



## FlashReport

Psychological distance increases uncompromising consequentialism<sup>☆</sup>Pilar Aguilar<sup>a</sup>, Silvina Brussino<sup>b</sup>, José-Miguel Fernández-Dols<sup>a,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain<sup>b</sup> Universidad de Córdoba, Argentina

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ We hypothesized that psychological distance increases consequentialism.
- ▶ We carried out three different manipulations of psychological distance.
- ▶ All manipulations increased morally counter-normative consequentialism.

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## ABSTRACT

Individuals can follow their moral norms, or opt for a means-end, consequentialist reasoning, in which a valuable consequence (e.g., to save the lives of five people) justifies the tolls incurred even if they clash with basic moral principles (e.g., to kill one person). Psychological distance gives rise to an abstract representation of actions that make goals more prominent and can help us ignore their immediate effects. For these reasons, psychological distance should increase consequentialism. Three experiments confirmed that different manipulations of psychological distance increased participants' consequentialist choices, such as the killing of innocent victims in the service of valued ends.

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## Introduction

Individuals can follow their moral intuitions, based on moral norms (e.g., “thou shalt not kill”), or opt for a more complex means-end reasoning, in which the moral value of the final consequence (e.g., saving many lives) justifies the toll incurred in the process of attaining such a consequence (e.g., by expending one life). In philosophical terms, these two options are called deontological and consequentialist moralities, respectively. In psychology, Tetlock (2003) has described those individuals who follow moral intuitions as “intuitive theologians” and those who follow a consequentialist rationale as “intuitive economists”.

Researchers also conclude that, in general, the two perspectives can be compatible (e.g., Tanner, Medin, & Iliev, 2008), but when they are not, consequentialist judgments are more rational and beneficial than deontological judgments because “protected values” can cause deontological judgments to take extreme, irrational forms. Protected values (e.g., prohibition of harming or killing living creatures such as endangered species; see Ritov & Baron, 1999) are absolute (i.e., they do not induce concern about the consequences) and

focused on forbidden or obligatory actions, rather than their final outcomes. They convey a strong sense of universal moral obligation, attribute the duty involved in the norm to specific individuals, and resist trade-offs with other desirable outcomes (Baron & Spranca, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000).

Researchers have characterized these uncompromising deontological positions as predicting mental rigidity and moral exhibitionism (Baron & Leshner, 2000, Tetlock, 2003), but also as malleable: a number of contextual factors can undermine deontological moral judgments in general (e.g., Bartels, 2008; Tanner & Medin, 2004), and radical deontological positions in particular (e.g., Baron & Spranca, 1997). People with deontological positions can be made more amenable to consequentialism by inducing them to think carefully about all the consequences of following a deontological principle (e.g., potential counterexamples, exceptions, conflicts between protected values or probabilistic estimates; Baron & Leshner, 2000) or just by rhetorically reframing the choices of the moral dilemma in which a protected value is involved (e.g., by framing a utilitarian decision as vaguely deontological; Tetlock, 2003).

Nevertheless, the implementation of uncompromising consequentialism also raises serious questions about its rationality and moral superiority. For example, a strict application of the principle of overall utility seems to lead to moral skepticism, because it says nothing about which particular decisions are a priori right, only about the objective a posteriori consequences. Furthermore, history shows that defining what overall consequences are valuable, satisfactory or good

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can be very different depending on the actor's ideology (Walter Duranty – an admirer of Stalin – illustrated this problem with his infamous consequentialist motto: “you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs”).

In this article we expand upon these two alternative views of moral judgment by exploring the psychological causes of uncompromising forms of consequentialism, i.e., consequentialist options in strong conflict with moral norms, through moral dilemmas (e.g., is one child's life disposable if it saves the lives of many others?).

### Using moral dilemmas

A reasonable objection to the use of moral dilemmas in psychological research is that participants' behavior in a hypothetical situation may well be different from their behavior in an actual situation. Participants in low-impact situations, such as hypothetical vignettes or dilemmas, would make decisions aimed at impression management, following what they assume will please the experimenter (e.g., the normative appropriate rules in the described situation), rather than reflecting their actual reaction in a real dilemma (Lerner, 2003).

