

Value-Driven Tradeoff Reasoning in Consumer Choice

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Even if people do not always succeed in choosing outcomes that leave them happier, healthier, or wealthier, they usually try their best to do so. In this way, choices reflect a desire to promote welfare-enhancing outcomes. However, decisions involving morally “protected” values often appear to be driven by proscriptions that explicitly disregard consequences (e.g., “do not allow companies to pollute for a fee. . . even if pollution credits reduce pollution”). In four consumer choice studies, we examine how thinking about proscriptions and consequences depend on the decision maker’s initial preferences and on the situational context. When presented with ethically-relevant information, participants with a protected value were both more and less sensitive to outcomes than consumers without a protected value. Their choices depended on what reasons were available to them when making a (moral) decision. If at least one option satisfied their proscription to do no harm then they usually choose that option — even when that option was unattractive, and other options would maximize beneficial consequences. If all available options caused some degree of harm, however, participants with protected values were most likely to choose an option that maximized consequences, regardless of their initial preferences.