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Moral choices: The influence of the “Do not play God” principle

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Abstract

A wide literature demonstrates that people prefer harm caused by omissions over equal or lesser harm caused by actions. This omission bias has been explained referring to several principles, such as causality or responsibility. A convincing research view has been suggested by Sunstein (2005): harmful acts are generally worse than harmful omissions when moral intuitions reflect the “Do not play God” principle: inactions interfere less with the “natural order.” In two preliminary studies, we examine the influence of the “Do not play God” principle on individuals moral preferences, using the switch version of the trolley problem. Study 1 demonstrates that our participants’ justifications for their inaction choice explicitly refer to the intention of not interfering with the “natural order”. Study 2 demonstrates that the presence of stimuli influencing a reduction of protagonist’s decisional autonomy (e.g. an authority) activates the “Do not play God” principle, leading them to prefer inaction.

Keywords: Omission bias; Moral choices; Trolley dilemma; “Do not play God” principle.

Introduction

It’s quite common the intuition that it is worse for a doctor to kill a patient with a deadly disease than let him die by abstaining from any kind of medical intervention. Consequentialist philosophers argue that these cases should be considered equivalently (Singer, 1979). In a number of well-controlled experiments Baron and colleagues have shown instead that people consider harmful acts worse than harmful omissions with otherwise identical, predictable outcomes (i.e., omission bias). For example, Spranca, Minsk and Baron (1991) showed that people find it worse when somebody who wants to harm a person offers this person a food item with an allergenic ingredient than when she passively watches the person who does not know about the ingredient taking this item himself. Ritov and Baron (1990) used also vaccination to illustrate the bias: many people consider the risk of harm from vaccination as more serious than the risk from omitting vaccination. This bias seems to affect real vaccination decisions (Asch et al., 1994; Meszaros et al., 1996), and it has been replicated in several situations (e.g. Royzman & Baron, 2002; Baron & Leshner, 2000).

Wroe and Salkovskis (2000) explain this kind of choices arguing that most people regard themselves as more responsible for what they actively do than what they fail to do, and that this omission bias occurs due to perceived differences in causality and differing degrees of responsibility. In particular, according to these authors participants’ judgments about the immorality of commission depend on several factors that ordinarily distinguish omission and commission, such as physical movements in commission.

Sunstein (2005) suggests instead that harmful acts are generally worse than harmful omissions when individuals’ moral intuitions reflect an overgeneralization of the “Do not play God” principle: omissions or inactions interfere less with the “natural order.” Omission generally carries less negative moral weight than commission, intervening less in individual’s destiny.

Let’s go back to the doctor who decides to let a patient die by refraining from any kind of medical intervention. According to the common sense, this case is considered less morally negative than the case in which the same doctor gives the patient a medication that quickly kills him. But the former case (to suspend any medical treatment, i.e. the omission) does not imply less responsibility or physical movements than the second decision (to give a deadly medication, i.e. the commission): the doctor could ask to move the patient from the emergency room, or could proceed by removing tubes or catheters, or finally by communicating the nurses his instructions and supervising how they follow them. In other words, contrary to Wroe and Salkovskis (2000), the harmful omission could not necessarily imply less responsibility or physical movements than actions. From this point of view there are no differences between action and omission.

So what does differentiate them? According to Sunstein’s hypothesis, the omission choice has less impact on the “natural order” (in the example the patient’s destiny), not violating the “do not play God” principle, and this would make the difference. It’s like people say: nobody can claim the right to decide over the life and death of someone, even if s/he explicitly asks to die. S/he can only follow and adapt to the events.

Moreover, Haidt and Baron (1999) showed that the differences between harmful actions and omissions disappear (i.e. the omission has the same moral weight of

action) with people that are in roles that make them responsible. They have an equal responsibility to prevent harm through both action and omission, like for example a captain of a ship, who is equally responsible for both the acts and omissions that lead to similar harm for the passengers. That is, the higher is the social role, the higher is the decisional autonomy and the right to intervene on the natural order (i.e. responsibility to protect) and thus the less is the weight of the “do not play God” principle.

So far, no empirical studies have investigated whether the “do not play God” principle influences individuals choices when faced with problems like moral dilemmas.

