

How Quick Decisions Illuminate Moral Character

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Abstract

It has been suggested that people attend to others' actions in the service of forming impressions of their underlying dispositions. If so, it follows that in considering others' morally relevant actions, social perceivers should be responsive to accompanying cues that help illuminate actors' underlying moral character. This article examines one relevant cue that can characterize any decision process: the speed with which the decision is made. Two experiments show that actors who make an immoral decision quickly (vs. slowly) are evaluated more negatively. In contrast, actors who arrive at a moral decision quickly (vs. slowly) receive particularly positive moral character evaluations. Quick decisions carry this signal value because they are assumed to reflect certainty in the decision (Experiments 1 and 2), which in turn signals that more unambiguous motives drove the behavior (Experiment 2), which in turn explains the more polarized moral character evaluations. Implications for moral psychology and the law are discussed.

Keywords

decision speed, motives, moral judgment, moral character, certainty

Most research on the psychology of moral judgment has focused on the moral evaluation of acts—for example, why some acts are deemed permissible or impermissible (Gilligan, 1982; Greene, 2009; Kohlberg, 1969). For instance, acts that bring about harm to innocent others or violate prescriptive rules of fairness are generally seen as moral violations (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Although moral evaluations are clearly responsive to actions, people attend to others' behavior in the service of forming impressions of actors' dispositions (Funder, 2004). For example, Gilbert (1989) showed that when people observe an action, they automatically characterize the act in trait-relevant terms and ascribe the trait to the actor in question. But research in moral psychology has suggested that moving from a characterization of an action as moral or immoral to an impression of the agent's moral character is a more nuanced process than one of simply assuming bad or good actions reflect bad or good character, respectively (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011).

Previous research has extensively examined *whether* observers dismiss a moral/immoral action as nondiagnostic of the actor's true moral character because (1) the action is a weak signal of moral character or (2) the action is better explained by situational forces. To the first point, whereas almost all antisocial behaviors are committed by immoral people, prosocial behaviors are more ambiguous (and thus nondiagnostic) signals. After all, even immoral people frequently act prosocially (Reeder & Spores, 1983). In addition, with further thought, people will reinterpret prosocial acts as having stemmed from selfish motives (Critcher & Dunning, 2011). Consistent with these arguments

and findings, immoral acts elicit stronger moral evaluations than do moral acts (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987).

To the second point, attribution researchers have demonstrated that when situational forces offer a sufficient explanation for an observed behavior, the behavior is seen as uninformative of the person's underlying character or dispositions (Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones, Davis, & Gergen, 1961). More recent research in this tradition has focused on signals actors emit that convey whether or not their behavior should be used to judge their moral character—cues that signal that actions are not a product of one's own true, undistorted intentions but are instead situationally coerced. For example, Krull, Seger, and Silvera (2008) found that after a mother suggested her child mow a neighbor's lawn, a child who helped grudgingly was praised less than one who helped willingly. Presumably grudging assistance signaled that the mother's urging, not the child's prosocial disposition, was responsible for the helping. Similarly, Ames and Johar (2009) showed that the emotional expression accompanying a behavior can signal whether the action is congruent with the actor's underlying intentions. An employee who agreed to help his coworker with a time-

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consuming project was judged more positively if he agreed with a friendly smile (thus signaling his prosocial intentions) as opposed to a grimace (thus signaling his decision was not a product of such praiseworthy intentions). If people seem displeased with their own prosocial or antisocial actions, praise or blame is discounted, respectively (see also Fleming & Darley, 1989). As a final example, Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Salovey (2003) showed that when misbehavior appears to be driven by situationally inspired anger, blame is discounted (see also Finkel & Parrott, 2006).

