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Whose Mind Matters More: The moral agent or the artist? The role of intent in ethics and aesthetics

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Abstract

The current study directly investigates the similarities and differences in theory of mind for moral judgment versus aesthetic evaluation. We target the role of intent, the mind of the moral agent or the artist, i.e. whether the moral act or work of art was intentional or accidental, for objective judgments (e.g., quality) versus subjective judgments (e.g., preference). We show that (1) intent matters more for objective versus subjective judgments, in ethics and aesthetics, and (2) overall, intent matters more for moral judgments than aesthetic evaluations. These findings suggest that an objective-subjective dimension may similarly describe judgments in both ethics and aesthetics, and that in general we may be more influenced by the mind of the moral agent than by the mind of the artist when evaluating their impact on the world.

Keywords: intent; aesthetic judgment; moral judgment; social cognition; theory of mind

Mental states matter across a number of contexts, including moral judgment (Borg, Hynes, Van Horn, Grafton, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006; Young, Cushman, Hauser, & Saxe, 2007; Cushman, 2008; Mikhail, 2007) and artistic evaluation (Gelman & Bloom, 2000; Bloom & Markson, 1998; Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011). People speculate about the harmful or helpful intentions of their social partners, and about an artist's mental state (i.e. what the artist planned and intended) when responding to the art itself (Bloom, 2004; Donald, 2006; Freeman & Adi-Japha, 2008; Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011). Here, we provide a direct comparison of the role of mental states in people's intuitive "subjective" versus "objective" judgments of moral actions versus works of art.

Recent research suggests that, for art, mental states may matter differently depending on whether people are instructed to provide an "objective" evaluation (e.g., of the quality of the art) or a "subjective" evaluation (e.g., personal preference) (Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011). In particular, subjective judgments were based more on the use of "*preferred* colors", while objective judgments were explained by appeal to "the *purposeful* use of space" and "the *intentionality* of line". Furthermore, objective but not subjective judgments were sensitive to information about the artist's identity (e.g., a young child, a chimpanzee, or a professional artist). Finally, participants often reported "liking" an image while simultaneously judging it to be objectively "bad art". The current study directly investigates the role of intent (i.e. whether a work of art was created intentionally or accidentally) for objective and subjective aesthetic judgments.

A parallel body of work suggests that moral judgments depend critically on mental state inferences: people assign more blame for intentional versus accidental harms and more praise for intentionally versus accidentally helpful actions (Cushman, 2008; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003; Young, Scholz, & Saxe, in press). Little is known, however, about the possible distinction between subjective and objective moral judgments, or the impact of intent on subjective versus objective judgments. Recent research has revealed individual differences in moral objectivism versus subjectivism; some people tend to be moral objectivists, taking ethical beliefs to express factual truths, while others tend to be moral subjectivists, treating fact and value as independent (Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003). Key questions remain: In the moral domain, is there a reliable cognitive division between subjective and objective judgments? Can we "like" a person whom we judge to be morally inferior, just as we can enjoy an image that we won't count as "good" art? Specifically, are subjective versus objective judgments governed by distinct cognitive rules (e.g., intentionality)?

The current study investigates both the distinction between subjective versus objective judgments for the domains of art and morality, in addition to the role of intent for both kinds of judgments in both domains. We present two experiments that show that (1) intent matters more for objective versus subjective judgments of both moral actions and works of art, and (2) overall, intent matters more for moral judgments than aesthetic evaluations.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 investigated whether (1) intent matters more for objective versus subjective judgments of works of art and morally relevant actions (e.g., harmful and helpful actions), and (2) intent matters more for moral judgments versus aesthetic evaluations.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 31 undergraduate psychology majors at Boston College, who participated for course credit (11 males, 20 females, ages 17-27 years, M =19.4).

Materials and Procedure

Presentation of art and moral tasks was counterbalanced across participants.