The present study aimed to examine whether individuals tend to prefer harm caused by omissions over equal or lesser harm caused by acts, on the basis of their moral intuition based on the “Do not play God” principle. To this aim, we used the well-known switch version of the trolley problem. In its original form, the problem asks people to suppose that a runaway trolley is headed for five people, who will be killed if the trolley continues on its course. The question is whether one would throw a switch that would move the trolley onto another set of tracks, killing one person rather than five. This moral dilemma requires participants to choose one of two undesirable courses of action (both involving loss of life). The action option requires subjects to act, thereby causing the death of one person (but indirectly saving the lives of others). According to Sunstein’s hypothesis, it allows modification of the “natural order” in the attempt to minimize the number of victims. The omission option involves no action, and the failure to act results in the deaths of five people. But omission does not modify the “natural order” and respects the “Do not play God” principle.

In line to the consequentialist point of view, in this dilemma, people should prefer the action option: it involves a lower number of victims. According to Sunstein, people would prefer the omission option, consistent with the “Do not play God” principle.

To test this hypothesis two different studies were carried out. In the first, we wanted to verify whether subjects preferring inaction would actually tend to justify it by referring to the “Do not play God” principle, while those preferring action would tend to justify it by referring to the consequentialist idea of minimizing suffering and victims. According to Cushman and colleagues (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006), we assume that the principles used in judgments are articulated in justifications. In the second study, we wanted to verify whether the preference for the omissions would enhance with stimuli leading to a reduction of protagonist’s decisional autonomy (e.g. an authority).

When faced with the original trolley problem, most subjects (80-90%) prefer action (see Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Greene, Cushman, Stewart, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2009). In order to avoid this sort of ceiling effect, which could interfere with the results of the second experiment, we used a version of the

problem with a modified proportion of victims, five vs. three instead of the original five vs. one.

In a preliminary study of the first study we tested this modified version with a group of 54 volunteers, undergraduate students from the University of Rome, with a mean age of 20.2 (ranging from 18-32). All participants were given four moral dilemmas (see below) with the new proportion of victims. Each dilemma required participants to indicate which of two courses of action they would take if confronted with such dilemmas in real life (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene et al., 2004). Participants were asked to respond to each dilemma by marking “yes” (action) or “no” (inaction). The total number of inaction choices made by each participant was the dependent variable. With this modified trolley problem, there were about 50% action choices in all dilemmas.

Study 1

In this study we wanted to verify whether subjects preferring inaction would tend to justify it by referring to the “Do not play God” principle (e.g. “*Who am I to decide who lives and who dies?*”), while those preferring action would tend to justify it by referring to the consequentialist attempt to minimize suffering (e.g. “*it’s better that three people die instead of five*”). Four moral dilemmas were shown to a group of participants. For each dilemma participants were asked to justify their choice. Two judges codified all justifications into two categories: deontological and consequentialist.

Method

Participants

Participants were 69 undergraduate and postgraduate students recruited by advertisements at the University of Rome (Italy) (45 females and 24 males). Their ages ranged from 18 to 45 with a mean age of 23.8. All of the participants were thus volunteers and provided informed consent.

Materials and Procedure

After completing a demographic questionnaire, participants received seven brief scenarios comprised of 6–8 sentences each. Four scenarios concerned moral dilemmas, each requiring participants to indicate which of two courses of action they would take if confronted with such dilemmas (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene, et al., 2004). In one (action) alternative, the participant acted, thereby killing three human beings, but saving the lives of five others. In the second (inaction) alternative the participant did not act, and therefore did not kill three human beings. However, in this second alternative, the participant’s failure to act resulted in more deaths (five) than in the first alternative. The other three scenarios required participants to choose between action and inaction. These control scenarios did not involve moral dilemmas. They did not present any victims or harm, but were included as filler items. The order of the seven dilemmas was randomized. Following is an example of the two kinds of dilemmas, moral and control, presented in the study (translated from Italian):

Moral Dilemma

You are near a Ferris wheel. It does not work. Just under the wheel, there are five tourists. Suddenly, the wheel starts turning and soon a cabin will kill them. There is no way to warn them and they cannot escape in any way. The only way to save the five tourists is to pull a lever that can change the rotation of the wheel. Unfortunately, there are three people on the other side that would be killed. Should you pull the lever?