Such criticism helps to make clear what can and cannot be inferred from our participants' decisions. Dilemmas do not predict actual behavior, but they can help to disentangle the conflicting cognitive and motivational processes triggered by the mere representation of our being confronted with such dilemmas (Cushman & Greene, 2012). For example, the above-mentioned biblical prohibition (thou shalt not kill) is one of the elements in Abraham's dilemma, in which God commands his son Isaac to be slaughtered, a decision with real consequences.

We cannot predict anyone's behavior if confronted with such a dilemma, but its mere consideration is disturbing and triggers motivational (moral intuitions) and cognitive (moral reasoning) processes that can help us to understand the decisions of people confronted with real dilemmas. Coming back to the example of Abraham's dilemma, philosophers have concluded that the main problem behind it (the command for a human sacrifice on behalf of a morally superior being) is basically epistemic: a command based on a historical or visionary faith raises the suspicion of serious errors or misinterpretations of the deity's supposed commands (revelations cannot be apodictic, see Adams, 1999; Kant, 1960).

Thus, an abstract philosophical discussion about a thought dilemma helps us to understand some of the potential key cognitive factors in real human sacrifices on behalf of a superior deity. For example, terrorism in God's name is not a necessary outcome of specific religious values, but a hideous variation on the epistemic distortions associated with any destructive cult.

From an applied point of view, an additional reason for studying abstract moral dilemmas is that current technological changes have created real decision contexts which, ironically, imitate philosophical dilemmas. Computers, robots, and telecommunication devices have blurred the threshold between the real and the symbolic for an increasing number of professionals whose abstract decisions can be translated, at lightning speed, into real consequences for their invisible targets.

This article is motivated by both concerns: the theoretical understanding of the cognitive processes involved in some forms of consequentialism, and its applied relevance in organizational and political contexts.

### Psychological distance and consequentialism

Some philosophers (e.g., Portmore, 2003) have pointed out that the perceived moral costs of adopting uncompromising consequentialist courses of action vary depending on whether the judge is the actor or a neutral witness. For example, the moral dilemma about sacrificing one individual in order to avoid five deaths is dramatically different depending on who is judging such a dilemma: a distant

witness or the actor, i.e., the person whose task is to kill the victim. Sacrificing a person can be an extremely supererogatory demand for the sacrificer, who can see his or her life devastated by the emotional or legal consequences of such an action. In contrast, a killing committed by someone else can be a distasteful but desirable course of action for a person not directly involved in the dilemma.

The translation of this philosophical observation into psychological processes strongly suggests that a key difference between the actor and a neutral witness is psychological distance (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance involves a high-level construal, an abstract representation. Abstract representations are focused on superordinate goals rather than immediate circumstances. An individual in an abstract mindset is less concerned with the problems of a course of action (means) and freer to focus on desirable outcomes (consequences) (see Amit & Greene, 2012). Therefore, helping actors to distance themselves with respect to their actions (that is, to represent their actions at an abstract level) should facilitate consequentialist courses of action.

Our aim across three experiments was to test for a positive causal link between psychological distance and uncompromising consequentialist decisions through different manipulations of psychological distance and measures of consequentialism.

### Experiment 1

Students from a university in Argentina volunteered to participate in the experiment (42 females, age  $M = 21.12$ ,  $SD = 3.48$ ). Seven participants were excluded after the experimental debriefings (e.g., for having misunderstood the instructions).<sup>1</sup>

We presented the participants with a moral dilemma inspired by a scenario commonly used in philosophical literature on consequentialism (the Transplant Dilemma, Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1985). Doctors have to make up their mind about sacrificing the life of a man by surgically removing a gland that secretes a unique hormone capable of saving the lives of thousands infected by a new, deadly strain of smallpox. We gave participants the choice to kill the person with a number of alternatives that only differed with respect to the guarantee of success regarding the expected payoff (i.e., the guarantee that the hormone would really be successful in saving others' lives). Probability of success ranged from 50% to 1%. After reading the dilemma, participants were asked to fill out and sign a form in which they marked their acceptable level of risk option (see Appendix 1). Our rationale was that an uncompromising consequentialist view would lead participants to adopt a more dismissive attitude toward the victim's death, so that they would indicate a lower threshold for the acceptable level of probability of success.