In the present research, we investigate a different kind of cue that may offer insight into a moral agent's motives and character—the speed with which a person makes a moral or immoral choice. Decision speed can characterize any decision-making process, but has perhaps been overlooked since it is not a feature specific to the moral decision itself, nor is it necessarily informative of situational influences (the typical focus of previous research in this tradition). Nonetheless, we believe that decision speed may be morally informative because it provides information to an observer about the certainty with which the decision was made, which provides information about the strength of competing concerns or motives that were present when guiding the decision. If deciding between two courses of action involves something of a tug-of-war between competing moral and immoral motives, the decision will be made quickly if one motive is much stronger than the other, but slowly if the strength of the competing motives is nearly equal. Decision speed thereby offers a glimpse at a target's underlying character as especially, or only somewhat, pristine or corrupt.

In two experiments, we sought to test the hypothesis that when moral agents are deciding between a perceived moral and immoral course of action, the speed with which the agent arrives at the decision will provide insight into his moral character. Specifically, we predicted that a quick decision to act morally or immorally would lead observers to assume an unambiguously pristine or corrupt moral character, respectively. This is because quick decisions should be seen as having been arrived at with greater certainty (Experiments 1 and 2). When one course of action is chosen with greater certainty, this may reflect the lopsided strength of the decision-congruent (vs. the decision-incongruent) motive, which may explain why quick decisions receive more polarized moral character evaluations (Experiment 2). We predicted that slow decisions would be seen as having been made with less certainty, the final output of a decision-making process in which both decision-congruent and decision-incongruent motives were relatively more balanced. This should produce more moderate moral character evaluations.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants. Participants ($N = 119$) were either students at the University of California, Berkeley, or members of the surrounding community.

Procedure. Participants read about both Justin and Nate, two men who each independently came upon two separate cash-filled wallets in the parking lot of a local grocery store. Justin “was able to decide quickly” what to do. Nate “was only able to decide after long and careful deliberation.” Participants assigned to the *moral* condition learned both men “did not steal the money but instead left the wallet with customer service.” Those in the *immoral* condition learned instead that both men “pocketed the money and drove off.”

Immediately following the description of Justin and Nate's actions, we asked participants the following sets of items (all on 1–7 scales):

Quickness. As a manipulation check, participants indicated how quickly (vs. slowly) the decision was made.

Moral character evaluation. The three moral evaluation items had participants assess the agents' underlying moral principles and standards (Justin: $\alpha = .94$; Nate: $\alpha = .78$) by asking whether the agent: “has entirely good (vs. entirely bad) moral principles,” “has good (vs. bad) moral standards,” and “deep down has the moral principles and knowledge to do the right thing.”

Certainty. We included 4 items to assess each actor's perceived decision certainty. Participants indicated “how conflicted [each] felt when making his decision” (reverse-scored), “how many reservations [each] had” (reverse-scored), whether the target “was quite certain in his decision” (vs. had considerable reservations), and “how far [each] was from choosing the alternate course of action.” The items had high internal reliability for both Justin ($\alpha = .89$) and Nate ($\alpha = .81$).

Emotional impulsivity. In order to ensure that decision speed was not simply taken as a proxy for emotional impulsivity (a feature previously shown to affect moral judgments; Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003), we assessed perceptions of the emotionally impulsive nature of the decision with 2 items. Participants indicated to what extent the person remained “calm and emotionally contained” (reverse-scored) and “became upset and acted without thinking.” The items were significantly correlated (Justin: $r = .51, p < .001$; Nate: $r = .33, p < .001$).

Results and Discussion

Confirming the manipulation's success, Justin was seen as having decided more quickly ($M = 6.44, SE = .08$) than Nate ($M = 2.15, SE = .12$), $F(1, 117) = 541.52, p < .001$, regardless of whether he decided to keep or return the wallet, $F(1, 117) = 2.06, p > .15$. Unsurprisingly, we found a main effect of moral decision on the moral character evaluation composite, $F(1, 117) = 127.07, p < .001$, confirming that returning the wallet was an indicator of moral (vs. immoral) character. Unexpectedly, quick Justin was also perceived to be less emotionally impulsive ($M = 2.40, SE = .11$) than slow Nate ($M = 3.79, SE = .12$), $F(1, 117) = 95.26, p < .001$, but the

