of some sort of muscle spasm. Here again, moral considerations will have little impact on people's intuitions. No matter what moral status the behavior has, almost

everyone will say that the agent brings about the outcome unintentionally.

Things get interesting, however, when we consider intermediate cases – i.e., cases that fall somewhere between the paradigmatically intentional and the paradigmatically unintentional. Thus, suppose that the agent knows that she will be bringing about a particular outcome through her behavior but that she does not care about this outcome in any way. (She has chosen to perform the behavior for some other reason entirely.) In such a case, we might say that the outcome is a ‘side-effect’ of her behavior. Will people say that she brought about this side-effect intentionally? It turns out that their intuitions in cases of this type can actually be influenced by their judgments about whether the side-effect itself is morally good or morally bad.

The usual way of demonstrating this influence of moral judgment on attributions of intentional action is to present experimental subjects with cases in which an agent brings about a side-effect that is either morally good or morally bad. Here, for example, is a case that we will call the *harm vignette*:

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, ‘We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will also harm the environment.’ The chairman of the board answered, ‘I don’t care at all about harming the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let’s start the new program.’ They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was harmed.

After reading this vignette, subjects can be asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement: ‘The chairman of the board intentionally harmed the environment.’

But now suppose we construct a case that is almost exactly the same as this first one, except that the side effect is actually morally good. We then arrive at what we will call the *help vignette*:

The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, ‘We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, and it will also help the environment.’ The chairman of the board answered, ‘I don’t care at all about helping the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let’s start the new program.’ They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was helped.

After reading this second vignette, subjects can be asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement: ‘The chairman of the board intentionally helped the environment.’

Experimental studies concerning intuitions about cases like these consistently show a striking asymmetry (Feltz and Cokely 2007; Knobe 2003; Mallon 2008; Nichols and Ulatowski 2007; Phelan and Sarkissian forthcoming). Subjects who receive the harm vignette typically say that the agent intentionally harmed the environment, whereas subjects who receive the help vignette typically say that the agent did not intentionally help the environment. Yet it seems that the agent’s mental states do not differ between

the two cases. The main difference lies instead in the moral status of the side-effect itself. Hence, most researchers have concluded that people’s moral judgments are somehow influencing their intuitions as to whether or not an agent acts intentionally (Knobe 2006; Malle 2006; Nadelhoffer 2006).

The key question now is whether this effect has something to do with the concept of intentional action in particular or whether it is simply one manifestation of a pervasive influence of moral judgment on folk psychology. In the experiment we have been discussing thus far, subjects were presented with the help and harm vignettes and asked in each case whether the agent acted *intentionally*, but what would have happened if they had instead been asked a question using some other folk-psychological concept? Suppose they had been asked whether the agent had a *desire* to help or harm the environment. Or suppose they had been asked whether the agent was *in favor* of helping or harming the environment. Would the effect then have disappeared? Or would we have found the very same asymmetry using those concepts as well?

Evidence of Pervasiveness

When one pursues this research program, one quickly runs up against a surprising result. Not only does the impact of moral judgment extend beyond the concept of intentional action, moral judgments appear to be having some impact on just about every concept that involves holding or displaying a positive attitude toward an outcome. We will present data on six different concepts in this section, then turn to another two cases shortly thereafter.

1. ‘Intention’ and ‘Intend’

One striking finding from recent work on the concept of intentional action is the surprising difference between people’s use of the adverb ‘intentionally’ and their use of the verb ‘intend’ and the noun ‘intention.’ Perhaps the strongest evidence here comes from a study by McCann (2005) in which subjects were given the harm vignette and asked:

*Did the chairman intentionally harm the environment?
Did the chairman intend to harm the environment?*

Was it the chairman’s intention to harm the environment? In that study, most subjects (64%) said that the agent acted ‘intentionally,’ but less than half (42%) said that he did ‘intend’ and relatively few (27%) said that he had an ‘intention.’