Our manipulation of psychological distance consisted in describing the final decision as close or distant in time. Temporal distance is a suitable manipulation for studying the effects of abstraction in consequentialism because it induces abstract level construal (Trope & Liberman, 2003; cf. Caruso, 2010). In the Near Future Condition, the surgery had to be performed in the next 48 h; in the Distant Future Condition the surgery would take place two years later.

Finally, the participants were debriefed and informed of the goals of the study. We took special care in helping the participants not to have any negative concerns about their decision in the experimental dilemma by emphasizing the positive side of any choice.

<sup>1</sup> Differences in attrition among experiments were probably due to differences in the recruitment process (volunteers vs. paid participants) and experimental tasks (probability estimates vs. to sign or not to sign). For a complete description of the attrition patterns and their consequences for the significance of these findings, see Appendix 2.

## Results and discussion

One participant, included in the Near Future Condition, refused to sign the form. Consistent with our prediction, a Wilcoxon rank-sum test (the distribution of scores on this scale was significantly non-normal) comparing participants' decisions in the two conditions showed significant differences in the probability of success required for signing the form. In the Distant Future Condition the required probability of success was 34.35%, whereas the probability of success required in the Near Future Condition was 48.82% ( $W = 252.00$ ,  $z = -2.22$ ,  $p = .026$ ,  $r = .38$ ).

### Experiment 2

Experiment 2 included some important variations on the basic design of Experiment 1. In this new experiment, the sample was made up of men and women from a different country (Spain). We also used a different manipulation of psychological distance (abstract vs. concrete priming). Finally, we made slight changes to the dilemma used in Experiment 1, changing the illness in the story to avoid any uncontrolled effects due to participants' ignorance about the seriousness of the illness (in this second case it was cancer). We also reduced the level of risk for participants' choices by increasing the range of success probability offered (in this experiment the range of success probability was 99% to 50%, whereas it was 50% to 1% in Experiment 1). The purpose of this change was to test whether the differences across conditions were stable, independently of the range of available options.

### Method

One hundred and seventeen students from a Spanish university participated in this experiment in return for a small payment. After being randomly assigned to the Concrete or Abstract Priming Condition, participants were requested to write progressively more specific descriptions of how to maintain good health (Concrete Priming Condition) or progressively broader descriptions about why one should maintain good health (Abstract Priming Condition) (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004). Immediately after priming, and ostensibly for a different study, participants had to read the above-described dilemma, which was a variation on that used in Experiment 1. Afterwards, participants were debriefed as in Experiment 1. Twenty-five participants were excluded from the analyses (e.g., because of misunderstandings over the instructions or reported cases of cancer among their close relatives).<sup>1</sup> The resulting sample consisted of 92 participants (46 women and 46 men, mean age = 20.89,  $SD = 2.37$ ).

### Results and discussion

Twelve participants (5 in the Concrete Priming Condition, 7 in the Abstract Priming Condition) refused to sign the form. For the remaining 80 participants the required probability of success was significantly lower in the Abstract Priming ( $M = 79.65\%$ ,  $SD = 19.38$ ) than in the Concrete Priming Condition ( $M = 88.20\%$ ,  $SD = 16.29$ ),  $t(78) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .036$ ,  $d = .47$ ).

Experiment 2 confirms the basic finding of Experiment 1: an abstract mindset facilitated consequentialist reasoning in a means-end dilemma. Participants in the Abstract Priming Condition chose, on average, significantly riskier options than those in the Concrete Priming Condition.

### Experiment 3

In Experiment 3 we tested the effect of psychological distance on consequentialism using a new, more dramatic moral dilemma and two key variations with respect to former experiments: the new dilemma involved an extreme form of deontological duty (to care for your loved ones) versus an extreme form of a valued ideal (universal

justice). The goal of Experiment 3 was to explore to what extent psychological distance caused differences not just in relative but also in absolute terms, that is, in a dilemma based on a dramatic dichotomy. Furthermore, the new dilemma permitted us to make a clear analysis of participants' moral reactions to their own decision.

### Method

The participants were 75 students from a Spanish university (12 male and 63 female, mean age = 21.20  $SD = 5.613$ ) who underwent the same abstract/concrete priming procedure as used in Experiment 2 (Freitas et al., 2004). In a second, ostensibly independent study carried out immediately after the priming task, participants were invited to read and sign a "contract" (cf. Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2000, cited in Haidt & Bjorklund, 2008) concerning their willingness to accept the toll incurred in attaining a desirable goal. The "contract" consisted of exchanging "the sacrifice of my loved ones" for "restoring justice in the world".

