

People apply principles inconsistently, study finds

October 8 2010, By George Lowery

Is it morally appropriate to sacrifice the life of an innocent person to save the lives of several others? David Pizarro, Cornell assistant professor of psychology, put a fresh spin on this classic question from philosophy.

In an update to the classic "footbridge" scenario in moral philosophy, which asks if it is morally appropriate to throw an innocent bystander to his death to stop an oncoming trolley that would kill a group of individuals, Pizarro and his colleagues asked California undergraduates whether it would be morally appropriate to sacrifice "Tyrone Payton" (presumably black) to save 100 members of the New York Philharmonic or "Chip Ellsworth III" (presumably white) to save 100 members of the Harlem Jazz Orchestra.

What Pizarro and his colleagues hoped to learn was whether people were consistent in their application of moral principles (such as the principle that it is wrong to kill innocent people regardless of the consequences) or whether their gut reactions to the names would lead them to endorse different principles across the two scenarios. Figuring that conservatives and liberals might have different reactions to the names, they also assessed the political orientation of their participants.

In the October 2009 issue of the journal *Judgment and Decision Making*, Pizarro and colleagues report the results of this and four other studies that provide evidence that individuals are quite inconsistent in their application of moral principles. Rather, they select whichever principle

is most consistent with their initial reaction to the description of the individual being sacrificed.

Pizarro's study found that self-identified liberals presented with these dilemmas were more likely judge that it was morally appropriate to send Chip to the great beyond, while conservatives were more likely to judge it morally appropriate to end Tyrone's life. "Despite explicitly stating that race shouldn't play a role in these [judgments](#) (which our participants do overwhelmingly), from the results it is clear that conservatives and liberals value the life of these individuals quite differently, and that they will defend this judgment with whichever principle suits their needs best," Pizarro said.

Do these results demonstrate racism on the part of conservatives? "When looking across our studies at how individuals responded when asked about moral principles, the largest difference we found was that liberals were more likely to say it was morally appropriate to sacrifice an innocent person for the sake of a greater good if the person sacrificed was named Chip, but not if the person was named Tyrone," Pizarro said.

These studies have received attention from popular science blogs (the phrase "Kill Whitey" appeared in several headlines). Pizarro thinks that neither side of the political spectrum should be too happy with the results. "Our studies show that there's enough inconsistency and bias on both political sides to go around," he said.

But one finding holds true in these studies, regardless of partisan leanings. "Although we believe and speak about moral principles as universal, our judgments demonstrate that we are content with applying whichever one fits the bill," Pizarro said. "What we really mean is: This is universal and absolute when I want it to be and not when I don't want it to be."

Despite the moral flip-flopping documented in these studies, Pizarro remains optimistic about the human capacity to make rational judgments. He points to one study demonstrating that when participants were given both versions of the scenario they remained consistent, responding to the second scenario the same as the first, regardless of race. "I think studies like ours can motivate people to be more aware of the irrationality often present in their own judgments and, we hope, to become more rational."

Provided by Cornell University

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