Art: Stimuli consisted of four non-representational abstract[1] images created by professional artists whose work we selected from art history textbooks (e.g. Hans Hoffman, Helen Frankenthaler). Images were presented one by one on a laptop; images were equated in size and resolution, to the extent that it was possible to do without distortion. Images were given black borders with no frame visible; signatures of the professional artists were removed using Adobe Photoshop.

A brief narrative accompanied each image, presented directly above it, indicating how the image was created and by whom. Narratives were constructed to manipulate the process by which the image was created: accidentally or intentionally. Word count was matched across conditions. Images were seen as accidental or intentional an equal number of times, across participants (Figure 1).

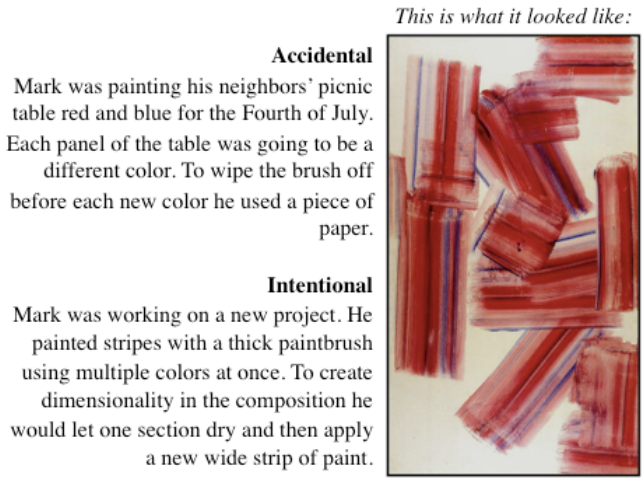


Figure 1. Sample Art Image, with narratives.

Following the presentation of each image and associated story, participants were asked to make two different kinds of judgments: (1) Subjective: "How much do you like this image at this moment?"; (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Much); (2) Objective: "Is this a good work of art?"; (1 = No, absolutely not, 7 = Yes, absolutely).

Morality: Sixteen moral scenarios were constructed to manipulate the agent's intent: whether the agent acted accidentally or intentionally. Scenarios included eight positive stories, describing helpful actions, and eight negative stories, describing harmful actions. There were two versions of each story: accidental or intentional (See Figure 2). Word count was matched across conditions.

[1] Non-representational abstract art is defined as having no figurative or objective representational qualities.

Accidental You and your friend go into the city for the day to enjoy the summer weather and catch up with each other. After a few hours you both decide to stop and get something to eat, and you see an ice cream store across the street. After your friend orders and pays for hers, you find out it's "buy one get one free" day. So you don't end up paying for your ice cream.	**Accidental** Your neighbor comes over for the afternoon. She admires a piece of original glasswork that is very close to your heart. After she leaves, you notice that the glasswork is gone. A few days later your neighbor calls you to say she found the piece in her purse – it fell in by accident – she is very embarrassed. You take the piece back and return it to its rightful position on your mantle.
Intentional You and your friend go into the city for the day to enjoy the summer weather and catch up with each other. After a few hours you both decide to stop and get something to eat, and you see an ice cream store across the street. After your friend orders, she says "Why don't you order yours too, this is my treat", So you don't end up paying for your ice cream.	**Intentional** Your neighbor comes over for the afternoon. She admires a piece of original glasswork that is very close to your heart. After she leaves, you notice that the glasswork is gone. A few days later you go over to your neighbor's house. You notice your missing piece of original work on her kitchen counter. You take the piece back and return it to its rightful position on your mantle.

Figure 2. Sample Moral Scenarios. Positive moral stories on left, negative moral stories on right.

Following the presentation of each story, participants were asked to make two different kinds of judgments: (1) Subjective: "How much do you like your [cousin, friend, neighbor, colleague, co-worker, sister, classmate] at this moment? (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Much); (2) Objective: "Is your [cousin, friend, neighbor, colleague, co-worker, sister, classmate] a good person?" (1 = No, absolutely not, 7 = Yes, absolutely).

