

The Charon Model of Moral Judgment

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Abstract

We present a model of moral judgment, Charon, which adds to previous models several factors that have been shown to influence moral judgment: 1) a more sophisticated account of prior mental state, 2) imagination, 3) empathy, 4) the feedback process between emotion and reason, 5) self-interest, and 6) self-control. We discuss previous classes of models and demonstrate Charon's extended explanatory power with a focus on psychopathy and autism.

Keywords: morals, morality, ethics, ethical reasoning, moral reasoning, moral judgment, philosophy, deontological, utilitarian, dual-process, modeling, psychopathy, autism, reasoning, emotion, emotions, self-interest, empathy, compassion, willpower, self-control, imagination.

Introduction

Traditional psychological models of moral judgment mainly focus on the types of reasons that people have to do the right thing (e.g., Rest, 1986; Gaudine & Thorne, 2001; Thorne & Saunders, 2002). More recently Haidt (2001) introduced a social-intuitionist model of moral judgment in which judgments are emotional, quick, and intuitive. The role of reason in Haidt's account is entirely post-hoc and does not play a role in generating judgments.

The role of emotion in moral judgment has also been investigated in dual-process models. Greene et al. (2001) distinguish between two types of moral processes – deontological and utilitarian. They argue that the former are an intuitive, emotional process and that the latter is reason-based.

This paper examines the state of psychological moral judgment modelling. We present a new model that better accommodates a breadth of empirical moral judgment evidence and, further, can explain the differences in moral judgment between abnormal populations, such as psychopaths and people with autism.

Reason-based Models

Reason-based models, such as Rest's (1986), involve recognition of moral issues, and then application of moral reasons, rules, or frameworks (such as utilitarianism) to arrive at a moral judgement. Others have added to this basic model to account for the influence of situational factors (e.g., Trevino, 1986). Models of moral judgment have similarly almost exclusively focused on reason-based decision making for the past thirty years.

One major problem with reason-based models is that they have trouble accounting for moral judgements that seem to have nothing to do with good moral reasoning, such as when somebody thinks it's immoral to burn a flag. Much of moral judgment happens quickly, with no deliberation, suggesting the importance of emotion in moral judgement.

According to Kohlberg (1973), as people become more proficient at reasoning and have a more fully developed concept of themselves as connected to the largest sphere of relations, they will develop an abstract, universalized form of morality. At its highest stages, these moralities take the form of utilitarianism, and better still Kantianism. Kohlberg's focus was on reasoning alone. The way people are moral is by becoming ever more proficient reasoners. As people improve their understanding of the world, they are better able to make moral decisions.

Haidt's Social Intuitionist model

Haidt (2001) introduced a social intuitionist model, later called Moral Foundations Theory (2012), that holds that moral judgements are based on application of several moral foundations (five in earlier versions, six in its 2012 version) that work through emotion. For Haidt, the role of moral reasoning is post hoc. Once we have already made a snap judgment, we use moral reasoning to justify or confabulate the decision we have already made.

Haidt's empirical support for the post-hoc role of reasoning in moral judgment comes from his moral dumbfounding experiments, in which he presented subjects with various moral scenarios and found that most would have an emotional judgment of things and hold that judgment even after their reasons failed to support it (Haidt, 2001; Haidt et al., 2000).

Research has highlighted the important role that disgust plays in moral judgment (Haidt, 2012; Pizarro et al., 2011). Haidt (2012, 2001) argues that disgust reactions, such as that which is felt when faced with cases of incest, or the idea of your neighbour eating his dead dog, are in themselves moral judgments of the wrongness of the acts. Pizarro takes this a step further in his research. He and his colleagues argue that even the presence of disgust is enough for someone to frame the situation they later view as being moral. In other words, disgust can trigger a moral mindset.

We argue that Moral Foundations Theory underestimates the use of reason in moral judgement. Examination of

Haidt's results indicate that depending on the scenario people sometimes change their minds from their original intuition based on their post-hoc reasoning. For example, when prompted to consider various ways in which the incest case is not actually "morally wrong"; i.e. no one is getting hurt, there will not be an infant conceived, etc., people will sometimes change their minds and arrive at a new moral judgment. 10-23% of people changed their judgments when presented with counter-evidence to their original intuitions (Haidt 2001; Haidt et al., 2000). Though not a majority, this is a sizable percentage and a model of moral judgment must accommodate it.

