

# New studies show moral judgments quicker, more extreme than practical ones—but also flexible

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Judgments we make with a moral underpinning are made more quickly and are more extreme than those same judgments based on practical considerations, a new set of studies finds.

However, the findings, which appear in the journal *PLOS ONE*, also show that judgments based on morality can be readily shifted and made with other considerations in mind.

"Little work has been done on how attaching [morality](#) to a particular judgment or decision may affect that outcome," explains Jay Van Bavel, an assistant professor in New York University's Department of Psychology and one of the study's co-authors. "Our findings show that we make and see decisions quite differently if they are made with a morality frame. But, despite these differences, there is now evidence that we can shift [judgments](#) so they are based on practical, rather than moral, considerations—and vice versa."

"Our findings suggest that deciding to frame any issue as moral or not may have important consequences," said co-author Ingrid Haas, an assistant professor of [political science](#) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "Once an issue is declared moral, people's judgments about that issue become more extreme, and they are more likely to apply those judgments to others."

"Ultimately, the way that people make decisions is likely to affect their behavior," said co-author Dominic Packer, an assistant professor at Lehigh University. "People may act in ways that violate their [moral values](#) when they make decisions in terms of pragmatic concerns - dollars and cents - rather than in a moral frame. In ongoing research, we are examining factors that can trigger moral forms of decision making, so that people are more likely to behave in line with their values."

The study, which gauged decisions ranging from voting to saving for retirement to dating a co-worker, also included researchers from Ohio State University and the University of Toronto.

Millions of decisions are made every day—which type of car to purchase, which restaurant to dine in, which company to invest in. But sometimes these decisions are made under a morality-based framework (e.g., purchasing a hybrid automobile because of our concerns about the environment) and other times we have practicality in mind (e.g., purchasing a hybrid automobile because of its fuel efficiency)—even though we end up making the same decision.

However, less known are the differences between the nature of judgments based on morals and those driven by a practical, or non-moral, considerations.

To address this question, the researchers conducted three experiments at Ohio State's Social Cognitive Science lab in which they prompted subjects to evaluate a variety of decisions from either moral or non-moral (pragmatic) standpoints. In the first experiment, participants were presented with 104 actions, one at a time, on a desktop computer. Participants made moral evaluations for 52 actions using the keyboard, rating "how morally wrong/right it would be for you to" take a specific action, ranging from 1 (very wrong) to 7 (very right); they also made pragmatic evaluations for the other 52 actions, rating "how personally bad/good you think it would be for you to" take a specific action, ranging from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good). Following each moral and pragmatic judgment, participants made universality judgments for the same action, rating "how many other people should" take a specific action (1 = nobody to 7 = everybody).

Actions to be evaluated morally versus pragmatically were randomly assigned within participants. Each action was equally likely to be evaluated according to moral or pragmatic standards. This ensured that any differences between moral and pragmatic evaluations were not due to the specific actions, but, rather, to differences in moral versus pragmatic evaluation.

Their results showed that morality-based decisions were made significantly faster than non-morality ones and that the decisions with a moral underpinning were more extreme—they rated, on a 1 to 7 scale, moral decisions more extremely than they did pragmatic ones. In addition, subjects were also more likely to make universality judgments under the moral-decision frame than under the pragmatic one—that is, they were more likely to indicate that others should make the same decisions they did for judgments made with a moral underpinning.

But perhaps more significantly, the findings revealed flexibility in what we consider to be moral or non-moral decisions. The study's subjects were randomly assigned moral and non-moral judgments—for instance, some were asked about if it is "morally right" to "flatter a boss with a lie" while others were asked if "how personally good" it would be for them to take such an action. Subjects had different responses to the same decision, depending on whether or not it was framed as a moral or pragmatic decision, indicating that how we view a particular decision (buying organic food, reporting a crime) may be malleable.

**More information:** Van Bavel JJ, Packer DJ, Haas IJ, Cunningham WA (2012) The Importance of Moral Construal: Moral versus Non-Moral Construal Elicits Faster, More Extreme, Universal Evaluations of the Same Actions. PLoS ONE 7(11): e48693. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0048693  
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