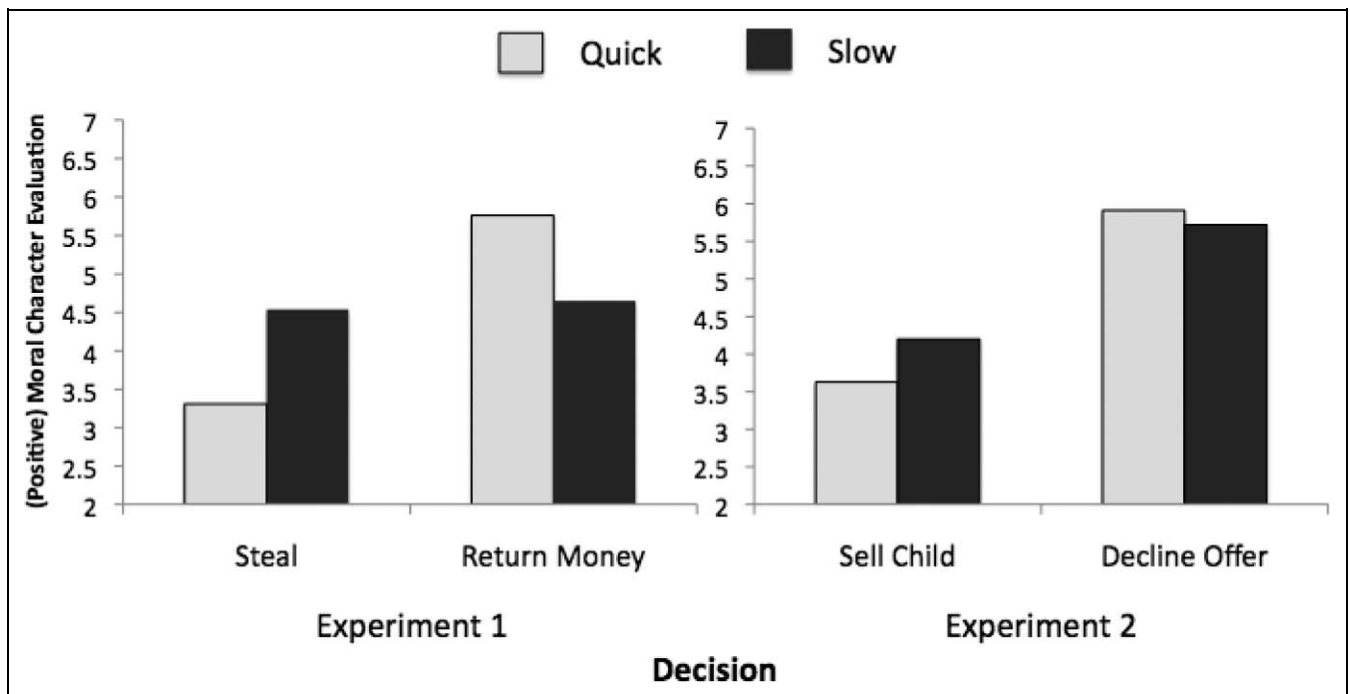


Figure 1. Moral character evaluation by decision and speed for Experiment 1 (left panel) and Experiment 2 (right panel).

differing perceptions of emotional impulsivity had no effect on moral evaluation, $t < 1$.

In order to test our prediction that quick decisions would receive more polarized moral evaluations than slow decisions, we submitted the moral evaluation composite to a two-way 2 (decision) \times 2 (speed) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The Decision \times Speed interaction was significant, $F(1, 117) = 127.07$, $p < .001$. An analysis of the simple effects showed that, as predicted, quick (vs. slow) immoral decisions prompted more negative moral character evaluations, $t(54) = 8.28$, $p < .001$, whereas quick (vs. slow) moral decisions prompted more positive moral character evaluations, $t(63) = 7.71$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1).