Dual-Process Models

Dual-process models of moral judgment are a relatively new area of investigation across disciplines. As a result, there are few existing models that take this approach. While it has been gaining traction in psychology, neuroscience, and other more applied disciplines, very little to date has been done from a philosophical standpoint.

Dual-process models of moral decision-making claim that emotion/intuition and reasoning are both integral to human morality.¹ Joshua Greene and his colleagues in the early 2000s were the first team to apply this framework, and other dual-process accounts resemble theirs.

Greene and colleagues used Philippa Foot's (1978) trolley/footbridge cases to examine how people make moral judgments. Trolley cases involve a person having to make a decision to act (such as by pulling a switch) where their choice to act will save a greater number of lives. For example, the classic trolley case involves a train coming down the tracks, if you choose to do nothing then the train will hit and kill 5 people, but if you pull a switch then the train will be diverted and will only kill 1 person. Greene et al. (2001) found that the large majority of people are willing to pull the switch in the trolley case. They argue that this is because when choosing whether or not to pull the switch people do some kind of utilitarian calculus. In this study, people will often explain their actions in the following way: "It's better to save five people, and to let one person die, because five lives saved is better than one." This reflects a utilitarian type of reasoning. Greene et al. were interested in explaining why it is that despite willingness to pull the switch in the trolley case, people will not act to save the five in the footbridge case where it is required that you physically push another person onto the tracks to save the five people's lives.

To explain this finding, Greene et al. invoke a dual-

¹ This approach aligns moral decision-making much closer to current theories of decision making more broadly. Daniel Kahneman's (2013) work on decision-making has shown how both reason and emotion play separate and integral roles in decision-making. They can cause separate judgments. They influence each other. They are both necessary for decision-making to work well.

process model of moral judgment. They claim that people are more averse to doing things that involve personal harm and that footbridge cases involve an entirely different type of process than in the trolley case. They explain that when faced with footbridge cases, people invoke (what Greene considers) a deontological approach to morality. Greene and colleagues explain that deontological approaches are emotional and that the idea of personally harming another person causes an emotional interference that impedes doing a utilitarian calculus.

Greene sees complex moral decisions as being the result of an internal struggle between reason-based and emotion-based approaches happening in the brain.

Messner, Nelson, and Peach (2016) and Messner (2013) also present a dual-process model equipped for the fact that depending on situation and context people can appeal to two different processes for moral judgment. Their focus is on stress' influence on ethical judgment. They explain that in situations where you are under time constraints, are uncertain, or stressed, deliberative processing is difficult. This predicts that when a person is stressed they are more likely to rely on intuitive moral judgments.

Criticism of Previous Models

We have presented three broad classes of models that attempt to account for the range of moral judgments' influences. However there are empirical findings that have not yet been accommodated by any existing model.

First, they do not account for the way in which imagination affects moral decision-making. Visual imagery has been shown to have an effect on the ways in which people reason. For example, being asked to visualize a situation before making a judgment about it tends to make people less utilitarian in their rule-application. They tend to reject the concept that the ends justify the means compared to those who do not visualize the situation (Amit & Greene, 2012).

The second is that they do not account for weakness of will and self-interest. This is surprising, considering that many consider morality as the opposite of being selfish. But in the classes of models we have looked at, there is no piece that explicitly accounts for differences in how selfish people are (either in general or in the moment).

Similarly, someone with a weak willpower (or with a willpower weakened by something like ego depletion), might make different moral judgments.

Third, these models do not make explicit the role of empathy, which has been shown to affect moral judgment (Batson, et al., 1997).

In response to these ignored issues, we present our own model of moral reasoning.

The Charon Model

The Charon model is a dual-process model of moral judgment built on previous models, such as those of

Messervey (2013) and Reynolds (2006).

Important ways in which our model (see Fig. 1) deviates from previous models is its introduction of 1) a more sophisticated account of prior mental state, 2) imagination, 3) empathy, 4) the feedback process from the emotion to reason and reason to emotion, 5) self-interest, and 6) self-control.

