

Introduction

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Abstract

Moral dumbfounding occurs when people defend a moral judgment even though they cannot provide a reason in support of this judgment. It manifests as an admission of not having reasons, or the use of unsupported declarations (“it’s just wrong”) or tautological reasons (“because it’s incest”) as justifications for a judgment. We test a dual-processes explanation of moral dumbfounding, where moral dumbfounding is an example of conflict between a habitual response (making a judgment) and a response that results from deliberation (providing a reason for the judgment). The dumbfounding paradigm involves three possible responses: (a) providing reasons for a judgment (deliberative/controlled process); (b) accepting the counter-arguments and rating the behaviour as “not wrong” (habitual/automatic process); (c) a dumbfounded response (habitual/automatic process). Cognitive load manipulations have been shown to inhibit deliberative responding. We present 6 studies in which dumbfounded responding was investigated under cognitive load manipulations. We hypothesized that rates of providing reasons would be reduced under cognitive load. The identification of reasons was inhibited in Studies 1, 2, 3, and 6, but not in Studies 4 or 5. The results provide some evidence for a dual-process explanation of moral dumbfounding. We found some evidence that dumbfounded responding may be linked with Need for Cognition.

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Moral dumbfounding occurs Moral dumbfounding occurs when people defend a moral judgment even though they cannot provide a reason in support of this judgment (Haidt et al., 2000; Haidt, 2001; see also McHugh, et al., 2017, 2020). It has traditionally been seen as evidence for intuitionist and dual-process theories of moral judgment (e.g., Crockett, 2013; Cushman, 2013; Cushman, Young, & Greene, 2010; Greene, 2008; Haidt, 2001; Prinz, 2005; though this narrative has been contested, e.g., Guglielmo, 2018; Royzman, Kim, & Leeman, 2015). Despite the influence of moral dumbfounding on the morality literature, the phenomenon is not well understood. In a pre-registered study we test one prediction of a conflict in dual-processes explanation of moral dumbfounding. By applying a cognitive load manipulation within a moral dumbfounding task we show that for three of the four moral scenarios used, dumbfounded responses are more likely when participants are engaged in a secondary task.

Moral Dumbfounding: A Dual-Process Perspective

Drawing on dual-process theories of moral judgment (e.g., Greene, 2008; Bago & De Neys, 2019; Brand, 2016; Cushman, 2013), we hypothesize that moral dumbfounding occurs as a result of a conflict in dual-processes (Bonner & Newell, 2010; De Neys, 2012; De Neys & Glumicic, 2008; Evans, 2007; see also De Neys & Pennycook, 2019). Dual-Process conflict occurs when a habitual/intuitive response is different from a response that results from deliberation. Examples of such conflicts include, base rate neglect problems (Bonner & Newell, 2010; De Neys, 2012; De Neys & Glumicic, 2008; Evans, 2007), the conjunction fallacy (De Neys, 2012; Tversky & Kahneman, 1983), and perhaps

most relevant to the current discussion, a seemingly irrational but persistent unwillingness to contact various symbolically “contaminated” objects, despite assurances these items are sanitary (e.g., items believed to have had prior contact with: an AIDS victim, someone who had been in a car accident, or a murderer, see Rozin, Markwith, & McCauley, 1994, p. @lerner_when_1999). This final example closely resembles the non-moral tasks described in the original unpublished dumbfounding manuscript (Haidt et al., 2000).

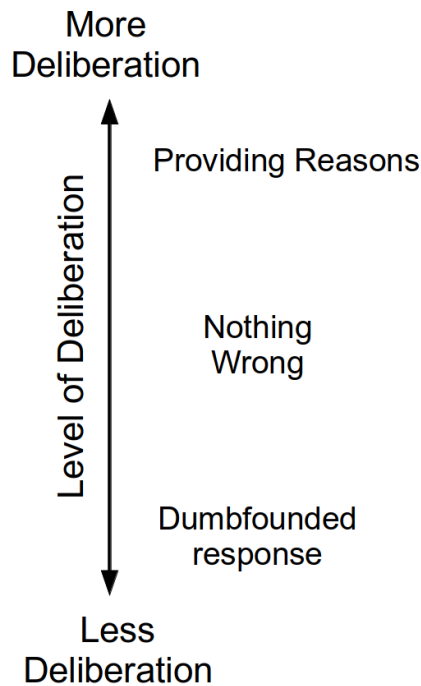


Figure 1

hypothesized relationship between responses in the dumbfounding paradigm and level of deliberation

To understand moral dumbfounding as a conflict in dual-processes, we classified the responses in the dumbfounding paradigm as involving more or less deliberation. There are typically three responses in the dumbfounding paradigm: (1) the providing of reasons (reason); (2) accepting the counter-arguments and rating the behavior as “not wrong” (nothing wrong); or (3) a dumbfounded response (dumbfounding). Drawing on existing theorizing (e.g., Cushman, 2013; Haidt, 2001; McHugh et al., 2021) we hypothesize that

making a judgment involves an intuitive/habitual response, involving relatively little deliberation, while providing reasons for judgment requires more deliberation (a deliberative response). We propose that dumbfounding occurs when the habitual response (the judgment) is in conflict with the deliberative response (providing reasons for the judgment). The dumbfounding paradigm additionally involves a third response, where participants may accept the counter-arguments and change their judgment, we hypothesize that this response involves more deliberation than a dumbfounded response but less deliberation than providing reasons. The hypothesized relative amounts of deliberation for each response are outlined in Figure 1.

Influences on Moral Dumbfounding

A core prediction of explaining dumbfounding as conflict in dual-processes is that under specific manipulations, responses in the moral dumbfounding paradigm should vary in predictable ways. Cognitive load has been shown to inhibit deliberative responding (e.g., De Neys, 2006; Evans & Curtis-Holmes, 2005; Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Schmidt, 2016). Above, we identified providing reasons as involving more deliberation than alternative responses in the dumbfounding paradigm. This implies that cognitive load should inhibit the identification of reasons for a judgment, leading to an increase in dumbfounded responding or an increase in accepting the counter-arguments and revising the judgment made.

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