



The Dark Triad of personality and utilitarian moral judgment: The mediating role of Honesty/Humility and Harm/Care



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ABSTRACT

Recent research on moral judgment has highlighted that socially aversive personality styles are linked to a utilitarian inclination in sacrificial dilemmas. The present research aims at extending these findings by testing some potential mediating factors, namely Honesty/Humility and Harm/Care. Our results showed that the Dark Triad of personality was positively related to utilitarianism and Harm/Care and Honesty/Humility negatively mediated this relationship, revealing that utilitarian inclinations are expressed by a lower concern for the no-harm principle and for prosocial behaviors. Among the Dark Triad, psychopathy appeared to be the only independent predictor of Harm/Care and utilitarianism, suggesting a stronger predictive value of psychopathy in explaining utilitarian judgment. Taken together, the results suggest that utilitarian inclination could arise from an inhibition of moral deontology.

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1. Introduction

At the end of the movie *Star Trek 2: The Wrath of Khan*, Mr. Spock makes the self-sacrificing decision to enter the starship's radioactive engine room with the aim of fixing the warp drive. When Captain Kirk asks him why, Mr. Spock replies that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one. Mr. Spock's moral reasoning is a clear-cut illustration of utilitarianism insofar as the sacrificial action is designed to maximize the aggregate well-being. This reasoning contrasts with a deontic approach according to which nothing justifies the violation of a basic moral rule, like taking an innocent life, regardless of the goodness of the consequences.

The introduction of sacrificial dilemma scenarios have illustrated that moral decisions are affected by both emotion and reason (Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004). Specifically, deontic responses (e.g., it is not morally acceptable to kill 1 in order to save 5) are assumed to rely on intuitive/emotional processing, while utilitarian responses (e.g., it is morally acceptable to kill 1 in order to save 5) are assumed to emerge from a colder, deliberative processing. Consistent with these perspectives, utilitarian judgments are predicted by a rational thinking style rather than an intuitive thinking style (Bartels, 2008). Besides, experimentally induced reflectiveness prior to moral dilemma questions have been

shown to generate higher utilitarian inclinations (Paxton, Ungar, & Greene, 2011). Moreover, the utilitarian option is consistently found to be more morally acceptable for individuals exhibiting higher working memory capacities (Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008). The fact that utilitarianism stems from controlled processes has led some scientist to contend that it is the optimal moral judgment (see Greene et al., 2009).

It is worth noting that utilitarianism does not exclusively originate from deliberative processing, the same pattern of judgment can also be observed in people with emotional and decision-making deficiencies. Neuroscience research has revealed that patients with damage to the ventromedial pre-frontal cortex (vmPFC) show a greater preference for utilitarianism in moral judgments (Koenigs et al., 2007). Reduced connectivity in vmPFC is a neurobiological characteristic of clinical psychopaths (see Motzkin, Newman, Kiehl, & Koenigs, 2011). However, no relationships between psychopathy and utilitarian responses to personal moral dilemmas were observed (Glenn, Raine, Schug, Young, & Hauser, 2009). In addition, psychopathic offenders did not report significantly more utilitarian preferences than both non-psychopathic offenders and healthy control subjects in personal dilemmas (Cima, Tonnaer, & Hauser, 2010). Conversely, low-anxious psychopaths were found to endorse more the utilitarian solution to personal dilemmas than high-anxious psychopaths and non-psychopaths (Koenigs, Kruepke, Zeier, & Newman, 2012). At the subclinical level, interpersonally aversive traits like subclinical psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated to a higher utilitarian inclination (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011). For the first time,

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Bartels and Pizzaro showed that, at the subclinical level, emotionally callous personalities are more prone to utilitarianism.

The mixed results reported herein do not afford evidence regarding the specific type of emotional deficit that could lie behind utilitarian inclination (i.e., lack of empathy, guilt) (Cima et al., 2010). Moral decisions based on the perspective of hurting or killing someone raise the question of one's ability to experience social and moral emotions. As essential attributes of subclinical aversive personalities, there are a lack of empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013) and a lack of prosociality (Jonason, Li, & Teicher, 2010). A relative inability to be prosocially concerned and to be morally disturbed in response to someone else's suffering or killing may influence responses to moral dilemmas. In line with this rationale, the present research focuses on the Dark Triad of personality (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and on its interplays with prosocial orientations (Honesty/Humility) and with a moral group of virtue concerned with empathy (Harm/Care).

1.1. The Dark Triad of Personality and Utilitarian judgment

The Dark Triad includes psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. Subclinical psychopathy involves thrill seeking impulses, emotional insensitivity, deceitfulness, and remorselessness (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006). Machiavellianism is commonly associated with manipulative and deceptive proclivities, cynical worldviews, and a disregard for conventional morality (Christie & Geis, 1970). The latter is widely portrayed as an exaggerated feeling of superiority, a high level of self-centeredness and self-love.

