



Moral hypocrisy, power and social preferences



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ABSTRACT

We study how individuals adjust their judgment of fairness and unfairness when they are in the position of spectators before and after making real decisions, and how this adjustment depends on the actions they take in the game. We find that norms that appear universal instead take into account the players' bargaining power. Also, individuals adjust their judgments after playing the game for real money, when they behaved more selfishly and only in games where choices have no strategic consequence. We interpret this possibly self-deceptive adjustment of judgments to actions as moral hypocrisy. This behavior appears produced by the attempt to strike a compromise between self-image and payoffs, so as to release oneself of one's responsibility for selfish behavior.

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1. Introduction

In public, most individuals promote social norms based on fairness and derive utility from being perceived as fair (Benabou and Tirole, 2006; Andreoni and Bernheim, 2009). Parents encourage children to be generous; politicians emphasize dedication to serving others; businessmen promote corporate social responsibility. Real behavior may, however, reveal a different side of human nature. For example, individuals avoid beggars by changing the side of the street; they destroy the resources or production of others by envy (Mui, 1995; Charness et al., 2014) or for the joy of destruction (Zizzo and Oswald, 2001); the power of public office leads some politicians to use it for their personal gain (Aidt, 2003). How do people reconcile their stated norms of fairness and the temptation of more selfish actions that may alter their perception as fair people?

In this paper, we study how individuals try to maintain consistency between fairness judgments and real actions, and how they take into account the situation to adjust judgments on norms that appear universal. We test how much they maintain their image of fairness by adjusting their actions to suit their moral judgments, and instead how much they adjust their judgments and manipulate norms to justify their actions. Thus, the study of this interaction belongs to the study of moral

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hypocrisy (Batson et al., 1997, 1999), defined as the motivation to appear moral to oneself and to others while avoiding the cost of acting morally.

Studying moral hypocrisy from an economic perspective is important for several reasons. First, it helps understand how moral reflection influences economic behavior. We may assume that behavior follows given social norms. Here instead we investigate an aspect of the construction of norms by using a dynamic perspective. Studying moral hypocrisy means investigating one aspect of the co-construction of judgments and actions focusing on norm manipulation. Second, studying moral hypocrisy contributes to the understanding of the role of self-image in economic behavior (Bernheim, 1994; Bodner and Prelec, 2003; Benabou and Tirole, 2006; Ellingsen and Johannesson, 2008; Ariely et al., 2009). In our experiment we analyze an intrapersonal game by which self-serving individuals may engage, possibly unconsciously, in self-deception to reconcile their judgments with their behavior and keep a good perception of the kind of person they are. Finally, understanding moral hypocrisy contributes to explain why pro-social behavior is not more developed and which incentives could encourage pro-sociality. If greedy individuals who care about looking fair use hypocrisy to keep a high self-esteem while reaping the monetary benefits of acting selfishly, increasing the cost of moral hypocrisy and norm manipulation may encourage them to behave less selfishly because of reputational concerns.

We adopt the methodological view that both actions and judgments constitute social behavior. We expect that individuals strike a compromise between monetary consequences and reputation, understanding that judgments are evaluated in view of actions, and actions are interpreted in view of judgments. Thus, to understand social behavior we need to measure both. Precisely, in our experiment, individuals participated in two consecutive sessions. In the first session we elicit their judgments regarding the fairness and unfairness of all possible shares between two hypothetical players in three different scenarios. The scenarios correspond to Dictator, Ultimatum and Trust games. Eliciting the individual's judgments of fairness and unfairness in terms of intervals rather than point estimates indicates the individual's moral vagueness and constitutes a novelty of our approach. A second novelty is that, instead of eliciting judgments in the position of impartial third parties who would have to make decisions for others (as in Konow, 2000; Konow et al., 2009, for example), participants have to report their judgments in the position of partial spectators.¹ They evaluate the fairness and unfairness of all possible shares in the perspective of an advantaged player and a disadvantaged player, successively, without knowing that they will have to make real decisions for themselves in the future. This information allows us to open a different perspective on the study of the effect of strategic environments on stated social norms: eliciting partial judgments helps understanding whether power influences the perception of justice, when we consider the weaker side. Thus realism, as well as selfishness and self-deception, may influence social norms. We find that this is the case.

One week later, the same individuals are invited to play the Dictator, Ultimatum, and Trust games for real. In order to analyze whether actions motivate individuals to adjust their judgments, after making their decision subjects have to again report a judgment on the fairness and unfairness of all possible shares in the same three scenarios. This design allows us to measure both (i) how the actions in the second session diverge from the fairness judgments and hypothetical choices during the first session and (ii) whether the fairness judgments during the second session conform more to the initial statements or to the actions taken. We are also able to determine (iii) whether actions are more consistent with initial fairness judgments when the other player is not passive (i.e. in the Ultimatum game) than when he cannot react (i.e. in the Dictator and the Trust games).

We observe clear evidence of moral hypocrisy: later actions violate fairness judgments made before individuals know their role, and norms stated later are manipulated in the direction of the actual decisions by more selfish players. The first findings alone would not characterize moral hypocrisy, as good faith in reporting judgments could simply be followed by a lack of willpower. But in most cases, individuals increase the range of shares declared fair after playing the game for real money compared with their initial statement. The discrepancy between hypothetical and real behaviors is larger in games where real behavior has no strategic consequence (Dictator and Trust) than in games where the other player can react to the decision (Ultimatum), so the subject has to take into account consequences of his choices. While the fairness statement in the Dictator scenario is based on an ethical judgment, the strategic dimension of the Ultimatum is immediately perceived (see also Charness and Gneezy, 2008). By using scenarios that vary the bargaining power we show that the adjustment of judgments is influenced by relative power and that both sides, the one in the advantageous and the one in the disadvantageous position, accept the fact that allocations are biased in favor of the powerful.

Moral hypocrisy is not uniform among individuals: those who adjust their judgments to their action the most are also those who behave more selfishly, and whose hypothetical and actual decisions differ the most. This confirms that although it is rational to make selfish decisions from an economic point of view, individuals care about their self-image. By being hypocritical, they both pursue their self-interest and try to keep up appearances of pro-social motivations. However, the most selfish players do not adjust their judgments sufficiently to judge their decision as being fair, having to assume the violation of the fairness norm.

¹ Our approach differs from philosophical theories of justice based on an ideal observer in the position of a hypothetical third party, or from a judicial spectator theory in which judgments are made by real third parties (Hume). It differs from Rawls's contractarian model of impartiality, in which individuals in original positions choose distributive rules under a veil of ignorance, knowing that they will be stakeholders in the same situation (on the impartial spectator in theories of justice, see Konow, 2009).

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