

EDITORIAL

DECONSTRUCTING THE MORAL MIND: WHEN DATA SPEAK

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After winning the national lottery, the fortunate woman declares to the media that she has decided to quit her job and begin to spend thousands of dollars a week on massages and expensive chocolate. This behavior would not be totally unpredictable for a new millionaire, except for the fact that her mother was recently kicked out from the hospital due to her inability to afford the cost of her cancer treatment. If your response to this (I hope, fictional) vignette is an experience of disgust toward the mentioned woman, then we can start this first look at the complexity of the moral mind.

The study of the psychological foundations of moral judgments has gone beyond the merely theoretical treatment to constitute an empirical academic subject. Although studies of moral topics have been ubiquitous in both humanities and social sciences, it is not until the integration of different scientific disciplines in the convergent science of moral psychology that the study of morality seems to start its flourishing age. Thus, in the last ten years, a growing body of research from cognitive sciences, experimental philosophy, primatology, clinical and developmental psychology, economy and anthropology have made possible a “new era” on the study of morality (Cushman, Young, & Greene, 2010; Huebner, Dwyer, & Hauser, 2009; Olivera-La Rosa & Rosselló, 2014; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

In this context, a growing body of research favors (with some slight modifications) the characterization of a typical moral judgment as an automatic evaluation. For example, Greene (2009; 2010) claims that moral cognition works like a camera: there is an “automatic” (emotions-intuitions) and a “manual” (conscious reasoning) mode. Depending on the situation being judged, one setting could be more efficient than the other. However, as a general rule, the automatic mode is more efficient in everyday situations to which we are to some extent habituated. Conversely, in novel situations that require of more flexible responses, the manual mode is more efficient.

According to Haidt (2001; 2013) most moral judgments are caused by moral intuitions. Therefore, in daily life, affect-laden intuitions drive moral judgments, whereas moral reasoning –when it occurs– follows these intuitions in an *ex-post facto* manner. From this perspective, moral judgment is like an aesthetic judgment: in the presence of a moral event, we experience an instant feeling of ap-

proval or disapproval (Haidt, 2001). Thus, we can say that in some situations, we intuitively “know” whether something is right or wrong, but faced with the lack of a logical understanding of our responses; we tend to rationalize a justification for our initial intuition.

Interestingly, the existing psychological correspondence between certain corporal states and cognitive processes (embodiment) has been widely documented in studies associated with morality. Indeed, the state of art in this line of research favors that the moral mind is strongly embodied. For instance, several studies suggest that people use the experience of disgust as embodied information about certain social events. Schnall, Haidt, Clore, and Jordan (2008) found that the feeling of disgust, even when it is extraneous to the action being judged, can shape moral judgments by making them more severe in people with high sensitivity to their own visceral reactions. Likewise, Eskine, Kacimik, and Prinz (2011) found that gustatory disgust influenced moral judgments by making them more severe. It seems that the reverse of this pattern also mediates moral cognition. For instance, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) found that, when people think about a past immoral action they displayed a greater desire for cleansing products and that physical cleansing reduced the upsetting consequences of immoral behavior. Moreover, there is evidence that clean scents promote reciprocity and charity (Liljenquist, Zhong, & Galinsky, 2010) and that the sensation of physical cleanliness can make moral judgments less severe (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008).

Consequently, a growing body of research suggests that moral judgments are influenced by incidental affects (that is, are not elicited by properties of the target-object). In particular, recent studies have reported evidence showing that affective priming by disgust and horror pictures exclusively reduced the severity of moral judgments (Olivera-La Rosa & Rosselló, 2012). Interestingly, they found that the shortest the exposure time of the affective prime, the stronger the effect on moral judgments.

All together, these findings support the claim that moral judgments are influenced by irrelevant features of the decision context. Clearly, the finding that incidental affective responses can distort moral judgments has serious implications for certain social issues outside the laboratory. For instance, consider the presence of negative affects in the legal system. Moreover, death-related reports, such as homicides, terrorist attacks or car accidents could increase the permissibility by which we judge the “wrongness” of the subsequent news. In addition, it is important to consider whether daily exposure to computer games and Internet websites with high level of disgust and horror can influence people’s moral standards by raising their level of tolerance for violence. Further research is needed to address this problematic in a more ecological approach, given the fact that several domains of our daily life can be substantially benefited from a better understanding of how our (implicit) moral mind works.

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