We next tested our prediction that decision speed influences moral evaluations because it signals the agent's decision certainty. Consistent with our account, quick Justin was seen as more certain in his decision ($M = 6.17$, $SE = .09$) than slow Nate ($M = 2.33$, $SE = .09$), $F(1, 117) = 706.6$, $p < .001$. Also consistent with our prediction that certainty mediates the effects of decision speed on moral evaluation, the effect of certainty on judgments of character depended on whether the actor stole the wallet or returned it, $\beta = -.25$, $t(113) = 3.77$, $p < .001$. Simple slopes analyses showed that when both men stole the wallet, Justin's greater relative certainty explained why he was seen to have worse moral character, $\beta = -.26$, $t(113) = 3.00$, $p = .003$. Conversely, when both returned the wallet, Justin's greater relative certainty explained why he was seen to have better moral character, $\beta = .24$, $t(113) = 2.39$, $p = .02$. In both simple slopes analyses, the intercept term (i.e., the predicted difference between moral character evaluations of Nate and Justin when one assumes

no differences between them in certainty) did not significantly differ from 0, $ts < 1.06$, $ps > .29$. This suggests that the amplifying property of decision quickness was fully mediated by perceived certainty (Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001)—once we accounted for the difference in perceived certainty between the quick and slow targets, the difference in moral character evaluation disappeared.

Experiment 2

Our second experiment built on Experiment 1 in three ways. First, our manipulations of decision speed in Experiment 1 indicated the actor was or was not "able" to decide quickly. Although use of this word had the benefit of clarifying that the agent himself (and not a situational factor) was responsible for the decision speed, Experiment 2 provided information only about the time taken to make the decision. This enhances external validity, for in a naturalistic context only decision speed would be directly observable. Second, Experiment 1 varied decision speed within subjects. To test the robustness of the effect, Experiment 2 was conducted entirely between subjects. Third, we wanted to understand more precisely why perceived certainty regarding a decision amplified moral evaluations. Specifically, we sought to test our prediction that decision speed, in signaling decision certainty, thereby provides information about the ratio of good versus bad motives within the decision maker. That is, we are not arguing that it is simply seen as more or less appropriate to reach different decisions at different lengths of time. Instead, we suggest that when moral judges assess the goodness of moral agents' character, they are speaking to the balance of praiseworthy to

blameworthy motives they infer the agent holds. Just as a longer game of tug-of-war signals that the two sides are of equal strength, the longer a moral agent takes to decide, the more mixed the agents' motives can be assumed to be. We therefore included measures of perceived motives, to see if decision certainty influenced moral evaluation because it suggested the agent's motives were purely good or bad when decisions were made quickly, but that motives were mixed when the decision took longer (see Malle, 2004).

Method

Participants. Participants ($n = 553$) were undergraduates at the University of California, Berkeley.

Procedure. Participants read about Pamela, who struggled to earn enough to provide for her two children. Pamela worked for Mr. Muir, a wealthy bachelor who took a special interest in Pamela's son Alan, taking him on outings and buying him expensive presents. Although Pamela had no direct evidence that Mr. Muir's intentions were unsavory, his obsession with Alan made Pamela feel suspicious of Muir's true intentions. One day, Mr. Muir approached Pamela with a proposition. He told Pamela that he cared for Alan very much and would like to adopt him. If Pamela agreed, Muir would triple her salary. We assumed that people would find it morally abhorrent to, in effect, sell one's son to a man who might abuse him.

Pamela was described as taking 3 seconds (*quick*) or 3 days (*slow*) to make her decision. We independently varied whether Pamela accepted or rejected Mr. Muir's offer to sell her son. Participants answered the same quickness, moral character evaluation ($\alpha = .83$), certainty ($\alpha = .86$), and emotional impulsivity ($r = .43$) items as in Experiment 2. We added 2 items that assessed Pamela's perceived motives. On scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very strong*), participants rated Pamela's motives to: "get more money" and "protect her children" ($r = -.64$, $p < .001$). We created a difference score to reflect the relative strength of her motive to protect her children.