To ensure that the negative and positive moral stories were matched in outcome severity, we asked a separate group of participants: (1) Is this a big deal to you? (1 = Not a big deal, 7 = A very big deal), and (2) Objectively speaking, is this event significant? (1= Not at all, 7 = Very much). Participants did not distinguish between positive and negative moral stories in terms of severity (question 1: $t(3) = -.375$, $p = .73$; question 2; $t(3) = .176$, $p = .87$).

Intentional-Accidental (IA) Difference Scores for Analyses: To assess the role of intent, that is, the difference between intentional versus accidental actions, across both positive and negative moral scenarios and art images, we calculated critical IA difference scores: Judgment of Intentional act or image minus Judgment of Accidental act or image. Absolute values of differences scores were used in analyses below where specified (e.g., when comparing across judgments of positive and negative actions). IA difference scores therefore reflect the extent to which the dimension of intent makes a difference.

Results

Art

Paired sample *t*-tests of aesthetic judgment revealed a difference between objective judgments of accidentally ($M = 3.7$) versus intentionally made images ($M = 4.5$); $t(30) =$

3.18, $p < .03$); however, there was no difference in subjective judgments of accidentally ($M = 4.1$) versus intentionally made images ($M = 4.4$; $t(30) = 1.12$, $p = .29$). A Intent x Judgment (dependent variable) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 30) = 6.12$, MSE = 2.33, $p < .019$). Intent mattered more for objective than subjective artistic judgments.

In addition, subjective judgments of accidentally made images ($M = 4.1$) were higher than objective judgments of accidentally made images ($M = 3.69$; $t(30) = 2.4$, $p < .02$), consistent with prior work showing that people can like images that aren't intentionally made but judge them as being of objectively lower quality (Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011).

Morality

We conducted a series of paired sample *t*-tests using IA difference scores (absolute values). Intent mattered more for objective judgments than subjective judgments, for both positive moral stories ($t(30) = -3.05$, $p < .005$) and negative moral stories ($t(30) = 3.42$, $p < .002$).

Art versus Morality

We conducted a 2x2 Domain (art vs. morality) x Judgment (subjective vs. objective) ANOVA of IA difference scores (absolute values) to determine whether intent mattered more for moral judgments versus aesthetic judgments, overall. First, this analysis revealed a main effect of Judgment ($F(1, 30) = 7.59$, MSE = 4.84, $p < .010$). That is, Intent mattered more for objective ($M = 1.63$) versus subjective judgments ($M = 1.23$), replicating the patterns observed above in the separate analyses of Art and Morality.

Second, as predicted, we found a main effect of Domain ($F(1, 30) = 15.45$, MSE = 14.22, $p < .001$). That is, Intent mattered more for judgments of moral actions ($M = 1.77$) than for judgments of artistic images ($M = 1.09$). Lastly, Domain interacted with Judgment, ($F(1, 30) = 7.96$, MSE = 2.19, $p < .008$). That is, there was a greater disparity between subjective and objective ratings within the moral domain ($M_{subjective} = 1.44$, $M_{objective} = 2.10$) than in the art domain ($M_{subjective} = 1.03$, $M_{objective} = 1.16$).

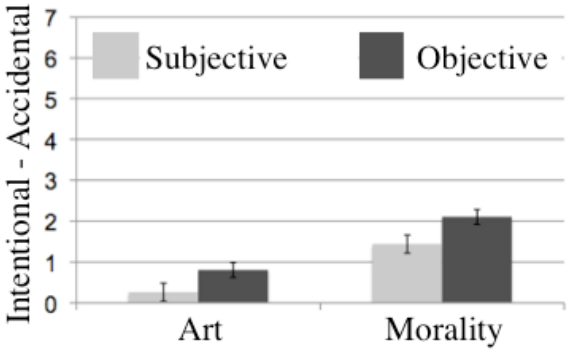


Figure 3. The role of intent in subjective and objective aesthetic and moral judgments.

IA Difference scores (judgment of intentional act / art minus judgment of accidental act / art) for subjective versus objective judgments, for art and morality (*y-axis*).

