

Joint Evaluation as a Real-World Tool for Managing Emotional Assessments of Morality

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Abstract

Moral problems often prompt emotional responses that invoke intuitive judgments of right and wrong. While emotions inform judgment across many domains, they can also lead to ethical failures that could be avoided by using a more deliberative, analytical decision-making process. In this article, we describe joint evaluation as an effective tool to help decision makers manage their emotional assessments of morality.

Keywords

emotions, joint evaluation, judgment, morality

People often respond emotionally to moral problems. Sometimes, these emotional responses conflict with cognitive preferences. This article examines separate- versus joint-evaluation mode as a tool that can predict the conditions under which the emotional self overrides the cognitive self in moral judgment. When people think about one option at a time, as they do in separate evaluation mode, they are more likely to base their moral judgments on emotions than when they compare two or more options simultaneously in joint-evaluation mode (Ritov & Baron, in press). Because many decisions could benefit from increased cognition and control over the emotive self, it is important to understand how to effectively use joint decision-making procedures as a tool in the moral domain.

Substantial evidence has documented preference reversals between what people choose in separate versus joint decision making (Bazerman & Moore, 2008). Bazerman, Tenbrunsel, and Wade-Benzoni (1998) suggest that many of these preference reversals are explained by the internal conflict between what one emotively wants to do versus what one cognitively thinks one should do. Consistent with the affect heuristic (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002), people favor the more emotively appealing option (the “want option”) when considering only one option at a time, and favor reason-based decision making (the “should” option) when considering two or more options simultaneously.

Prior research has examined the influence of joint and separate decision making by examining whether people pay attention to their own outcomes or to comparisons with others’. Bazerman, Schroth, Shah, Diekmann, and Tenbrunsel (1994) asked Kellogg MBA students whether they would accept job offers from a consulting firm when facing deadlines. The researchers manipulated whether students were presented with one or two job offers at a time. The job descriptions included the following information:

Job A: The offer is from Company 4 for \$75,000 a year. It is widely known that this firm pays all starting MBAs from top schools \$75,000 a year.

Job B: The offer is from Company 9 for \$85,000 a year. It is widely known that this firm is paying some other graduating Kellogg students \$95,000 a year.

As these descriptions show, Job A pays less than Job B, but Job B is more likely to evoke an emotional reaction because it raises the moral issue of the firm paying others more than the target student. The study results demonstrated that MBA students who were presented with only one job offer were more likely to accept Job A, the more emotionally appealing option. In contrast, students who were presented with both job offers simultaneously were more likely to accept Job B. The opportunity to

compare the offers allowed students to make decisions more consistent with their best interests.

In another study, Paharia, Kassam, Greene, and Bazerman (2009) explored the degree to which emotions influence judgments of price gouging. The study was motivated by the 2005 news that pharmaceutical giant Merck had sold the rights to two of its relatively unprofitable cancer drugs to a smaller and lesser known company, Ovation Pharmaceuticals. Ovation then raised the price of the drugs by 1,000%, although Merck continued to manufacture the drugs. The price hike generated little outrage, probably due in part to Ovation's low public profile. In contrast, had Merck raised the price of the drugs directly, observers likely would have responded to the news in a more negative manner. Paharia et al. (2009) designed a study that compared the difference between raising prices directly versus indirectly. All study participants read:

A major pharmaceutical company, X, had a cancer drug that was minimally profitable. The fixed costs were high and the market was limited. But, the patients who used the drug really needed it. The pharmaceutical was making the drug for \$2.50/pill (all costs included), and was only selling it for \$3/pill.

Then, one group of participants assessed the ethicality of the following action:

A: The major pharmaceutical firm (X) raised the price of the drug from \$3/pill to \$9/pill.

A second group assessed the ethicality of a different course of action:

B: The major pharmaceutical firm (X) sold the rights to a smaller pharmaceutical. In order to recoup costs, company Y increased the price of the drug to \$15/pill.

The results showed that participants who read Action A judged the behavior of company X more harshly than those who read Action B, despite the smaller negative impact of Action A on patients. In addition, Paharia et al. (2009) presented a third group of participants with both possible actions simultaneously and asked them to judge which was more unethical. In this case, preferences reversed. When participants could compare the two scenarios, they judged Action B to be more unethical than Action A. Here again, a joint-evaluation format reduced the influence of emotional responses on moral judgments.

More recently, Gino, Moore, and Bazerman (2010) used the distinction between separate and joint evaluation to examine the effect of the outcome bias—the tendency to judge the quality of others' decisions based on results rather than on their decision-making process—on judgments with ethical implications (see also Gino, Shu, & Bazerman, 2010). Participants in Gino et al.'s (2010) study read a scenario describing the case of a patient suffering from pain who had been advised by his doctor to simply rest. The scenario stressed that the doctor's advice was contrary to practice guidelines but saved the doctor money

and time. In the “separate evaluation/bad outcome” condition, the scenario description ended as follows:

Sam's symptoms worsen over time and after only a couple of weeks, Sam is in need of back surgery, which will very likely result in long-term effects such as pain and loss of mobility.

In contrast, in the “separate evaluation/good outcome” condition, the ending read:

Sam's symptoms improve over time and after only a couple of weeks, the pain completely disappears.

Both groups of participants rated the ethicality of the doctor's actions. As expected, the emotions resulting from the combination of an unethical decision with a bad outcome led participants to rate the doctor's behavior as more unethical than when a good outcome resulted. Parallel to prior studies, the researchers included a third condition in which participants read both scenarios and judged the ethicality of the doctor's actions. In this joint-evaluation condition, participants' judgments were less swayed by positive or negative outcome information, and 65% of the participants rated the scenarios as equally unethical.

Implications

The empirical evidence discussed in this article is consistent with research showing that emotions play too strong a role in separate decision making. In fact, Ritov and Baron (in press) show that emotional responses are stronger when assessing options separately than when assessing problems jointly. The evidence we have described suggests that decision makers should consider evaluating options jointly when assessing morality or making moral judgments. This is consistent with the long-standing advice in the decision literature to consider all available alternatives when making decisions (Raiffa, 1968). In addition, research shows that if people consider a decision well in advance or in retrospect, they express greater support for the decisions resulting from the joint format (O'Connor et al., 2002).

We believe that both emotion and cognition add value to moral decision making. But when they are in conflict, normative decision criteria (Bazerman & Moore, 2008), predecision preferences (O'Connor et al., 2002), and retrospective assessments (O'Connor et al., 2002) all suggest that we would better meet our underlying moral and ethical values by applying joint evaluation to our moral judgments. And, when making decisions with moral implications, we should avoid the common real-world default to assess options sequentially as they develop.

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