The structure of the model, with arrows indicating influence, can be seen in Fig. 1.

Top-Down Mental States

There are many ways in which top-down processing can affect decision-making. Long-held beliefs and desires, for example, will have an impact on the way in which we perceive incoming information as well as constrain our imaginative processing. Our phenomenological experiences are determined by the interaction of mental states with either sensory input or imagination.

The types of mental states that can influence moral judgment are broad. However, we want to focus on three ways in which mental states affect moral decision-making.

The first, introduced by Messervey, Nelson, and Peach (2016), is the role of stress. Being in a stressed mental state has consequences from the onset of decision-making. The major consequence of stress is that it makes it difficult to reason effectively. In other words, if someone is already stressed then deliberative processing will be impaired. As predicted by dual-process models, those under cognitive load suffer impairments in utilitarian but not deontological reasoning, and removing time pressure increases utilitarian judgment (Greene, 2012, 127).

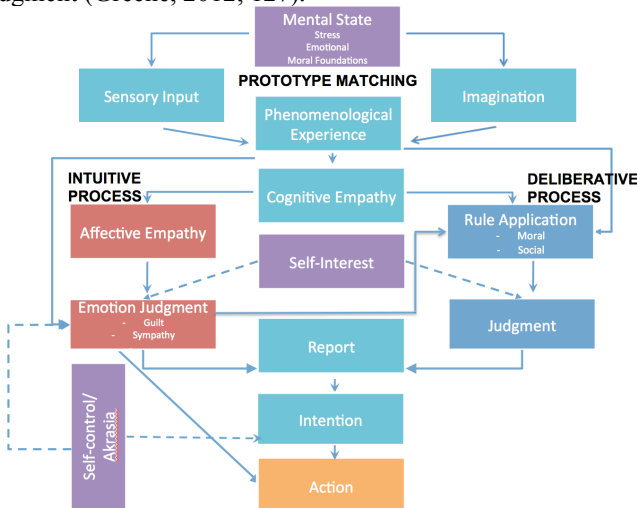


Figure 1. The Charon model of moral judgment. Arrows indicate influence. Dotted lines are mediating.

General affect can alter moral behaviour. Isen and Levin (1972) ran a study where they found that getting an extra dime out of a pay phone increased the likelihood of that person helping another by 22 times. This supports the hypothesis that a positive emotional state will result in more

ethical behaviour. We assume that moral judgment was also affected, but we know of no study that differentiates moral action and judgment for the “dime effect.”

Haidt’s (2012) moral foundations are also stored in the “mental state” box in our model. Given the different reactions that people have to Kohlberg’s (1976) moral dilemmas, leaving a broad category for rule application helps to explain the differences. Additionally, by building in the moral foundations as part of the mental states, it will also help in predicting how they will reason. For example, someone who is high on the fairness consideration may lean more towards not stealing.

Imagination

Amit and Greene (2012) examined the role visual imagination plays in moral judgments. They found that those with more visual cognitive styles compared to those with verbal styles were significantly more likely to prefer deontological judgments. They tended to prefer the rights of the individual over the collective good. Further, impairing visualization ability by overloading visual capacity made all participants less deontological in their judgments.

This lends empirical support to the introduction of the role of imagination in moral judgments. Presumably, imagination generates more visceral reactions than abstract thought, preferentially activating the emotional system, which, as we have seen, results in deontological judgments.

Empathy

Empathy, sometimes characterized as that which creates an emotional understanding of the other (Lamm, Batson & Decety, 2007) has long been linked to morality, dating as far back as Hume. More recently, there are those, such as Slote (2007), who have argued that morality is founded on empathy. While we hold that empathy is neither sufficient nor necessary for moral judgment, the ability to empathize with another person can change the ways in which people reason as well as their emotion judgments. As such, it is important that it be included as part of a moral judgment model. There are those who see empathy as that which creates an emotional understanding of the other. Our model characterizes empathy as involving having two distinctive processes. These are cognitive and affective empathy.²

Cognitive empathy includes the perspective taking necessary to identify the emotional state of another person and the imagination required to put oneself in that other person’s shoes. In other words, it allows a person to imagine how she would feel if she were in similar circumstances to that other person. Batson et al. (1997) has shown that asking participants to take on others’ perspectives makes us more likely to offer them help.