Once the participants had made their decision (to sign or not to sign the contract), they filled out a questionnaire adapted from Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, and Wilson (1997), in which they reported the intensity of their emotions while and after making their decision, on a 1 to 7 scale (1 = *Not at all*, to 7 = *Extremely*) and some judgments about their decision (e.g., about the morality of their decision; 1 = *Not at all*, to 9 = *Completely*). Finally, participants were debriefed.

### Results and discussion

Participants in the Abstract Priming Condition were more willing to sign the contract (10 out of 37 participants; 27%) than those in the Concrete Priming Condition (3 out of 38 participants; 7.9%) ( $\chi^2(1,75) = 4.78$ ,  $p = .029$ ).

With respect to the questionnaire about emotions, we conducted a Wilcoxon rank-sum test for each question (which showed that the emotional judgments were not normally distributed). Participants who signed the contract allowing the sacrifice of their loved ones reported being significantly happier ( $Mdn = 2$  vs.  $Mdn = 1$ ;  $W = 2126.5$ ,  $z = -2.66$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $r = -.30$ ), more sympathetic ( $Mdn = 6$  vs.  $Mdn = 4$ ;  $W = 1764.5$ ,  $z = -4.88$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $r = -.58$ ), and more compassionate ( $Mdn = 6$  vs.  $Mdn = 1$ ;  $W = 2150.0$ ,  $z = -1.98$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $r = -.23$ ) than those who did not sign. Those who signed also judged their own decision as more moral ( $Mdn = 8$  vs.  $Mdn = 5$ ;  $W = 2155.0$ ,  $z = -2.83$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $r = -.33$ ) and reasonable ( $Mdn = 7$  vs.  $Mdn = 6$ ;  $W = 2209.0$ ,  $z = -2.08$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $r = -.24$ ) than those who did not sign. On the other hand, those who did not sign expressed the wish that they had not had to make the decision ( $Mdn = 5$  vs.  $Mdn = 9$ ;  $W = 280.0$ ,  $z = -3.26$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $r = -.38$ ). Finally, participants in the Abstract Priming Condition considered their decision to be more morally correct than participants in the Concrete Priming Condition ( $Mdn = 8$  vs.  $Mdn = 5$ ;  $W = 1168.50$ ,  $z = -2.94$ ,  $pV = 0.003$ ,  $r = -.33$ ).

### General discussion

These experiments clearly support the hypothesis that psychological distance increases counter-normative consequentialist decisions in some specific contexts. The induction seems to overcome deontological concerns in an individual who, in other conditions, would not be willing to make such decisions.

In Experiment 3 those who – mostly in an abstract mindset – chose the death of their loved ones reported being happier and more moral than those who did not sign. They also reported compassion and sympathy for victims of injustice, rather than for their loved ones. Further studies should clarify whether psychological distance made these participants emotionally focused on the beneficiaries of

their decision, or whether awareness of their choice (killing their loved ones) led them to project a more normatively positive self-image through their reports.

On the theoretical side, our findings suggest that moral reasoning is related to psychological distance in a complex way. In some instances, an abstract mindset can increase the rigor and, presumably, the accessibility of moral judgments, especially when the context emphasizes moral values rather than moral norms or moral intuitions based on moral rules (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009). In other instances, abstraction can lead actors to ignore their intuitions based on moral norms, in pursuit of a valuable goal.

On the practical side, these findings have some important political and organizational consequences. For example, Smith and Trope (2006) found that power is related to an abstract mindset. Thus, our findings suggest that powerful people have an inclination to approach moral decisions on consequentialist bases that may clash with the moral intuitions of their followers. In the same vein, educational emphasis on abstraction would promote a consequentialist way of approaching most moral dilemmas which, combined with the values acquired in the academic socialization process, could produce professionals prone to ignoring most people's moral intuitions on behalf of consequentialist schemes. Frank, Gilovich, and Regan's (1993) studies on the socialization of economics students and its effects on their (strongly consequentialist) moral reasoning provide an interesting illustration of the result of an emphasis on abstraction combined with values such as self-interest.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.01.002>.

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