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 replicates and extends Experiment 1 by including new images of "bad" art, in addition to the original images of "good" art used in Experiment 1.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 34 new undergraduate psychology majors at Boston College who participated for course credit (13 males, 21 females, ages, 18-21 years, $M = 19.1$).

Materials and procedure

Art: Materials and procedure were identical to those outlined in Experiment 1, with the following exceptions. Stimuli consisted of the same four "good" art images from Experiment 1, and four new "bad" art images. "Bad" art images were selected from websites displaying art by children under the age of 3 years. The "bad" art resembled scribbles and random marks (Figure 4). As in Experiment 1, each image was accompanied by a brief narrative, indicating whether the image was created intentionally or accidentally. As expected, a paired sample *t*-test revealed that good art ($M = 4.2$) was judged better than bad art ($M = 1.29$) ($t(33) = 11.285$, $p = < .001$) (collapsing across both kinds of judgments).

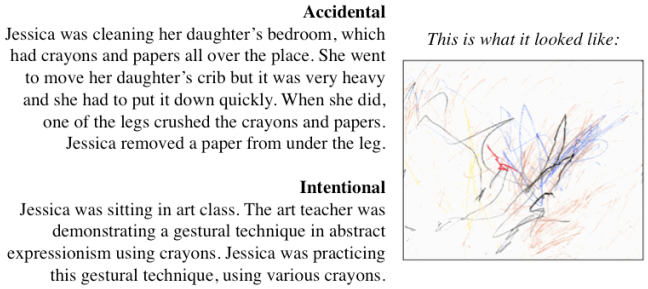


Figure 4. Sample "Bad" Art Image, with narratives.

Morality: Materials and procedure were identical to those outlined in Experiment 1.

Results

Art

As predicted, paired sample *t*-tests using IA difference scores (absolute values) revealed that intent mattered more for objective judgments than subjective judgments, for good art ($t(33) = 2.989$, $p < .005$) and for bad art ($t(33) = 3.442$, $p < .002$). That is, when responding to good art and bad art,

participants subjectively *liked* accidentally made art (good art: $M = 4.1$; bad art: $M = 2.3$) but rated it as *less good* objectively (good art: $M = 3.9$; bad art: $M = 1.8$). However, we found no difference between subjective versus objective judgments of intentionally made art (good art subjective, $M = 4.1$; objective, $M = 4.3$; bad art subjective, $M = 2.3$; objective, $M = 2.2$).

Morality

We conducted a series of paired sample *t*-tests using IA difference scores (absolute values). As in Experiment 1, intent mattered more for objective than subjective judgments, for both positive moral stories ($t(33) = -3.45$, $p < .002$) and negative moral stories ($t(33) = -2.035$, $p < .05$).

Art versus Morality

We conducted a 2x2x2 Domain (art vs. morality) x Judgment (subjective vs. objective) x Valence (positive/good vs. negative/bad) ANOVA of IA difference scores (absolute values) to determine whether intent mattered more for moral judgments versus aesthetic judgments. We replicated findings in Experiment 1. We found a main effect of Judgment ($F(1, 33) = 10.85$, MSE = 7.28, $p < .001$): Intent mattered more for objective judgments ($M = 1.40$) than for subjective judgments ($M = 1.077$). We found a main effect of Domain ($F(1, 33) = 36.24$, MSE = 32.141, $p < .001$). Intent mattered more for judgments in the moral domain ($M = 1.58$) than for judgments in the art domain ($M = .89$). We found a main effect of Valence ($F(1, 33) = 32.28$, MSE = 22.08, $p < .001$). Intent mattered more for negative images and stories ($M = 1.52$) than for positive images and stories ($M = .95$).

In addition, Domain interacted with Valence ($F(1, 33) = 49.62$, MSE = 61.65, $p < .001$): there was a greater difference between responses to negative stories ($M = 2.34$) vs. positive stories ($M = .82$) within the moral domain, than between responses to bad ($M = .7$) vs. good art ($M = 1.08$). Lastly, Domain interacted with Judgment ($F(1, 33) = 4.10$, MSE = 3.42, $p < .05$): we found a greater difference between subjective ($M = 1.3$) and objective ($M = 1.86$) judgments in the moral versus art domain (subjective: $M = .84$; objective: $M = .94$).