At this point, one might conclude that morality does not have the same sort of effect on ‘intend’ and ‘intention’ that it does on ‘intentionally.’ (After all, the majority of subjects in the study are disagreeing with the claim that the agent ‘intended’ or had the ‘intention.’) But appearances here are misleading. While only a minority of subjects applies these terms in the harm case, one can still see evidence of a moral asymmetry.

Thus, in one recent study (Knobe 2004), subjects were randomly assigned to receive either the help vignette or the harm vignette and then asked:

Was it the chairman's intention to harm [help] the environment?

Although relatively few (29%) subjects said that the agent had an intention to harm, absolutely none (0%) said he had an intention to help. So people tended not to ascribe intention in either of these cases, but they were more likely to ascribe intention in the case where the behavior was morally bad.

Similar effects have been observed for the verb 'intend.' Cushman (2007) developed 21 different scenarios about agents who brought about side-effects. Each scenario was constructed with two versions – one in which the action is morally good, another in which the action is morally bad. In all 21 scenarios, subjects showed higher levels of agreement with the statement that the agent 'intended' to bring about the side-effect in the morally bad version than in the morally good version.

2. 'Desire'

Here one might suspect that the words 'intentionally,' 'intend' and 'intention' all express more or less the same concept and that the effect might disappear as soon as one turns to words that express other folk-psychological concepts. That, however, appears not to be the case. In fact, the effect also emerges when one looks at applications of 'desire.'

Tannenbaum, Ditto and Pizarro (2007) conducted a study in which subjects were presented with the help and harm vignettes and then asked:

Did the chairman have a desire to help [harm] the environment?

Subjects marked their answers to this question on a scale from 1 to 7. The mean for the help vignette was 1.6; the mean for the harm vignette was 3.4. Here again, although subjects in both conditions leaned toward a negative answer to the question, subjects assigned significantly higher ratings in the morally bad case than in the morally good case.

3. 'Decided'

In light of these earlier results, we suspected that the effect would also arise for 'decided.' We therefore conducted an additional experiment.

Subjects were 37 undergraduate students taking philosophy classes at UNC-Chapel Hill. Each subject was randomly assigned to receive either the help vignette or the harm vignette. Subjects were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement:

The chairman decided to help [harm] the environment.

Ratings were recorded on a scale from 1 ('disagree') to 7 ('agree'). The mean rating for the help condition was 2.7; the mean for the harm condition was 4.6. This difference is statistically significant, $t(35) = 2.4, p < .05$.

4. 'Advocated' and 'In Favor Of'

Given that the effect had emerged for so many other folk-psychological concepts, we predicted that we would be able to find it even if we simply selected arbitrary expressions that in some way indicated that an agent was holding or displaying a positive attitude toward a given outcome. We chose the expressions 'advocated' and 'in favor of.'

Subjects were 62 students taking undergraduate philosophy classes at UNC-Chapel Hill. The experiment used a 2x2 design, with each subject randomly assigned to receive a story with a particular moral status (harm or help) and also randomly assigned to a particular question type ('advocated' or 'in favor of'). Subjects in the harm condition received the following vignette:

The management of a popular coffee franchise held a meeting to discuss a new procedure for preparing and serving coffee. The assistant manager spoke forcefully in favor of adopting the new procedure, saying: I know that this new procedure will mean more work for the employees, which will make them very unhappy. But that is not what we should be concerned about. The new procedure will increase profits, and that should be our goal.

Subjects in the help condition received a vignette that was almost exactly the same, except that the assistant manager argued for a policy that would mean *less* work for the employees. Subjects were then asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a particular statement about the vignette. Each subject was randomly assigned to receive either a statement claiming that the agent 'advocated' bringing about an effect or that the agent was 'in favor of' bringing about an effect. Hence, the possible statements were:

The assistant manager advocated [was in favor of] making the employees do more work.

The assistant manager advocated [was in favor of] making the employees do less work.

Subjects rated each statement on a scale from 1 ('disagree') to 7 ('agree'). The results are displayed in Table 1.

	Harm	Help
Advocated	4.1	2.8
In Favor Of	3.8	2.6

Overall, there was a significant main effect such that subjects were more inclined to agree in the harm condition than in the help condition, $F(1, 58) = 4.6, p < .05$. There was no significant difference between the two question types ('advocated' vs. 'in favor of'), nor was there any significant interaction between moral status and question type.

