

How do we make moral judgements?

November 26 2014, by Julie Langelier

In a target article published in the current issue of the *American Journal of Bioethics (AJOB) Neuroscience*, Université de Montréal and IRCM neuroethics experts open the black box of moral intuitions by suggesting a new approach to explain the way we make moral judgements. The proposed "ADC framework" could offer insight into the types of simple and fast intuitive processes involved in the potentially infinite number and variety of moral assessments.

"Our ADC approach identifies the kinds of intuitions people use regularly to make [moral judgments](#)," says Veljko Dubljevic, PhD, first and corresponding author of the article. "When making moral decisions, we use three accessible criteria to determine what should be considered right and wrong: we assess the agent (A) by focusing on the character's virtues and vices; the deed itself (D) by determining what are right and wrong actions; and the consequences (C) by evaluating good or bad outcomes."

"Until now, no theoretical explanation existed to fully make sense of the numerous studies conducted on moral judgement and decision making," mentions Eric Racine, PhD. "We reviewed 15-years' worth of experiments on different regions of the brain activated during moral judgement, drawing on neuroimaging studies and cognitive neuroscience research, to identify how normative ethics (the study of the morality of our actions) can constructively inform empirical research."

In the article, the experts use as an example a case that generated much public controversy in Europe and has been included in important publications concerning human rights. In October 2002, police officers

in Frankfurt, Germany, had in custody a man who they suspected had kidnapped an 11-year-old boy. Although the man was arrested while trying to take the ransom money, he maintained his innocence and denied having any knowledge of the child's whereabouts. Worried for the child's life, the officer in charge finally decided to threaten to inflict serious pain upon the suspect if he did not reveal where he had hidden the child. The threat worked—however, the child was already dead.

"In this case, the agent (A) is considered positive, being a dedicated police officer seen as a sincerely virtuous person," explains Dr. Dubljevic. "The deed (D), threatening torture, is considered negative as it is viewed as a genuinely wrong action. The consequences (C), however, remain uncertain as the outcome was neither overwhelmingly good nor bad, because the suspect was indeed guilty but the child had already died. Changing any of the elements (A, D, C) can result in a different intuitive judgement and, in fact, the controversy over this case revolved around the uncertainty of the suspect's guilt and the potential to save a child at the time the decision was made. "

"The analysis of ADC intuitions could clarify a wide set of data from empirical moral psychology, and could inform future studies on moral judgment," concludes Dr. Racine. "This framework could also be very useful in applied normative ethics for case assessments and discussions about issues causing "deadlocked" moral intuitions, which are issues that invoke very strong opposing intuitions and for which people cannot easily come to a consensus, such as cognition-enhancement drugs (some think it is morally acceptable, whereas others think it is morally wrong) and abortion (some view it as murder, while others view it as a basic right for women)."

More information: "The ADC of Moral Judgment: Opening the Black Box of Moral Intuitions With Heuristics About Agents, Deeds, and Consequences." [DOI: 10.1080/21507740.2014.939381](https://doi.org/10.1080/21507740.2014.939381)

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