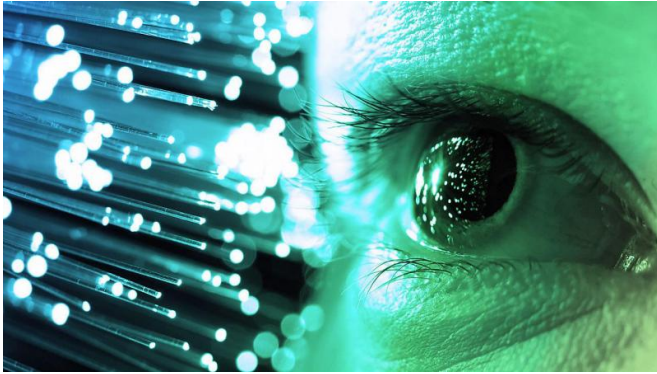


# Study shows that people switch their morality in the heat of the moment

11 October 2016, by Amy Mcsweeney



Credit: University of Plymouth

Virtual reality technology could show how a person would really behave in a morally difficult situation – despite what he or she might claim on paper, according to new research by Plymouth University.

The study led by Kathryn Francis, PhD student in the School of Psychology, found that people are more likely to sacrifice others for what they imagine to be the greater good when immersed in virtual reality.

In the dilemma, people had to decide whether to push a person off a bridge to block a train to save five people on the railway line below. The researchers found that people were more likely to make a sacrificial response – push the person off the bridge – in a [virtual reality environment](#) than they would in the traditional text-based equivalent of the experiment.

They also found that antisocial traits predicted sacrificial [moral actions](#) in virtual reality, but they did not predict moral judgements given in the text-based dilemma.

This study is the result of collaboration between Kathryn, Dr Sylvia Terbeck, Dr Michaela Gummerum, Dr Giorgio Ganis and Grace Anderson in the University's School of Psychology, and Dr Ian Howard and Charles Howard of the Centre for Robotics and Neural Systems.

The research suggests that Oculus Rift technology – the [virtual reality headset](#) more commonly associated with home entertainment – could be a valuable tool for studying moral actions in a more accurate way than the more traditional approaches.

Kathryn, who is also part of the University's cognitive innovation doctoral programme, CogNovo, said:

"Our results offer new insights into the nature of moral action beyond that of moral judgement. The disparity demonstrated here between moral judgements on paper and moral actions in virtual reality suggests that they may be driven by different processes. It supports the age-old saying of 'do as I say, not as I do', highlighting the real disparity between moral action and [moral judgement](#). With the emergence of these virtual technologies we can gain an insight into how we make difficult decisions when faced with an emotionally aversive dilemma." Dr Sylvia Terbeck, Lecturer in Social Psychology and study co-author, added:

"The possibility of using immersive [virtual reality](#) in order to assess moral behaviour opens new prospects for future psychological assessment of anti-social behaviour."

Dr Ian Howard, Associate Professor in the Centre for Robotics and Neural Systems, said:

"This is good example of applying gaming technology to carry out valuable behavioural research, and we are already adding touch into these simulations to make interactions even more realistic."

**More information:** Kathryn B. Francis et al. Virtual Morality: Transitioning from Moral Judgment to Moral Action?, *PLOS ONE* (2016). DOI: [10.1371/journal.pone.0164374](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0164374)

Provided by University of Plymouth

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