Discussion

In light of these results, we are inclined to think that the impact of moral judgment is pervasive, playing a role in the application of *every* concept that involves holding or displaying a positive attitude toward an outcome. That is, for all concepts of this basic type, we suspect that there is a psychological process that makes people more willing to apply the concept in cases of morally bad side-effects and less willing to apply the concept in cases of morally good side-effects.

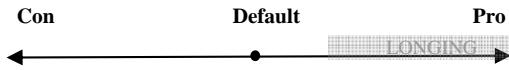
The Hypothesis

Thus far, we have been providing evidence for the view that moral considerations affect the application of a wide array of different concepts. The question now is why so many different concepts should be subject to this same basic effect.

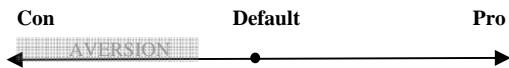
In addressing this question, we will be adopting a somewhat unusual approach. We will not offer anything like a full picture of any of the concepts under discussion here. Instead, our aim is to identify a common psychological mechanism underlying the application each of the concepts which show the effect. In our view, this is the most promising approach for explaining the pervasiveness of the effect.

Let us begin, then, by asking what sorts of psychological mechanisms might be affecting the application of all of the different concepts we have been investigating thus far. It seems to us that the common element that all of these concepts share is that each of them involves the idea of some kind of *pro-attitude* about an outcome – the idea of supporting or approaching or favoring an outcome. We suspect, then, that although a proper understanding of each of these concepts would involve a wide variety of seemingly unrelated notions, all of the concepts rely on a mechanism that distinguishes ‘pro’ from ‘con.’ It is this underlying mechanism that we propose to investigate here.

The first question to address is how people represent pro-attitudes in general. Our hypothesis is that such attitudes are represented, not in terms of a simple dichotomy between ‘con’ and ‘pro,’ but as a matter of *degree*. Accordingly, the attitude an agent takes toward an outcome can be thought of as represented on a kind of scale. At one end of the scale would be the state of an agent who has an overwhelmingly negative attitude toward the outcome. At the other end would be the state of an agent who has an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward the outcome. Intermediate cases would be represented by points toward the middle of the scale. We can then suppose that different concepts require the agent to occupy different positions along this scale. So, for example, the concept *desperate longing* might be represented as requiring a position very far to the ‘pro’ side:



By contrast, the concept *mild aversion* might require a position slightly toward the ‘con’ side:



Now, when we represent these different concepts using the same basic type of diagram, it is not because we think that there is literally a single type of thing – ‘having a pro-attitude’ – that is simply present to varying degrees in desire, intention, being in favor, and so forth. Nor are we claiming that people actually use the very same scale to understand all of the concepts under discussion here. All we mean to suggest is that all of these concepts have the same sort of underlying structure.

To get a sense of what we have in mind here, consider the semantics of the adjectives ‘interesting,’ ‘expensive,’ ‘prevalent,’ ‘amusing’ and ‘democratic.’ It certainly does not seem that there is a single unified scale underlying the semantics of each of these terms. (It would be a bit nonsensical to use a sentence like: ‘George is exactly as interesting as hamburgers are expensive.’) Still, it does appear that the semantics of all of these terms involve a similar sort of structure. All of them involve a scale from less to more (‘less interesting to more interesting,’ ‘less expensive to more expensive’); all permit modification by intensifiers like ‘very’ (‘very interesting,’ ‘very expensive’); all can be used with explicit comparison classes (‘pretty interesting, at least for a professor,’ ‘pretty expensive, at least for a t-shirt’). In light of all these similarities, it is only natural to begin developing a very general theory that abstracts away from all the differences between these different adjectives and simply characterizes the structure that they all share (e.g., Kennedy 1999).