Control dilemma

You have just sent an e-mail order for three books that you need for your studies (they are by your favorite writer), when a colleague suggests that you buy the same books and two more (five books in total) at a discount. The order cancellation procedure requires too much time. Should you proceed with the cancellation procedure?

The text of all seven scenarios is available on the web at www.apc.it. After having responded to each scenario by marking “yes” (action) or “no” (inaction), participants were asked to justify their choice in their own words. Of 276 justifications, 18 were removed from the analyses because participants provided a nonsensical response or a judgment that made it clear they had misunderstood a scenario. Two colleagues of the authors who were blind to the hypotheses being tested coded a total of 258 justifications. Justifications were coded into two exclusive categories:

Deontological: justification refers to the importance of not substituting God, not interfering with a destiny already determined, or not taking the responsibility of deciding for others.

Consequentialist: justification refers to the importance of saving the greatest number of lives.

Results

According to our hypotheses, we found that almost all participants preferring inaction (96%) justified it by referring to the “Do not play God” principle (e.g. “*I cannot decide who lives and who dies*”) ($\chi^2 (1, N = 69) = 213.6; p < 0.001$), while most of those preferring action (86%) justified it by referring to the importance of minimizing suffering (e.g. “*it’s better that three people die instead of five*”) ($\chi^2 (1, N = 69) = 133.9$, see Table 1).

Table 1. Proportions (and frequencies) of justifications given by participants for their action/inaction choices.

Justification	Choice	
	Action	Inaction
Deontological	14 (38)	96 (242)
Consequentialist	86 (226)	4 (10)

Table 2 provides the overall agreement between coders for the two categories of justifications, along with Cohen’s kappa, a statistic of interobserver reliability for which values between .60 and .70 are considered fair, from .70 to .75 are considered good, and above .75 are considered excellent (Fleiss, 1981). The overall agreement for the four moral dilemmas, .83, was quite high.

Table 2. Agreement between coders for each moral dilemma for the two categories of justifications, along with Cohen’s kappa.

Dilemma	Inter-Observer Reliability
	kappa
1	.84
2	.71
3	.89
4	.90

Overall, these results show that participants tend to prefer omission in order to respect the moral principle of “Do not play God.”

Study 2

With the first study we have demonstrated that individual preferences for omissions in moral dilemmas are actually influenced by the moral goal of respecting the “Do not play God” principle. But these results raise the question whether participants’ justifications of their moral choice reflect their actual reasons for deciding. It is possible that participants simply report a justification that corresponds to their decision, but it is not clear whether the justification preceded and causally influenced their decision (e.g. Haidt, 2001), although Cushman and colleagues (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006) state that the principles used in judgments are well articulated and reflected in justifications. For these reasons a second study is carried out.

With this second experiment we wanted to further verify whether the preference for the omissions in problems like the trolley dilemma is influenced by the goal of respecting the “natural order”, activated by a restriction of one’s decisional autonomy.

To this aim, we compared three versions of the trolley dilemma to isolate the effects of 1.authority presence, and 2.closeness, on moral judgments concerning harmful actions. The original version of the trolley dilemma was used as control condition (neutral problem, cf. study 1). We expected that in the “authority” problem participants would choose the inaction options more than participants in the “closeness” and neutral problems. The presence of an authority would indeed limit the decisional autonomy of the protagonist, leading participants to prefer the omission.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 105 undergraduate and postgraduate students recruited by advertisements at the University of Rome (Italy) (70 females and 35 males). Their ages ranged from 18 to 51 with a mean age of 24.5. All of the participants were thus volunteers and provided informed consent.

Materials, and procedure

Subjects responded to one of three versions of the trolley dilemma, in a between-subject design. In each condition, participants received the seven scenarios used in the earlier

experiment (4 moral dilemmas, 3 control dilemmas), in which information about the presence of the “authority” and the “closeness” of the protagonist to the victims were systematically varied. In the “authority” condition ($n=45$), the moral scenarios presented an authority close to the protagonist (e.g. a policeman, a judge). In the closeness condition ($n=30$), in all the moral scenarios the protagonist was close to the potential victims. In the neutral condition ($n=30$), participants were given the original version of the trolley dilemmas.

