Motivating Internalism
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The Debate

The debate between motivational internalists and motivational externalists has focused on the connection between making a moral judgment and motivation.

Motivational Internalism: There is a conceptual connection between S making a moral judgment that she ought to ϕ and S being motivated to ϕ.

Externalists deny this conceptual connection and hold that sincere assent suffices for making a moral judgment that one ought to ϕ.

Evidence Against Internalism

Theoretical: The ‘amoralism’ challenge (Brink, Svaedarsson, etc.), holds that we can imagine an amoralist who makes moral judgments but is not motivated by them at all. For example: Svaedarsson’s (1999) case of Patrick, who accepts that it is his obligation to help a stranger, but is not motivated to do so.

- Internalists hold that Patrick doesn’t really make the moral judgment that he ought to help, since he isn’t motivated to do so.
- Externalists argue that this response is ad hoc and only motivated by a theoretical commitment to internalism.

This charge can be tested on people who have no stake in the debate.

Empirical: Previous research (Nichols; Strandberg & Björklund; Leben & Wilckens) have taken up this debate and asked subjects whether people like Patrick really make moral judgments. They find that approximately 75% answer ‘yes’, supporting externalism.

Importantly, however, this previous research did not systematically vary either assent or motivation.

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<tr>
<th>Previous Results</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>No Motivation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assent</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Assent</td>
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- This leaves open the possibility that people’s judgments are also influenced by an agent’s motivation, and actually could even be more influenced by motivation than by assent.
- Likewise, it also remains possible that participants could attribute moral judgment when assent is absent but motivation is present, meaning assent may not even be a necessary condition.
- Previous experimental methods can also by improved by using multiple dependent variables, employing continuous response scales rather than dichotomous yes/no measures, and by soliciting agreement with particular moral judgment attributions rather than directly asking participants more abstract modal questions.

The Study

Independent Variables (schematic overview of 2 x 2 design)

- Assent/No Motivation [original case]. Patrick says that he accepts that it is his obligation to help, but that he is nevertheless unwilling to do so, since he does not care at all about helping strangers in need. Patrick refuses to help.
- Assent/Motivation. Patrick says that he accepts that it is his obligation to help, and that he is willing to do so, since he strongly cares about helping strangers in need. Patrick agrees to help.
- No Assent/Motivation. Patrick says that he disputes that it is his obligation to help, but that he is nevertheless willing to do so, since he strongly cares about helping strangers in need. Patrick agrees to help.
- No Assent/No Motivation. Patrick says that he disputes that it is his obligation to help, and that he is unwilling to do so, since he does not care at all about helping strangers in need. Patrick refuses to help.

Dependent Variables (on a scale from 1 (Disagree’) to 7 (Agree))

- Judgment: In Patrick’s judgment, helping the stranger is the morally right thing to do.
- Acceptance: Deep down, Patrick accepts that helping the stranger is the morally right thing to do.
- Agreement: Ultimately, Patrick and Virginia agree about what the morally right thing for Patrick to do is.

Aggregated into a Moral Judgment Attribution Index (α = .88).

Results

- We observed a main effect of Assent F(1,73) = 13.69, p < .001, ηp² = .156, a main effect of Motivation F(1,78) = 72.03, p < .001, ηp² = .716, and no interaction effect F < 1.
- Strikingly, participants’ moral judgment attributions were above the midpoint in the Motivation/No Assent case t(20) = 5.312, p < .001.

Discussion

As in previous research, participants’ moral judgment attributions were influenced by whether the agent was willing to assent to the relevant moral proposition. However, in contrast to the conclusions drawn from previous research, participants’ attributions of moral judgment were also significantly affected by whether or not the agent was motivated.

Indeed, participants’ moral judgment attributions were actually much more affected by whether or not Patrick was motivated than by whether or not Patrick assented!

While we observed an effect of both motivation and assent, we did not observe an interaction effect, suggesting that effects of motivation and assent on participants’ moral judgment attributions were relatively independent.

Philosophical Import

These results support the internalist claim that there is a conceptual connection between moral judgment and motivation. (There are a number of objections that might be raised to drawing this conclusion – talk to us about this!)

However, traditional formulations of internalism have cashed out this conceptual connection in terms of a necessary condition: motivation is a necessary condition for moral judgment. Our results – which show participants showing an intermediate willingness to attribute moral judgment where assent is present but motivation is absent – suggest this may not be the best way to spell out this connection.

Rather, one might think of the concept of moral judgment in terms of prototype theory: a prototypical moral judgment will involve both assent and motivation, and in the absence of either we are left with something that is less than a prototypical moral judgment, but not definitively outside the conceptual category of moral judgment altogether.

This view, if right, may also lend support to a ‘liberalized’ form of a hybrid theory of moral judgment, where both cognitive and non-cognitive features are important to moral judgment.