

# Empathy and moral choices—study limits the role of emotions in moral decisions

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Empathy and emotional awareness do not affect our moral decisions. This is suggested by a new study published on *Social Neuroscience* and led by SISSA neuroscientist Marilena Aiello. Our choices do not depend on our empathy. The difference, instead, lies in our emotional reactions, more pronounced in more empathic people. In particular if we opt for uncomfortable decisions for a greater good.

Could you harm another person to save yourself? Could you kill one person to save five? The answer depends neither on our ability to share someone else's feelings – known as [empathy](#) – nor on our lack of emotional awareness – known as alexithymia. Surprisingly, the decision taken will be the same, both for emotional and detached people. The difference lies instead in the emotional reactions to the decision-making process.

"This is the first study to analyse at the same time the role of empathy and alexithymia in moral choices through decision-making rather than judgment tasks, in order to investigate what happens when subjects are directly involved" Marilena Aiello and Cinzia Cecchetto, first author of the study, explain. "Moreover, for the first time we examined the emotional reactions with both explicit and implicit measures, combining participants' self-reports with two physiological indices: [heart rate](#) and skin conductance".

The study involved forty-one volunteers, whose levels of empathy and alexithymia were assessed through standard questionnaires used by

clinicians. Participants had to solve forty-six dilemmas, with either deontological – i.e. based on the principle of not harming others – or utilitarian choices – i.e. based on the achievement of a greater good. During the tasks, researchers monitored heart rate and skin conductance of participants, who, at the end of each dilemma, reported on their emotional state.

To better understand, let's imagine there is a runaway trolley barrelling down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people. The only way to save them is by pulling a lever that will make the trolley switch to a side track, where, however, there is another person. Would you pull the lever, diverting the trolley onto the side track to save five people? The utilitarian choice would be "yes", the deontological one "no".

"We expected a high number of deontological choices in individuals with high empathy and a high number of utilitarian choices in people with high alexithymia. Instead we found out that the type of decision depends neither on our empathy nor on our alexithymia" Cinzia Cecchetto comments. "However, both explicit and implicit measures of [emotional reactions](#) confirmed what we expected: more emphatic individuals experience higher distress in utilitarian choices. Similar results appeared only through implicit measures in individuals with high levels of alexithymia who, in line with the type of disorder, showed reduced physiological activation during [moral decisions](#), but normal self-report ratings."

"These are important results, not only because they suggest that moral decisions are more rational than what was previously suggested, but also for the methodological approach" Marilena Aiello concludes.

**More information:** Cinzia Cecchetto et al. Emotional reactions in moral decision-making are influenced by empathy and alexithymia,

*Social Neuroscience* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/17470919.2017.1288656](https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2017.1288656)

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