In each condition, the order of the seven dilemmas was randomized. Following is an example of the two kinds of moral dilemmas, “authority” and “closeness”, presented in the study (translated from Italian). Each version started with the same stem but ends differently:

Start of the dilemma:

You are near a Ferris wheel. It does not work. Just under the wheel, there are five tourists. Suddenly, the wheel starts turning and soon a cabin will kill them. There is no way to warn them and they cannot escape in any way. The only way to save the five tourists is to pull a lever that can change the rotation of the wheel. Unfortunately, there are three people on the other side that would be killed.

The “authority” script continues as follows:

You are in the cabin and close to the lever. You know that the cabin is under video surveillance and that cameras are connected to the police and the security service. Should you pull the lever?

The “closeness” script continues as follows:

You are in the cabin very next to the five tourists and you can see clearly their faces from there. Should you pull the lever?

The text of all seven scenarios is available on the web at www.apc.it. In all conditions, as in the earlier study, each dilemma required participants to indicate which of two courses of action they would take if confronted with such dilemmas (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene, et al., 2004). The total number of inaction choices made by each participant was the dependent variable.

Results

As expected, the proportion of scenarios for which participants chose inaction was significantly greater in the “authority” condition ($F(2,102) = 9.55, p < 0.001, M = 2.47, SD = 1.15$), than in the other two experimental conditions (“closeness”: $M = 1.46, SD = 1.3, t(73) = 3.48, p < .002$; neutral: $M = 1.43; SD = 1.88, t(73) = 3.9, p < .001$). No differences were found between the “closeness” and neutral conditions, $t(58) = 0.1, n.s.$

This result demonstrates that participants’ preferences for the inaction depend on the goal of reducing or limiting one’s own decisional autonomy, according to the not play God moral principle.

General Discussion

The two studies present evidence that moral judgments of harmful acts and omissions are affected by the degree of their interference with the “natural order”. According to Sunstein (2005), harmful acts are worse than harmful

omissions because individuals’ moral intuitions reflect an overgeneralization of the “Do not play God” principle. In this perspective, omissions or inactions interfere less with the “natural order.” Omission generally carries less negative moral weight than commission, since it interferes less with individual’s destiny.

In particular, in two studies we demonstrated that the “Do not play God” principle influences individuals’ moral preferences when faced with problems like the trolley dilemma, traditionally used in moral psychology to study how people reason when choosing between two morally unacceptable courses of action. In particular, in the first study we demonstrated that participants preferring omission justified this choice according to the “Do not play God” deontological principle. The second experiment demonstrated that the presence of an “authority” lead people to limit their decisional autonomy, thus preferring the inaction, that is what interferes less with a given order (“do not play God” principle).

Our findings may contribute to the explanation of the omission bias, which is defined as the tendency to judge harmful actions as worse or as less moral than equally harmful omissions (inactions) (e.g. Baron & Ritov, 2004; Spranca, Minsk, & Baron, 2003).

Several experiments have found that across a variety of moral dilemmas, subjects’ judgments about the permissibility of harming an individual align with some principles, which usually distinguish between action and inaction, such as harm intended as the means to an end is worse than harm foreseen as the side effect of a pursuit, or that harm involving physical contact with the victim is worse than harm involving no physical contact.

Sunstein (2005) suggests that harmful acts are generally worse than harmful omissions because according to the “Do not play God” principle, they interfere less with the “natural order.” Overall, results from our two preliminary experiments confirm this hypothesis. In Study 1, our participants’ justifications for their inaction explicitly refer to the intention of not interfering with destiny. In Study 2, our participants are affected in their moral choice by the presence of an authority, which induce them to choose the inaction, the option that does not modify “the natural order”.

The omission bias may thus be better considered as a part of a deontological theory that people tend to approve (Sinnott-Armstrong, Young & Cushman, 2010; Waldmann, Nagel, & Wiegmann, 2012), and actively influences both commonsense morality and law, including constitutional law, by treating harmful omissions as morally unproblematic or categorically different from harmful actions (see for example the current debate on euthanasia).

The current studies are to be considered as preliminary studies on this topic. They also present several limitations that call for further investigation. First, participants of both our studies were predominantly female, young, and influenced by Catholic culture. It is possible that our results may not generalize to a broader population. Thus, they may not work well for others that differ in culture and religion.

Further experiments could test whether our results will be replicated for individuals of different in cultures and religions.

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