Our suggestion is that an analogous approach might be applicable to the concepts under discussion here. Obviously, the concepts *desiring*, *intending* and *in favor* differ in numerous respects, but it seems that these different concepts might nonetheless be characterized by a common structure. All of them can be understood in terms of an underlying scale that goes from ‘con’ to ‘pro’ (though the precise sense in which an attitude counts as ‘pro’ might differ considerably as one goes from one concept to the next), and all of them work by picking out points along such a scale. The goal now is to develop a theory that abstracts away from the differences among all these distinct concepts and simply describes the basic structure that they all share. Such a theory might not tell us anything about the difference between intending and being in favor, but it would tell us something very general about the patterns that arise whenever one takes a scale from ‘con’ to ‘pro’ and then constructs a concept that involves picking out certain points along this scale.

The idea that such scales underlie the application of our folk psychological concepts allows us to explain how moral judgments could have a pervasive impact on people's application of folk-psychological concepts. To see how, it will be helpful to begin with an analogy. Suppose that we handed out cups of coffee and cups of beer, and that we then asked people to rate the liquids in these cups as 'cold,' 'warm' or 'hot.' If the coffee and the beer were both boiling, people would presumably rate both as 'hot.' Conversely, if the coffee and the beer were both freezing, people would rate both as 'cold.' But now suppose that both the coffee and the beer were exactly room temperature. We might then find that people rated the coffee as 'cold' and the beer as 'warm,' even though the two liquids were in fact at precisely the same temperature.

What is going on in this case? It seems that people are rating each liquid relative to a *default* that specifies what it is supposed to be like. Coffee is supposed to be at a higher temperature, beer at a lower temperature. Hence, when both are at room temperature, the coffee falls below the default (and is classified as 'cold'), while the beer falls above the default (and is therefore classified as 'warm').

We want to suggest that much the same process is at work in the phenomena we have been exploring here. Pro-attitudes are assessed relative to a default, and this default is based in part on a sense of how things are supposed to be. The key claim then is that people's sense of what sort of attitude an agent is 'supposed to' have toward a given outcome can depend on the nature of the outcome itself. People are supposed to have more positive attitudes toward good outcomes, more negative attitudes toward bad ones. Hence, agents' attitudes toward these different outcomes end up getting compared to different defaults.

With this framework in place, we can now derive specific predictions about the intuitions people will have in different cases. The guiding assumption will be that people's application of the word 'intentional' to harming vs. helping follows more or less the same pattern we saw for people's application of the word 'warm' to coffee vs. beer.

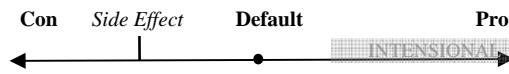
First, consider a behavior that is paradigmatically intentional. The agent specifically wants to have a particular effect on the environment, and everything proceeds exactly as planned. In such a case, the agent's attitude will be toward the 'pro' side of any reasonable default. Regardless of whether the act involves harming or helping, it will be classified as intentional.

Now consider a behavior that is paradigmatically unintentional. The agent specifically wants to have no impact at all on the environment and goes out of his way to avoid having such an effect, but his plans go awry and he ends up impacting the environment anyway. Here the agent's attitude will be toward the 'con' side of any reasonable default. Regardless of whether the act involves harming or helping, it will be classified as unintentional.

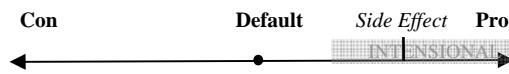
The thing to focus on, then, is the intermediate case. Suppose that the agent does not particularly want to impact the environment *per se*, but he does want to

implement a program that he knows will end up having such an impact. In such a case, it may happen that the agent's attitude looks very different depending on where the default is set. In the help condition, one is inclined to think: 'How callous! Surely, any reasonable person would be at least a little bit more in favor of this outcome.' But in the harm condition, one has exactly the opposite reaction: 'How blasé! It seems like anyone should be at least a little bit more opposed to this outcome.' Hence, this very same attitude ends up falling on the 'con' side of the default in the help condition but on the 'pro' side of the default in the harm condition.

