

Is virtue its own reward? Self-sacrificial decisions for the sake of fairness

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Abstract

We investigate the ways in which concern for fairness influences decision-making. We use a paradigm previously shown to illustrate circumstances under which a decision maker sacrifices some of his or her own potential for financial gain to punish or reward someone who has demonstrated a prior intent to be either unfair or fair to another person. By ruling out alternative hypotheses related to the original finding, we obtain evidence that “virtue is its own reward”: Decision makers make self-sacrificing allocations, despite the absence of short- or long-term benefits for doing so. Extending the generality of this effect, we also identify circumstances under which the desire for virtuous fairness produces decisions that are *not* self-sacrificial and *do* reward someone whose motives seemingly include a willingness to exploit others. These special circumstances apparently indicate the decision maker’s belief that “two wrongs don’t make a right.” Thus, these studies show that the fairness motive and moral concerns can influence decisions that have economic impact. We extend the range of effects in other studies to include condemnation of interactional injustice and we discuss implications of the overall set of studies in terms of three new foci for attention: A focus on the perpetrator, a focus on the victim, and a focus on the offensiveness of the act itself. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA). All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Moral judgment and the condemnation of others, including fictional others and others who have not harmed the self, is a universal and essential feature of human social life (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999, p. 574).

People undertake to punish others when they have no concrete or immediate “interest” in doing so—when they have nothing directly to gain by punishing, and there may be some risk or cost in doing so (Fiske, 1991a, p. 192).

Are humans inevitably selfish? Can all human behaviors be reduced to self-interest? As the opening quotations suggest, we think not. They indicate that people sometimes seek to punish the moral transgressions of others—even those with whom they have no relationship—not only without any instrumental self-benefit but also (at times) despite burdens imposed. Violations of fairness norms fit that description,

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but, as we will show, existing organizational justice literature derives fairness-oriented reactions by assuming universal self-interest. We propose that such reactions reflect the presence of endogenous “deontic emotions” (from the Greek root *deon* for obligation or duty)—emotions elicited by perceiving the transgression itself, just as aesthetic emotions (e.g., the enjoyment elicited by viewing a dramatic sunset) are endogenous and intrinsic to the experience itself. The intrinsic, endogenous nature of such reactions is expressed in a common colloquial expression regarding moralistic reactions: “Virtue is its own reward.”¹

To preclude self-interest, our research has respondents function as observers of a moral transgression between two parties with whom they have no relationship (i.e., as disinterested third parties in the sense of the opening quote from Fiske, 1991a). Our respondents never know the identity of either of the other two parties, the victim or the perpetrator. Respondents who express antipathy toward the perpetrator of a transgression or who punish that perpetrator at the cost of their own self-interests therefore act consistently with the opening quotes from theorists who hypothesized the existence of such behavior. In our final discussion, we speculate about possible links between our results and emergent theories on “deonance” (Folger, 2001; see also Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001), which aim to explain moral emotions and reactions to others’ actions as morally creditable or blameworthy (see also the attribution-of-blame based Fairness Theory of accountability, Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001). Our next section contextualizes the deontic approach by distinguishing it from two others.

2. A triad of justice approaches

Thinking about justice in moral terms beyond self-interest contrasts with two traditional approaches. We refer to the three as material, relational-identity, and deontic. Even though the moral or deontic approach (e.g., Folger, 1994, 1998, 2001) is much more recent than the other two, some commentaries already distinguish among them (e.g., Colquitt & Greenberg, 2001; Cropanzano, Rupp, Mohler, & Schminke, 2001). We start with the former commentary.

As an explanation of procedural justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and as characterized by Lind and Tyler (1988), the first approach “contends that people attend to fairness insofar as it allows them to gauge the degree to which their long-term economic interests are enhanced or protected” (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2001, p. 221). The second, or group value or relational model (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992), “contends that people care about fairness insofar as it allows them to gauge the degree to which they are valued by the collectives to which they belong”

¹ The phrase “virtue is its own reward” merely emphasizes the endogenous, intrinsic (internally motivated) nature of a for-its-own-sake response, consistent with how Fiske describes moral motives to respond in accord with norms of sociality: “Each of the relational models of sociality,” which give rise to norms, “comprises an autonomous motivational goal [which] People seek...for its own sake” (Fiske, 1991b, p. 183). Similarly, Batson makes the following distinctions: “An *instrumental goal* is sought as a means to reach some other goal; an *ultimate goal* is sought as an end in itself; an *unintended consequence* is a result of acting to reach a goal but is not itself sought as a goal” (1994, p. 604). We treat the deontic goal of punishing moral transgressions as an ultimate goal, which is all that “virtue is its own reward” is meant to imply. In Batson’s terms, retribution is an end in itself rather than the instrumental means to achieving some other ultimate goal (e.g., self-interest)—although, as Batson notes, benefits serving self-interest might result as unintended consequences from pursuing a deontic ultimate goal. Batson refers to *principism* as a driving force of human nature independent of egoism, relational concerns, or empathy—a “motivation with the ultimate goal of upholding some moral principle, such as justice” (1994, p. 608).

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