

The Logic of Moral Outrage

Eric Luis Uhlmann

HEC Paris

(Commentary on McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak,
“Cognitive Systems for Revenge and Forgiveness”)

ABSTRACT: 60

MAIN TEXT: 998

REFERENCES: 14

ENTIRE TEXT: 1,498

Eric Luis Uhlmann
HEC Paris - School of Management
Management and Human Resources Department
1, Rue de la Libération
78351 Jouy-en-Josas
France
Tel: 33 (0)1 39 67 97 44
E-mail: eric.luis.uhlmann@gmail.com

Abstract

McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2012)'s functionalist model of revenge is highly compatible with the person-centered approach to moral judgment, which emphasizes the adaptive manner in which social perceivers derive character information from moral acts. Evidence includes *act-person dissociations* in which an act is seen as less immoral than a comparison act, yet as a clearer indicator of poor moral character.

McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2012) propose a functionalist model of revenge in which retaliatory aggression is neither irrational nor a sign of pathological dysfunction. Rather, such behavior is driven by the implicit calculations of a revenge system that seeks to deter harmful future acts against oneself, kin, and allies. This revenge system operates in tandem with a forgiveness system designed to reassess whether a person is worthy of inclusion in one's ingroups.

Their analysis of revenge is in harmony with the person-centered approach to moral judgment (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Tannenbaum, Uhlmann, & Diermeier, 2011), which emphasizes the adaptive manner in which social perceivers derive character information from moral acts. In the same spirit as McCullough et al. (2012), we argue that what at first appear to be irrational decision making biases often "make sense" when one considers the adaptive goals individuals must meet as they navigate their social environments. Unlike McCullough et al. (2012), we emphasize that people often wish to avenge moral transgressions that not only do not harm them or their kin, but in some cases cause no material harm at all.

In addition to assessing the permissibility of acts, people use behaviors to draw inferences about the moral character of the agents who carry them out. Whereas moral judgments of acts are comparatively more likely to center on the tangible harm caused, judgments of persons focus on whether the behavior signals the presence or absence of positive moral traits (Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann, Zhu, & Tannenbaum, 2011). Relatively harmless acts can therefore provoke outrage when they suggest severe deficits in moral character.

Some behaviors are more informative than others regarding an agent's personal character (Nelson, 2005; Nelson, McKenzie, Cottrell, & Sejnowski, 2010; Reeder & Brewer, 1979). Drawing inferences about character based on such signals is critical to resolving the collective

action problems central to McCullough et al.'s (2012) analysis of revenge. Because moral traits predict whether a person will cooperate with us or betray us, character-relevant information becomes extremely valuable when navigating social environments. Even acts that are not especially harmful can speak strongly to personal character and therefore prove useful for anticipating more consequential future acts. For the same reason, relatively harmless acts can elicit a desire to castigate the transgressor and exclude him or her from social ingroups.

Evidence for the person-centered approach to moral judgment is provided by *act-person dissociations* in which an act is seen as less immoral than a comparison act, yet as a clearer indicator of negative moral traits. For example, although beating one's girlfriend is viewed as more morally blameworthy than beating her cat, the latter act is seen as indicating a more coldhearted and sadistic person (Tannenbaum et al., 2011). This might seem like a bias in moral judgment until one recalls that animal cruelty predicts anti-social behaviors and an erosion of normal empathic responses (Becker, Steuwig, Herrera, & McCloskey, 2004).

Additional studies demonstrate act-person dissociations in the context of truly harmless acts. For instance, although the use of a racial slur (in private, and with no one overhearing) was seen as a less blameworthy act than physical assault, use of a slur was perceived as providing more negative information about the person's character (Uhlmann, Zhu, & Diermeier, 2011). Consistent with the idea that person-centered judgments serve the function of determining who to include in one's social ingroups, participants were more willing to be friends with the target who had been physically aggressive than with the bigot.