If people's moral judgments do end up shifting the default in this way, we should expect to find an effect of moral judgment on the application of certain concepts. For suppose that people represent the concept *intentionally* as requiring a position at least a little bit toward the 'pro' side of the default. Then, in the help condition, it may happen that people's attitude falls on the 'con' side of the default and that the behavior is therefore classified as unintentional:



Meanwhile, in the harm condition, that very same attitude may fall on the 'pro' side of the default, leading the behavior to be classified as intentional:



Notice now that the explanation we have offered here does not rely on any features that are peculiar to the concept of intentional action in particular. A parallel explanation could be offered for each of the other concepts discussed above: *intending*, *desire*, *in favor of*, and so on.

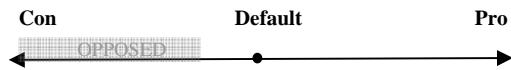
Testing the Hypothesis: 'Opposed'

Thus far, we have been concerned exclusively with the attribution of positive attitudes: 'intending,' 'desiring,' 'in favor of,' and so forth. In each of these cases, one finds an attitude whereby the agent is favorably disposed to an outcome or motivated to pursue it. But suppose we now try to extend our investigation to negative attitudes. For example, instead of simply considering intuitions about whether an agent is 'in favor' of a given outcome, suppose we consider intuitions about whether the agent is 'opposed' to an outcome.

It follows from the hypothesis we advanced above that people's moral judgments will have an impact here too – but that this time the impact will go in the opposite direction. While people were more inclined to say that an agent was 'in favor' of harming the environment than helping it, they should be more inclined to say that an agent is 'opposed' to helping the environment than to harming it.

To see why this is so, one need only suppose that the concept *opposed* requires some negative value along an

underlying scale. Then people's representation of the scale might look something like this:



Now suppose that there is a general effect whereby people shift the representation of an attitude over to the 'pro' side when they perceive the outcome as morally bad. Such an effect would have very different impacts on people's use of the phrases 'in favor' and 'opposed.' Specifically, when people determined that an outcome was morally bad, they should become *more* inclined to classify an agent as 'in favor' of it but also *less* inclined to classify an agent as 'opposed' to it.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted an additional experiment. Subjects were 56 students taking philosophy classes at UNC-Chapel Hill. Each subject was randomly assigned either to the 'harm' condition or the 'help' condition.

Subjects in the harm condition received the following vignette:

The CEO of a company was talking with his assistant. The assistant said: 'We have conducted an in-depth study of the company's proposed new policy. Our study shows that the new policy would decrease profits for the company and that it would also harm the environment.' The CEO said: 'Look, I don't really care about what happens to the environment. What I care about is making sure that our profits don't decrease. So, with that in mind, let's definitely not implement that new policy.'

Subjects in the help condition received a vignette that was exactly the same, except that the word 'harm' was replaced with 'help.' Thus, the vignette in this condition told the story of a policy that would decrease profits but help the environment. After reading their vignettes, subjects were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements:

*The CEO was opposed to harming [helping] the environment.
The CEO deserves blame for what he did.*

All statements were rated on a scale from 1 to 7.

There was no significant difference between conditions on the statement about blameworthiness. For the statement about being 'opposed,' ratings for subjects in the harm condition, $M = 2.3$, were significantly lower than ratings for subjects in the help condition, $M = 3.4$, $t(54) = 2.0$, $p < .05$.

Conclusion

When experimental studies first began showing that moral considerations could influence the application of folk-psychological concepts, it might have been thought that this effect would be limited to a tightly constrained range of cases. One could have supposed, e.g., that the effect would only arise for the concept of intentional action, or that it would only arise in cases of side-effects, or that there would

be some other, fairly narrow range of circumstances in which it could be found. It could then have been supposed that there was a kind of 'core' of folk-psychology that was entirely free of the impact of moral judgment.

Plausible though it may have seemed, this view appears not to be correct. On the contrary, as we learn more and more about the application of various different folk-psychological concepts, we are coming to find an impact of moral considerations in more and more places. It seems to us that there is now good reason to believe there are no concepts anywhere in folk psychology that enable one to describe an agent's attitudes in a way that is entirely independent of moral considerations. The impact of moral judgments, we suspect, is utterly pervasive.

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