

Hot Utilitarianism and Cold Deontology: Response Patterns to a Set of Moral Dilemmas Containing Sacrificial and “Real-World” Utilitarian Items

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Research on moral judgment with sacrificial dilemmas asks participants to judge the action of sacrificing one stranger in order to save several others. A wealth of papers reported increased utilitarian responses (UR) in participants with either clinical or subclinical deficits in pro-social emotions. On this basis, some researchers have suggested that the use of sacrificial moral dilemmas in moral judgment research is inadequate to evoke utilitarian moral concerns.

In a recent set of studies, Kahane and colleagues reported statistical correlations between variables of interest. They found that primary psychopathy (PP) scores correlate positively with UR to sacrificial dilemmas and negatively with “real-world” measures of utilitarian judgment, where a greater good requires altruistic sacrifices on the part of the agent (in “sacrificial” dilemmas, the agent sacrifices a stranger instead). But they found that participants who responded positively to sacrificial dilemmas were neither more nor less likely to make sacrifices in behalf of strangers. This latter result suggests that participants giving URs to sacrificial dilemmas are a mixed bunch. Some of them could also be utilitarians when the requirement is to sacrifice something dear to them.

In order to discriminate between different types of ‘utilitarian’ participants, we investigated the patterns of responses in a sample of students (N=590) to dilemmas of both types: in some items the UR requires to sacrifice a stranger, while in others it requires a personal sacrifice (not life, though). Results show that some participants who only approve to sacrifice a stranger when a large number of people are saved also approve of making a personal sacrifice for strangers. Empathic concern and primary psychopathy self-report scores from that group reveal stronger moral concerns than those revealed in consistent non-utilitarian participants. Consequently, at least some URs to sacrificial dilemmas do express moral concerns.

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