Negative gut reactions to harmless-but-disgusting transgressions are frequently cited as a case of moral bias. Indeed, participants can find themselves dumbfounded when asked to justify why they feel eating a dead dog and having sex with a chicken carcass are morally wrong (Haidt,

2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Part of the reason for strong intuitive responses to such transgressions is that they provide more diagnostic information about the personal character of the agent than do most harm violations. Participants rated eating a dog to be less immoral than stealing meat, yet more informative of poor moral character (Uhlmann & Zhu, 2011).

People are left at a loss to justify their intuitions regarding harmless-but-disgusting acts because they cannot be defended using rational criteria such as the degree of harm caused. In contrast, because of their high informational value regarding underlying traits, there is a clear rational basis for drawing strong character inferences from such behaviors. Although participants were morally dumbfounded when asked whether sex with a chicken was an immoral *act*, they were not at all dumbfounded when asked whether a *person* who engaged in sex with a chicken had negative moral traits (Uhlmann & Zhu, 2011). This lack of dumbfounding regarding person judgments was driven by the behavior's high informational value.

As further evidence that person-centered judgments are not subjectively irrational (Pizarro & Uhlmann, 2005), act-person dissociations are observed under conditions of both joint and separate evaluation (Tannenbaum et al., 2011; Uhlmann & Zhu, 2011). Joint evaluation, in which social targets are evaluated side-by-side, promotes logical comparisons and attenuates many decision making biases (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, & Bazerman, 1999). This suggests that participants do not view their tendency to judge actions and persons differently as irrational. If they did, they would correct their judgments under conditions of joint evaluation so as not to show any "bias."

In closing, I agree with McCullough et al. (2012) that vengeance against wrongdoers—like moral outrage more generally—has a logic to it. Indeed, their functional analysis of revenge converges with our findings in highlighting the adaptive, reputation based, and person-centered

nature of moral cognition. The desire to exact revenge— and willingness to ultimately forgive— may often be less about the transgression itself than what it says about the agent's moral worth as a person.

References

- Becker, K. D., Steuwig, J., Herrera, V. M., & McCloskey, L. A. (2004). A study of firesetting and animal cruelty in children: Family influences and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 43*, 905–912.
- Gaertner, S. L., & Dovidio, J. F. (1986). The aversive form of racism. In J. F. Dovidio & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Prejudice, discrimination, and racism* (pp. 61-89). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review, 108*, 814–834.
- Haidt, J., Koller, S., & Dias, M. (1993). Affect, culture, and morality, or is it wrong to eat your dog? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65*, 613-628.
- Hsee, C. K., Loewenstein, G. F., Blount, S., & Bazerman, M. H. (1999). Preference reversals between joint and separate evaluation of options: A review and theoretical analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 125*, 576-590.
- Nelson, J. D. (2005). Finding useful questions: On Bayesian diagnosticity, probability, impact, and information gain. *Psychological Review, 112*, 979–999.
- Nelson, J. D., McKenzie, C. R. M., Cottrell, G. W., & Sejnowski, T. J. (2010). Experience matters: Information acquisition optimizes probability gain. *Psychological Science, 21*, 960-969.
- Pizarro, D. A., & Tannenbaum, D. (2011). Bringing character back: How the motivation to evaluate character influences judgments of moral blame. In P. Shaver & M. Mikulincer (Eds.), *The social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil*. New York: APA books.

- Pizarro, D.A., & Uhlmann, E.L. (2005). Do normative standards advance our understanding of moral judgment? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 28, 558-559.
- Reeder, G. D., & Brewer, M. B. (1979). A schematic model of dispositional attribution in interpersonal perception. *Psychological Review*, 86, 61–79.
- Tannenbaum, D., Uhlmann, E.L., & Diermeier, D. (2011). Moral signals, public outrage, and immaterial harms. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 1249-1254.
- Uhlmann, E.L., & Zhu, L. (2011). *Acts, persons, and intuitions: Person-centered cues and gut reactions to harmless transgressions*. Manuscript under review.
- Uhlmann, E.L., Zhu, L., & Diermeier, D. (2011). *When actions speak volumes: Person-centered cues and moral outrage over racial bigotry*. Manuscript under review.
- Uhlmann, E.L., Zhu, L., & Tannenbaum, D. (2011). *When it takes a bad person to do the right thing*. Manuscript under review.