Results and Discussion

Confirming the success of the between-subjects manipulation, Pamela was seen as making her decision more quickly when she did so in 3 seconds ($M = 6.76$, $SE = .08$) versus 3 days ($M = 2.86$, $SE = .08$), $F(1, 548) = 1,195.04$, $p < .001$, regardless of which decision was made, $F < 1$. A main effect of decision on the moral character evaluation composite confirmed that participants thought it reflected bad moral character to sell one's children to a man who might abuse them, $F(1, 551) = 402.22$, $p < .001$.

Replicating Experiment 1, a two-way ANOVA on the moral character evaluation composite confirmed that the influence of decision speed depended on Pamela's decision, $F(1, 549) = 16.08$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1). When Pamela decided to sell her children, people judged her character more negatively when she decided quickly than when she decided slowly, $t(264.0) = 3.97$, $p < .001$. In contrast, when Pamela

refused Mr. Muir's offer, she was judged (marginally) more positively when she decided quickly than when she decided slowly, $t(262.1) = 1.71$, $p = .09$.

Quick Pamela was seen to be more certain in her decision ($M = 5.55$, $SE = 0.07$) than slow Pamela ($M = 3.43$, $SE = 0.08$), $F(1, 541) = 379.29$, $p < .001$. In contrast to Experiment 1, quick Pamela was not seen as less emotionally impulsive ($M = 3.61$, $SE = 0.09$) than deliberate Pamela ($M = 3.39$, $SE = 0.09$), $F(1, 541) = 2.96$, $p = .09$. All results were unaffected when controlling for emotional impulsivity.

Supporting our mediational account, the influence of perceived certainty on moral character evaluation depended on which choice Pamela made, $\beta = -.28$, $t(542) = 6.90$, $p < .001$. When Pamela sold her child, she was condemned more to the extent she was seen as more certain in her choice, $\beta = -.30$, $t(541) = 6.98$, $p < .001$. In contrast, when Pamela refused the offer, she was evaluated more positively to the extent she was seen as more certain in her choice, $\beta = .24$, $t(541) = 4.72$, $p < .001$. A final analysis suggested that the impact of decision speed on moral evaluation was mediated by perceived certainty. When entered into the same model (along with necessary main effects), the Decision \times Certainty interaction predicted the moral character evaluation, $\beta = -.29$, $t(539) = 7.10$, $p < .001$, but the Decision \times Speed interaction no longer did, $\beta = .06$, $t(539) = 1.40$, $p > .16$. Replicating Experiment 1, a significant Sobel test again suggested that perceived certainty fully mediated the effect of decision speed on moral evaluation, $z = 6.56$, $p < .001$.

In order to offer a more detailed test of our proposed mechanism, we conducted a final set of analyses to examine whether decision speed (and, in turn, perceived certainty) influenced moral judgments because of what they signaled about Pamela's motives. A 2 (decision) \times 2 (speed) ANOVA on the relative motive composite returned a main effect of decision, $F(1, 541) = 919.57$, $p < .001$, as well as the predicted Decision \times Speed interaction, $F(1, 541) = 51.07$, $p < .001$. When Pamela refused Mr. Muir's offer, her motive to protect her child (vs. gain money) was seen as stronger when she made the decision quickly ($M = 3.89$, $SE = 0.18$) versus slowly ($M = 2.78$, $SE = 0.20$), $t(541) = 4.12$, $p < .001$. When Pamela sold her child, her motive to gain money (vs. protect her child) was seen as stronger when she made the decision quickly ($M = -3.32$, $SE = 0.19$) versus slowly ($M = -1.68$, $SE = 0.20$), $t(541) = 5.96$, $p < .001$. When we regressed moral evaluation of Pamela on inferred motives, perceived certainty, decision, and the Perceived Certainty \times Decision interaction, the motives composite was a strong predictor of moral judgment, $\beta = .35$, $t(540) = 6.91$, $p < .001$, whereas the Perceived Certainty \times Decision interaction was a reduced predictor, $\beta = -.18$, $t(540) = 5.57$, $p < .001$, $z = 5.36$, $p < .001$. We used Preacher and Hayes's (2008) bootstrapping procedure to test the indirect effect through our string of mediators: The quickness with which Pamela made a decision signaled how certain she was in her choice, which provided different information about her underlying motives (depending on what she chose), which had a direct effect on moral character evaluations. The confidence interval on this indirect effect did