The issue of dealing with the Dark Triad of personality as a unitary construct or as separate dimensions has been contentious since its introduction (see Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). Evidence for unification is supported by evolutionary arguments according to which the Dark Triad traits are associated with adaptive mating strategies (Jonason & Buss, 2012; Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason, Luévano, & Adams, 2012). Indeed, the Dark Triad show overlap in exploitative short-term mating (see Jonason & Webster, 2010). Nonetheless, distinctions among the Dark Triad do appear in certain circumstances when controlling for shared variance among the members. For instance, the Dark Triad traits correlate more strongly with Honesty/Humility than with agreeableness (see Lee & Ashton, 2005), but, when controlling for shared variance, psychopathy predicts more strongly agreeableness than Honesty/Humility; conversely, narcissism and Machiavellianism predict more strongly Honesty/Humility than agreeableness (Jonason & McCain, 2012). The Dark Triad share a common core of empathy deficits (Ali, Amorim, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2009; Jones & Paulhus, 2011), but when controlling for shared variance, psychopathy appears to be the only independent predictor of affective empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). In sum, as the Dark Triad members have distinct effects on honesty/humility and have different levels of empathy deficits when controlling for shared variance, it is more useful, in regard to our current purpose, to treat them as distinct traits. Because affective empathy deficit probably contribute to influence Dark personalities' utilitarian inclination, we have reasons to think that psychopathy would be the most powerful and the only independent predictor of utilitarianism. On the contrary, as narcissism was found to be the weakest correlate of affective empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012), it is expected that it would be the weakest predictor of utilitarianism.

1.2. Honesty/Humility, Harm/Care, and Utilitarianism

The addition of Honesty/Humility personality to the previous B5/FFM helped to better elucidate individual differences in a wide

range of social behaviors that were not satisfactorily captured by agreeableness and the other B5 traits (Lee & Ashton, 2005). The Honesty/Humility factor structure embraces various facets such as fairness, modesty, honesty, and greed-avoidance (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Honesty/Humility appears to be a positive correlate of preference for ethical business decisions (Lee, Ashton, Morrison, Cordery, & Dunlop, 2008), for fair allocations in the dictator and the ultimatum games (Hilbig & Zettler, 2009), and for a cooperative choice in a prisoner dilemma game (Zettler, Hilbig, & Heydasch, 2013). Conversely, a low degree of Honesty/Humility predicts workplace delinquency (Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005), and sexual harassment tendencies (Lee, Gizzarone, & Ashton, 2003). In addition, a low level of Honesty/Humility seems to be consistent with manipulative and exploitative proclivities (Ashton & Lee, 2007). This description is corroborated by the observed inverse relationships between the Dark Triad traits and Honesty/Humility (see Jonason & McCain, 2012; Lee & Ashton, 2005). In sum, a low honesty/humility level is related to poor altruistic and prosocial concerns. Because it mirrors some attributes of the Dark Triad traits, a low Honesty/Humility level should be more likely to be connected with utilitarianism.

Further than the critical importance of subclinical traits and personality factors in understanding utilitarian judgment, a specific attention should be paid to individual differences in moral values that orient decisions. Moral foundations theory provides a set of psychological conformations upon which human societies erect their moral standards (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Among these five ecumenical categories, Harm/Care is of critical interest in context of sacrificial dilemmas. Indeed, it accounts for our evolutionary acquired ability to be empathetic and to be attached to the protection of people's physical integrity. It entails the sense of compassion, the ability to feel the pain and the suffering of others.

Recent findings showed that deontic and utilitarian choices are not inversely related (Conway & Gawronski, 2013). More specifically, some people may have a relative and ambivalent preference for the utilitarian option without categorically thinking that the opposite principle is incorrect. Moreover, there is an association between moral identity and utilitarian judgment (Conway & Gawronski, 2013). Moral identity is the propensity to consider moral traits (e.g., compassionate, caring) as an essential underpinning of one's self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Some people may maintain utilitarianism as a moral finality, as a deliberative volitional resolution to deem the sacrificial act to be a necessary evil even when basic moral traits relevant to deontism are thought of as self-defining. Hence, integrating people's evaluation of the moral relevance of Harm/Care is fundamental to demonstrate that subclinical antisocial personalities are prone to utilitarianism less because of the endorsement of utilitarian principle *per se* than because of the inhibition of the deontic inclination associated with a relative emotional apathy. If the positive relationship between the Dark Triad traits and utilitarian judgments is partly explained by a poorer concern for the no-harm sacrosanct principle, we should observe a negative mediating effect of Harm/Care. If our reasoning is correct, we should also observe a negative mediating role of Honesty/Humility, suggesting that the Dark Triad traits relate to utilitarian inclinations because of the lack of empathy and of a low preoccupation about the welfare of others, which is inconsistent with the promotion of aggregate well-being.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

One hundred and eighty participants ($M = 37.06$, $SD = 12.99$; 114 females) with a unique IP address were recruited on line via

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