

Extreme Time-Pressure Reveals Utilitarian Intuitions in Sacrificial Dilemmas

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The mainstream version of the dual-process model of moral cognition claims that utilitarian responses to sacrificial moral dilemmas are the outputs of controlled cognitive processes, while deontological responses are automatic and intuitive. This version predicts that interfering with cognitive resources should elicit more intuitive-deontological responses. However, attempts to experimentally confirm this prediction have been inconclusive. Some experiments partially confirm the prediction (Suter & Hertwig 2011; Tremoliere & Bonnefon 2014), but others suggest that utilitarian responses are slightly favored in the time-pressure condition (Gurcay & Baron 2017; Tinghög et al. 2016). I present a sequence of four studies recruiting participants online (at prolific.ac) with the same background design (total N = 2261) implementing extreme time-pressure (Capraro et Cococcioni 2016). They consistently throw data suggesting that time-pressure increases utilitarian responses. The effect is small, but the trend is consistent. When confronted with sacrificial dilemmas, our samples slightly favor utilitarian responses under time pressure.

These results suggest that in the four investigated samples, intuitive responses are predominantly utilitarian. We do not take these results to suggest that deontological responses are never intuitive. Rather, given the small effect size of utilitarian predominance under time-pressure, it seems more plausible to assume that sacrificial dilemmas trigger both utilitarian and deontological intuitions, and that deliberate reflection is an attempt to resolve the conflict between them. Models of moral cognition should be prepared to include both deontological and utilitarian intuitions as part of the basic structure of moral processing.

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