Discussion

The current results provide support for our key predictions. First, intent matters more for objective than subjective judgments not only of works of art (Cf. Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011) but also of moral actions. Second, intent matters more for judgments of moral actions than judgments of works of art. These results reveal similarities and differences in the cognitive processes that support our judgments for ethics and aesthetics. At the broadest level, people consider the mental states of both moral agents and artists when understanding and appreciating their actions. However, as we discuss below, these results also offer an account of how moral and aesthetic judgments diverge.

Recent research has targeted similar questions separately for the psychology of morality and the psychology of art. Structural models of aesthetic appreciation have asked whether aesthetic evaluations are affected primarily by automatic, unconscious, and emotionally driven processes, or evaluative, principled, and controlled processes (Hagtvedt, Hagtvedt, & Patrick, 2008; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004). In parallel, work in moral psychology and neuroscience has investigated the extent to which "reason" or "emotion" dominates human moral judgment (Haidt et al., 2001; Greene et al., 2004; Hauser et al., 2007; Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006). Researchers in both domains have also considered the contribution of culturally mediated versus universal components (Hauser et al., 2007; Haidt et al., 1993; Berylne, 1970; Child, 1965; Eysenck, Götz, Long, Nias, & Ross, 1984; Parsons, 1987).

In keeping with the tensions brought out in this prior literature, the current study reveals a distinction between objective and subjective judgments in the domains of art and morality. Participants weighed intent more heavily for objective than subjective judgments of works of art (Cf. Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011) as well as moral actions. Recent research indicates individual differences in moral judgment styles: some people are, on average, moral objectivists, while others are, on average, moral subjectivists (Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003). Future research should investigate whether moral objectivists assign more moral weight to intent, in general.

Differences between art and morality also emerged. We observed a greater role for intent in moral judgments than aesthetic judgments, when they were objective and subjective. These results suggest that though intent plays a key role in both ethics and aesthetics, people assign more weight to the intent of the moral agent compared to the artist, when evaluating the consequences of their actions. One possible interpretation is that moral judgment, on the whole, is perceived to be more "objective" than aesthetic judgment, even when people are simply evaluating whether they like or dislike a person (which in the current study represented a "subjective" judgment). One can imagine befriending someone with different taste in art, but not in people.

These results may relate to recent research suggesting that intent matters more for certain kinds of moral judgments compared to others (Young & Saxe, in press). In particular, intent matters more for moral judgments of harmful actions (e.g., one person poisons another), compared to moral judgments of "purity violations", which people may find offensive even in the absence of any adverse consequences (e.g., unusual but harmless sexual practices; eating taboo but nutritious foods). The current findings suggest that moral norms against purity violations may reflect people's subjective preferences (e.g., what offends people's sensibilities), to a greater extent than moral norms against harmful actions.

The current work investigates how information about intent informs and influences our moral and aesthetic judgments. Recent work has also shown that evaluative judgments, including, especially judgments of moral blame, crucially influence mental state inferences, including

attributions of intent and knowledge (Knobe, 2005; 2010). Interestingly, convergent research suggests that people may also use the formal properties of an image to reason "backwards" to the intent of the artist (Hawley-Dolan & Winner, 2011). Future work should therefore compare these bi-directional effects for both art and morality, and also compare the impact of subjective versus objective evaluations on mental state inferences.

Mental states fulfil many everyday social functions, not simply moral or artistic evaluation but also reading facial expressions (e.g. Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001; Kaliouby & Robinson, 2005), preparing for an acting role (Goldstein, Wu, & Winner, 2010), and predicting and explaining other people's behavior (e.g., Perner, Aichorn, Kronbichler, Wolfgang, & Laddurner, 2006; Saxe & Powell, 2006). Whether the current approach can be applied to other key domains of social interaction will certainly be worth exploring.

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