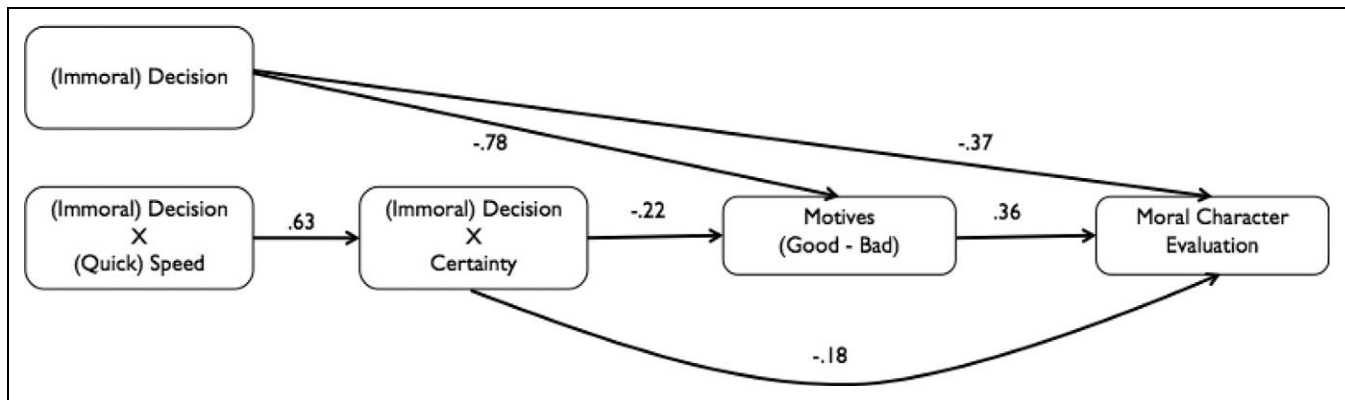


Figure 2. Path model summarizing the proposed effect of decision and speed on certainty, perceived motives, and positive moral character evaluation (Experiment 2). The main hypothesized model is depicted across the middle, horizontal path: Decision speed implies decision certainty, which suggests a more extreme ratio of good to bad motives, which in turn drives moral character evaluations. The significant direct effect of certainty on moral character evaluation indicates that mediation by motives was partial. The two direct effects of decision indicate that overall, people judged a person who made a moral (vs. immoral) decision to have better motives and more positive moral character. Model fit is acceptable: $\chi^2(4, N = 553) = 11.2, p = .024$; root mean square error of approximation = .057; Comparative Fit Index = .994. All paths are significant ($p < .001$).

not include 0, $[-.3881, -.2151]$, evidence consistent with a significant effect through this hypothesized chain. Figure 2 presents a path analysis that, in effect, summarizes in a single model what the series of regression analyses revealed.

General Discussion

When judging the moral decisions of others, individuals appear sensitive not just to the chosen act itself (e.g., Did it cause harm or break a rule?), but to *how* the decision was made. We moved beyond extant research that has focused on whether an action was a product of one's intentions to demonstrate that individuals use the speed with which a decision was made to determine whether an intended action stems from the purely pristine or corrupt motives of a person with exceptionally strong or weak character, or from a person with more mixed moral motives who thereby deserves a more moderate moral evaluation. Because of the certainty that quick decisions imply, quick moral or immoral decisions are assumed to reflect purely praiseworthy or blameworthy motives, respectively, thereby influencing subsequent moral evaluations of the agent.