Affective empathy can be understood as actually feeling,

² While there are possibilities of further subdividing empathy, it would unnecessarily over complicate our model at this point.

as opposed to simply perceiving, the emotional state that another is in. It is a state of emotion matching to the other person. Affective empathy is believed to be very important for altruistic behaviour and personal relationships, as has been shown to increase the likelihood of helpful behaviours (Mullins-Nelson, Salekin, & Leistico, 2006).

Cognitive empathy appears to have the ability to change the way in which we reason when we have a better understanding of what the other person is going through. However, cognitive empathy without affective empathy may result in increases of unethical behaviour. For example, psychopaths are noted for their manipulative behaviours and are known to exploit the information that they have on others (Hare, 2003). Their cognitive empathy is intact, but affective empathy is not. Perspective taking without appropriate emotional response may result in a higher probability of unethical behaviour.

Rule Application

Our model includes a box for rule application to account for the influence of explicitly represented moral principles (such as “I don’t eat meat”), as well as the use of rote retrieval of previous cases (or prototypes) of moral judgments (Reynolds, 2006).

This box also contains “scripts” that can be used in moral judgment. To demonstrate how scripts work, we will briefly discuss moral reasoning in those with autism, who do not use emotional cues (Brewer et al., 2015). People with autism are solely reliant on deliberative, reason-based approaches for making moral decision. One of the most effective strategies for teaching children with autism is the use of social scripts. These scripts include everything from everyday tasks such as proper hygiene and setting the dinner table to more complex, such as how to interact with someone in distress. Kelly and Maibom (2012) argued that autistic morality is founded in these social scripts. This may offer insight into how, despite having emotional deficits (Blair, 2005) that impair emotional processing, they are able to make ethical judgments and act accordingly. We assume that this process occurs in those without autism as well.

As described earlier in the case of moral dumbfounding, people change their minds in 10-23% of the cases of trolley/footbridge problems, based on subsequent reasoning. Charon allows for this because, like other dual-process models, reason and emotion run in parallel, both contributing “opinions” that are weighed to eventuate in a final judgment.

Self-Interest

People’s self-interest clearly affects their moral *action*. Sometimes people will do something they know is wrong because it will help them. But self-interest can also affect moral *judgment*. In a magazine survey, 85% of people agreed that “If someone sues you and you win the case, should he pay your legal costs?” But only 44% agreed with

“If you sue someone and lose the case, should you pay his costs?” (cited in Greene, 2012, 83).

Thus, in Charon, self-control affects moral judgment as well as moral intention (Fig. 1).

Self-Control / Akrasia

A final distinction of our model, the inclusion of self-control, will be made by appealing to psychopathy. As asserted earlier, a person can enter a situation with depleted self-control; however self-control can also fail throughout a morally-charged event. A place in where it seems to fail in psychopaths is at the level of intention.

Lack of self-control is part of the psychological construct for psychopathy. For example, M. Sib Ansari and colleagues (2010) found that psychopaths are hypersensitive to rewards, such as money and drugs. As was earlier established, psychopaths can avail themselves of utilitarian reasoning, but even when they make a judgment that something is wrong they seem unable to act accordingly (Cima et al., 2010). These findings suggest that this might be a failure of self-control: they might know right from wrong, but when they have something to gain, that goes out the window.³

Even for non-psychopaths, people with impulsivity issues might fail to act ethically because of a failure of self-control, even after producing the right moral judgment.

Another study found that training in self-control resulted in decreased anger (and retaliation) when facing aggression from another person (Denson, Capper, Oaten, Friese, & Schofield, 2011). The fact that anger was decreased is suggestive that moral judgment was affected, because anger has been shown to result in moral judgments (Haidt, 2012). But future studies should tease the effects of action and judgment out more carefully.

Applying Charon to Successful Psychopathy

Hare describes the psychopath in the following way: “A social predator who charms, manipulates and ruthlessly plows their way through life...completely lacking in feelings for others, they selfishly take what they want and do as they please, violating social norms and expectations without the slightest sense of guilt or regret (Hare, 2003, xi).” Though this combination of traits most often results in criminal behaviour, psychopaths make up between 1-2% of the general population (Hare, 2003)—far more than are imprisoned.

