

The Power of the Cognition/Emotion Distinction for Morality

Bazerman, Gino, Shu, and Tsay (2011) argue that separate decision making leads to more emotive and less reasoned decisions than joint decision making. Kaplan (2014) writes that our explanation creates a false dichotomy between the emotional self and the cognitive self. His reasoning is based on the conscious experience of coexisting emotion and cognition, the role of emotion in joint decision making, and the role of cognition in separate decision making.

We agree. Emotions and cognitions co-occur, and the processes coexist in both joint and separate modes of decision making. We have never claimed otherwise. Our article made the directional claim that “when people think about one option at a time (in separate evaluation mode), they are more likely to base their moral judgments on emotions than when they compare two or more options simultaneously (in joint evaluation mode)” (Bazerman et al., 2011, p. 290). We posit and substantiate through empirical evidence that emotion and cognition play relatively larger roles in separate and joint evaluation modes of decision making, respectively; we do not claim that either emotion or cognition is absent in either decision mode.

Kaplan’s most critical error is to call the emotion/cognition distinction false. This real distinction is based on neuropsychological evidence (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001), and it allows clear psychological predictions that can identify strategies to improve decisions.

Cushman, Tsay, Greene, and Bazerman (n.d.) further document the ability to make psychological predictions based on the relative weights of cognition versus emotion. When faced with the classic trolley problem, most people report that it is acceptable to turn a switch to save five people, even though turning the switch will kill one innocent person. People commonly explain this choice based on utilitarian, calculative logic (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008). Yet most people find it unacceptable to push an innocent bystander off a bridge to stop the trolley and save the same five people. When questioned about the reasoning behind this choice, people more commonly invoke emotions—self-report evidence that is substantiated by neuroimaging data showing greater activation in the associated regions of the brain (Greene et al., 2001). In fact, when people are asked to suppress their emotions as they consider personal dilemmas like the footbridge one, they are more likely to choose the utilitarian option than if they are not asked to regulate their emotions (Lee & Gino, 2013).

Cushman et al. (n.d.) show that choice in the trolley/footbridge problem could be affected by the differential input of cognition versus emotions in separate versus joint decisions. Cushman et al. (n.d.) adjusted the classic switch (trolley) problem so that one would save three lives at the cost of one life by choosing to turn the switch; 76% of the

participants did so. When considering the choice to push one person off the bridge (footbridge problem) and save five lives, only 41% of participants decided to push. People were more willing to switch to save three lives than to push to save five lives when assessing the scenarios separately. This result was reversed when people were in joint evaluation mode. Cushman et al. (n.d.) asked a third group of study participants to consider a situation in which two trains were coming down two different tracks. Three people were about to die on Track A, and five on Track B. Participants could save three lives on Track A by turning the switch, save five lives by pushing on Track B, or do nothing. In this joint evaluation mode, people shifted toward utilitarian, calculative logic: 18% turned the switch to save three lives; 45% pushed to save five lives. With more information and more clarity, utilitarian analyses became more dominant.

Bohnet, van Geen, and Bazerman (2012) showed that joint decision making could be used to make decisions less emotional and less subject to gender bias. First, they replicate the documented effect that when people judge job candidates one at a time, they discriminate based on gender by favoring men on quantitative tasks and women on verbal tasks. They then show that when participants compare two candidates simultaneously, they use performance-based data and eliminate their tendency to discriminate based on gender stereotypes. Arguing that joint decision making eliminates emotionally biased discrimination, Bohnet et al. (2012) offer joint decision making as a strategy for creating a more just society.

We encourage readers of Kaplan (2014) to avoid being lulled by his false claim that we see cognition and emotion as two separate processes. Rather, as we have documented with substantial evidence, people vary in the degree to which their decisions are affected by emotion versus cognition, the context in which each process is likely to dominate is predictable, and we can use this knowledge to create a more just society.

References

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