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Moral Cognition: A Dual-Process Model

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Introduction

For centuries philosophers have debated the roles that intuition and reasoning play in making moral judgments. Hume proposed that people possess a 'moral sense' that allows them to distinguish between right and wrong, while Kant argued that reason is, or should be, the basis for making moral judgments.

In the last 40 years psychologists have addressed this question using scientific methods. Kohlberg (1986) emphasized moral reasoning in his cognitive developmental stage model which posits that people progress through a series of six universal stages of moral reasoning. Haidt (2001) recently proposed a dual-process model of moral cognition that rejects reason as the primary cause of moral judgments and posits intuition as more influential. Intuition is characterized as fast, automatic processing that is not available to introspection. Reasoning, on the other hand, is characterized as slow, deliberate processing. While reasoning, people are aware of progressing through a series of steps to generate a judgment (Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2003).

We propose a modified version of the social intuitionist model. This dual-process 'interactionist' model proposes both intuition and reasoning processes are used, but their use depends on the situation being judged. Specifically, the model proposes that reasoning processes are used when people have no intuitions or when they have conflicting intuitions. However, when one dominant intuition is generated, reasoning processes are not engaged.

Methods

To assess the interactionist model, an experiment was conducted in which 60 participants read moral dilemmas used by Greene et al. (2001) and made judgments about them in two time conditions. In the fast time condition, participants made judgments immediately without reasoning about the dilemma, while in the slow time condition, participants had as much time as needed to make judgments. If reasoning processes are important, then disrupting that process should decrease people's ability to make judgments. Participants were tested on three different types of dilemmas: dilemmas that produced no intuitions; dilemmas that produced conflicting intuitions; and dilemmas that produced one intuition.

Findings

The findings support the interactionist position by suggesting that participants used intuition and reasoning

differently depending on the dilemma being judged. In situations that were predicted to require reasoning (no-intuition dilemmas and strong-conflicting intuition dilemmas), participants did poorly in the fast time condition (Figure 1). However in the dilemmas when reasoning was hypothesized to be causally inert (no-conflicting intuition dilemmas), there was no difference in participants' performances between the time conditions. These findings call into question both strong intuitionist and strong rationalist positions but support the dual-process interactionist model.

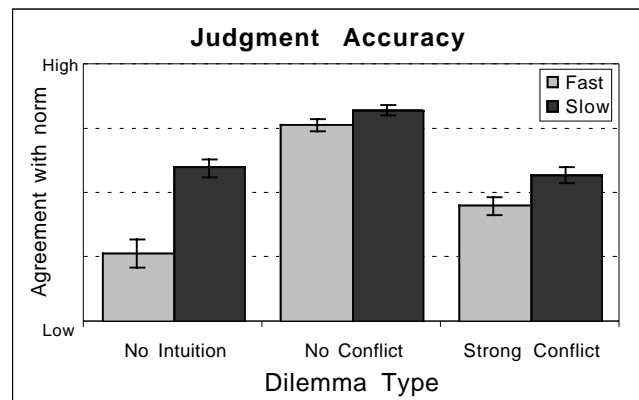


Figure 1: Judgment accuracy based on agreement with the empirically established moral norm.

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