Those who meet the diagnostic criteria for psychopathy, but maintain successful and productive lifestyles are known as “successful” psychopaths. The main features which distinguish a successful psychopath is their ability to abstain

³ Another interpretation is that even when psychopaths know right from wrong, and have self-control, they are simply not sufficiently motivated to care.

from criminal behaviour and that they succeed in their professional domain (Lykken, 1995).

Surveys sent to people in three professions – attorneys, psychologists, and professors—asked people to report on psychopaths they worked with. It was found that successful psychopaths were described as dishonest, exploitative, low in remorse, minimizing of self-blame, arrogant, and shallow (Mullins-Sweatt, Glover, Derefinko, Miller, & Widiger, 2010).

Unsuccessful psychopaths tend to have lower scores in the facets dutifulness, self-discipline and deliberation (Lynam & Widiger, 2007). An important difference between successful and unsuccessful psychopaths is that the former is higher in conscientiousness (Mullins-Sweatt et al., 2010).

An examination of the successful psychopath suggests four ways in which the underlying cognitive features of their moral decision-making system contribute to their success.

The first process is their cognitive empathy. As Babiak and Hare (2006) note, being able to read people can easily contribute to being able to manipulate them, understand their weaknesses, and use these to one's advantage. While this doesn't necessarily lead to a "moral" course of action, it can and does lead to success in many professional areas.

A third way in which the successful psychopath fits well within the Charon model of moral decision-making is that they have higher conscientiousness (Lynam & Widiger, 2007; Mullins-Sweatt et al.). In trying to explain why it is that they remain unincarcerated, one needs to refer back to the self-control/akrasia box of the model. This is the sequentially last cognitive control that we have over morality prior to action. At the very end, it determines whether we act or refrain from action both in the case of good and bad action. The successful psychopath has better inhibition than does the regular psychopath. Even if they were to arrive at a bad choice, they have the ability to refrain from action in the case of having made an immoral judgment because they have more self-control.

Finally, while there has been very little empirical work done investigating the specific moral deficits of successful psychopaths, there is no evidence to suggest that they are different from other psychopaths when it comes to their ability to use utilitarian reasoning to arrive at judgments. They would have the capacity to follow through on these judgments because of their higher self-control. While the use of utilitarian reasoning unchecked by emotional processes can lead to a cold morality, there are times when this is the necessary course of action. For example, for politicians who need to make decisions regarding who and when to send people to war when it means that they may die requires some utilitarian calculations. It is potentially the case that those with only utilitarian reasoning to use for these purposes may be well-suited to making these kinds of decisions as they are less likely to allow emotions to impede their decision-making process.

To summarize, while the Charon model can differentiate between the successful and unsuccessful psychopath and explain why it is that the former are more successful, it cannot conclude that the successful psychopaths are necessarily more morally successful. They are better at not doing illegal things because they have higher self-control, but many of the ways in which they move ahead professionally are of dubious moral methods. They are manipulative, cold, hurtful, and will leave a metaphorical line of bodies behind them to get to where they want to be. (Babiak & Hare, 2007). The severity of their moral lapses may not be as severe as those of the unsuccessful psychopath, but it is a difference in kind. It would not be fair to conclude that one is moral and the other is not. Both make bad moral decisions in general, just one is more inhibited about it and stays on the right side of the law.

Conclusions

The Charon model builds on past research in ethical decision-making to produce a unique approach that accounts for a broader range of evidence than previous models. Its use of empirical evidence from psychopathy and autism results in a more robust concept of emotion judgment. It is intended to account not only for quick moral judgments, but also judgments that are arrived at after considerable reflection.

Where previous models contribute valuable concepts, such as reason, emotion, moral foundations, and dual-processing, we have shown evidence of the influence of many more factors in the complex process of moral judgment, including a more sophisticated account of prior mental state, imagination, empathy, the feedback process between emotion and reason, self-interest, and self-control.

We expect that future research will show that even more aspects of mind affect moral judgment. We encourage modelers to incorporate all of these findings into their models.

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