Approaches that focus on how individuals judge the moral permissibility of specific acts (e.g., Greene, 2009) or how individuals make attributions of responsibility (e.g., Weiner, 1995) appear unable to account for these results. For example, although in Experiment 2 the deontological prohibition against selling one's children is seen to outweigh a possible utilitarian justification, the influence of decision speed on moral character judgment was evident while holding the decision (and thus resonance with these principles) constant. Furthermore, an attributional account may have, if anything, predicted the opposite pattern of results. Consider Ames and Johar's (2009) finding that when an antisocial action is accompanied by a negative or concerned moral expression, the actor is judged less harshly

because it is assumed the act was unintentional. For example, after Tina spilled a cup of coffee all over her assistant's pants, she was judged less harshly if she responded by grimacing and looking down (indicating that her action was unintended) than if she smiled and nodded (indicating that she intended to soak her assistant). If our participants found it unclear whether the quick actors had fully intended and understood the consequences of their actions, this uncertainty would have produced the reverse pattern of results. That is, quickness would have tempered moral evaluations instead of polarizing them.

The present findings also qualify the notion in the psychology and law literature that planfulness is a cue to responsibility (Roberts & Golding, 1991). Roberts, Golding, and Fincham (1987) report that the degree of planfulness in committing a crime led to harsher verdicts. But does quickness not reflect decreased planfulness? The resolution lies in what planfulness is ultimately signaling. For example, planfulness can indicate that a defendant had well-reasoned criminal intent, indicating that an insanity defense is not reasonable. Similarly, emotional impulsivity, like insanity, is seen as a cause of behavior that lies outside of one's control and produces behavior that does not reflect one's true underlying character. But when a lack of planfulness is not easily attributed to another source (e.g., extreme situational duress, insanity), it will be taken to reflect the baseness of a criminal's moral character. In other words, a deliberate lack of planfulness suggests the behavior is a strong signal of the person, not the corrupting nature of the situation.

Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000, Study 2): A Contradictory Finding

One reason this basic influence on moral judgment may have, until now, been missed is that it is directly contradicted by a well-known finding in the moral judgment literature. In one study, Tetlock et al. (2000) showed that people judged an agent

who engaged in extended consideration of a *taboo trade-off*—a moral dilemma that requires one to consider the value of something that social conventions deem “invaluable” (e.g., a person’s life)—more harshly, regardless of whether the agent ultimately made the morally praiseworthy or blameworthy decision. In Tetlock et al.’s Study 2, participants considered a hospital director who had to decide whether to perform an expensive surgery to save the life of Johnny, a sick child in need of an organ transplant, or to use the money to buy new equipment for the hospital. Regardless of whether the hospital director decided to save sick Jonny or let Johnny die, Tetlock et al.’s (2000) participants judged the director more harshly the longer he deliberated. By Tetlock and colleagues’ account, because it is wrong to even contemplate making this taboo trade-off (and the more contemplation the worse), a slow immoral decision would prompt more negative moral evaluation than a quick decision. This contradicts our account, which would predict that the quick-acting hospital director should be judged more harshly (because the certainty reflected by such speed is a signal of especially unsavory motives).

One possibility is that Tetlock et al.’s (2000) scenario represents a boundary condition on the logic that our introduction outlined. This seems unlikely, given our Experiment 2 also involved a taboo trade-off (i.e., selling one’s child). An alternative explanation is that Tetlock et al.’s findings were anomalous. The only way to assess the second alternative is to conduct an exact replication and determine whether we replicate Tetlock et al.’s findings or instead find (as we would predict) the exact opposite—that the hospital director is judged more harshly for denying Johnny the surgery immediately. That is, our account does not merely predict that Tetlock et al.’s findings were a false positive, but that a replication would show a significant reversal.

Between-subjects replication. As part of a longer experimental session, 181 undergraduates at Cornell University considered the hospital director scenario in which Robert lets Johnny die. We exactly replicated Tetlock et al.’s wording in describing Robert’s decision process as *slow* (he *finds the decision to be very difficult and is only able to make it after much time, thought, and contemplation*) or *quick* (he *sees his decision as an easy one and decides quickly*). Participants then completed Tetlock et al.’s “Interpersonal-Punitiveness” items, indicating (from 1 to 9) whether Robert should be fired from his job, punished for his actions, and whether participants would end a friendship with Robert ($\alpha = .85$). Directly contradicting (and reversing) Tetlock et al., Robert was evaluated more harshly when he was quick in denying sick Johnny a liver ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.96$) than when he did so slowly ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.93$), $t(179) = 2.65$, $p = .01$.

