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Reversing the side-effect effect: the 'Rational Scientist' explanation

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Abstract: Theory of mind, our intuitive understanding of the mind, is often conceptualized as analogous to a scientific theory with the function of predicting and explaining behavior. However, the so-called "side-effect effect" illustrates that moral considerations influence theory of mind judgments, and has been taken as evidence that theory of mind is fundamentally evaluative. We present new evidence for an alternative, the "rational scientist" view, which holds that moral evaluations inform ToM judgments, but that this relationship arises because behavior that conforms to norms (moral or otherwise) is less informative about underlying mental states than is behavior that violates norms. In two new experiments we demonstrate that different norms (moral or conventional) lead to different intentional descriptions of the same actions, and that the effect can be eliminated when norms are reversed. This view preserves the traditional understanding of ToM, but also suggests the importance of normative considerations in social cognition.