Within-subjects modified replication. We ran another version of the study in which we used the moral evaluation measures from Experiments 1 and 2. In this version, we made the decision speed manipulation even more salient by manipulating it within subjects. We did this by modifying the scenario to include two hospital directors who would decide independently whether or

not to save Johnny’s life. Their decision was varied between subjects. We manipulated decision speed within subjects (i.e., one director was slow; the other was fast). This allowed us to see if making decision speed more salient would lead to a replication of Tetlock et al.’s findings. It did not: A two-way ANOVA on the moral evaluation composite returned a significant Decision \times Speed interaction, $F(1,145) = 15.60$, $p < .001$. As both we and Tetlock et al. would predict, a quick decision to save the child led to a more positive evaluation ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 1.35$) than a slow decision ($M = 6.98$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(145) = 2.22$, $p = .03$. But as only our model predicts, a quick decision to let the child die led to a more negative moral evaluation ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 2.01$) than a slow decision ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(145) = 4.01$, $p < .001$. The results of these two replications suggest that Tetlock et al.’s findings do not reflect a boundary condition but were most likely anomalous.

Directions for Future Research

Our studies and model are silent on how people form moral evaluations of agents who are *forced* to make morally relevant decisions quickly. Just as Pizarro et al. (2003) found that situationally-induced emotional impulsivity was sufficient to account for a person’s misdeeds, an immoral choice made quickly under duress may be seen as less diagnostic of one’s underlying character. On the other hand, it is possible that people may treat such spontaneous, unfiltered responses as particularly revealing of someone’s moral character. Quick! Your child’s life or 10 million dollars? A forced quick decision to take the money might be seen as especially revealing of one’s immoral character, even if the person rejected the offer after careful consideration. Just as reaction-time-based implicit measures were once assumed to reflect an undistorted glimpse into the egalitarian hearts of research participants (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995), quick decisions made under duress might be seen as especially revealing. Note that this effect would emerge not because of the decision-certainty mechanism supported here but because of a belief that forced quick responses provide a glimpse of one’s character that is not obfuscated by controlled, socially desirable responding.

What decision speed actually signals and whether perceivers are sensitive to its varying diagnosticity are also topics for future research. For example, one may rush to a decision not because of a particularly pristine or corrupt character but because one does not fully understand the nature of the decision. Similarly, one may make a good, moral decision quickly not because of one’s own upstanding character, but because one is simply not particularly tempted by what the immoral course of action offers. Alternately, one may delay in making a decision because the moral implications of each choice are not immediately clear. One intriguing implication is that as people become more familiar with a moral issue, they may have trouble appreciating that those who have not thought about the issue before may require some time to grasp the

moral implications of each side in a debate. Thus, those who feel passionately (and thus have already thought extensively) about abortion and gay rights may be inappropriately suspicious of people who need to engage in considerable thought when formulating a position on such issues.

Conclusion

Although much of the research on moral judgment has focused on details of the moral/immoral action in question, the present studies take a different approach by focusing on the ways in which the agents' deliberation processes shed light on their motives and character. We rely on a guiding assumption in the person perception literature—that social perceivers attend to information in order to ascertain others' underlying, dispositional character (Heider, 1958)—but do so by moving beyond an emphasis on questions of dispositional versus situational causality to focus instead on social perceivers' reliance on a more indirect signal of moral character. In a recent review, Monin, Pizarro, and Beer (2007) lamented that there is little research examining how perceptions of a person's moral reasoning process influenced judgments of him or her. The present research begins to fill that gap, and we believe that future research on features of the deliberation process will identify additional factors that are important when ascribing blame and praise.

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Note

1. Note that these predictions hinge on the ability to differentiate the moral from the immoral course of action, so the model remains agnostic as to how decision speed might influence true moral dilemmas—those in which it is highly ambiguous what is right and what is wrong (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981).

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