Moral Judgment:
The Influence of Ethical Ideology

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In order to determine when ethical ideology influences judgments of morality, individuals who endorsed an absolutist, exceptionist, subjectivist, or situationist ideology morally evaluated an actor linked, at varying levels of responsibility, to positive or negative outcomes. As predicted, absolutists judged the actor more harshly than exceptionists, but only when the described actor has foreseen or intended to produce a highly negative consequence.

In a recent study of ethical judgments of psychological research, Schlenker and Forsyth (1977) found a wide range of opinions when they asked people to evaluate the morality of Milgram and his obedience research (1965). Although some people condemned the study for its use of deception and psychologically stressful procedures, others dismissed these negative consequences as slight in comparison to the scientific contributions of the findings. These researchers explained their findings by suggesting moral judgments are influenced by the perceiver's *ethical ideology*, and presented a typology of ethical positions based on two factors: relativism and idealism. First, relativistic individuals reject the possibility of formulating and relying on moral principles when making moral judgments, while nonrelativistic evaluators accept such principles. Second, idealistic persons tend to assume that desirable consequences can always be obtained without violating moral guidelines, while less idealistic individuals recognize positive and negative consequences are often intermixed. When both of these factors are considered, they yield the 2 X 2 classification of ethical ideologies featured in Table 1. Schlenker and Forsyth (1977) found that people who were both low in relativism but high in idealism (*absolutists*) tended to focus on the negative aspects of Milgram's research, those low in both relativism and idealism (*exceptionists*) focused on the positive aspects, while relativists (*subjectivists* and *situationists*) took both positive and negative aspects of the research into account when formulating their judgments.

The current research attempted to extend these findings to judgments that do not involve psychological research while also defining the conditions that minimize or accentuate the impact of ethical ideology on moral judgments. Individuals who endorsed one of the four ethical ideologies based on relativism

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TABLE 1 Taxonomy of Ethical Ideologies

	High Relativism	Low Relativism
High Idealism	*Situationist* Rejects moral rules; advocates individualistic analysis of each act in each situation; relativistic.	*Absolutist* Assumes that the best possible outcome can always be achieved by following universal moral rules.
Low Idealism	*Subjectivist* Appraisals based on personal values and perspective rather than universal moral principles; relativistic.	*Exceptionist* Moral absolutes guide judgments but pragmatically open to exceptions to these standards; utilitarian.

and idealism judged the morality of an actor linked, with varying degrees of responsibility, to actions with positive and negative outcomes. Following Heider (1958), five levels of responsibility were included: (1) association, where actors are vaguely related to the outcome; (2) causality, where actors cause consequences that they could not foresee; (3) foreseeability, where individuals produce unintended, but clearly foreseeable consequences; (4) intentionality, where outcomes are both foreseeable and intended; and (5) justification, where excusing and justifying factors are related to the outcome. Attribution of responsibility has been found to increase directly from level 1 to level 4, and decrease at level 5 (Shaw & Sulzer, 1964).

Given the increased salience of negative consequences produced by absolutists' (low relativism/high idealism) emphasis on achieving "good" by conformity to universal moral principles (Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), subjects who endorse this ethical ideology should judge the actor who produces negative consequences more harshly than the more lenient exceptionists (low relativism/low idealism). These judges assume that negative consequences—being often unavoidable—are to be balanced against the more important positive consequences gained and should therefore formulate more positive moral appraisals. The more neutral position of the situationists and subjectivists (high idealistic and low idealistic relativists, respectively) should, in turn, culminate in judgments which fall between the extremes represented by absolutists and exceptionists.

Two conditions which could limit the pervasiveness of the differences produced by ethical ideology were considered. First, because the contrast between absolutists and exceptionists stems from a differential salience of negative consequences, the gap between these ideologies should only be in evidence when the consequences of action are negative rather than positive. Second, ideological differences should be more pronounced when the actor is responsible for producing these negative effects. Although absolutists attend

more closely to negative consequences, when the quality of the consequences conveys no information about the actor's moral integrity, since he or she is not responsible for the outcome, then perceptions concerning consequences will not influence moral evaluations of the actor. Hence, effects of ethical ideology on moral judgments should only be obtained when negative effects occur at the "higher" levels of responsibility.

METHOD

Ethics Position Questionnaire. Ethical ideology was measured using a revised version of the instrument described by Schlenker and Forsyth (1977). Developed using factor analysis and traditional scaling methods, the revised EPQ is comprised of two ten-item scales which measure idealism and relativism, respectively. Items such as, "One should never psychologically or physically harm another person," and, "If an action could harm an innocent other, then it should not be done," make up the idealism scale, and the relativism measure contains items such as, "What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another," and "Whether or not a lie is judged to be moral or immoral depends upon the circumstances surrounding the action." Respondents indicate degree of agreement with each item using a nine-point scale ranging from "Completely Disagree" to "Completely Agree." Forsyth (1980) reports the idealism and relativism scales have moderate test-retest reliabilities (rs = .67 & .66, respectively), correlate significantly with the corresponding Schlenker-Forsyth measures (rs = .69 & .34, respectively), possess adequate internal consistency (αs = .80 & .73, respectively), and are orthogonal to one another (r = −.07). Additional information is reported elsewhere (Forsyth, 1980).

Subjects. The 32 males and 32 females who completed the materials for the experiment were selected from a larger sample of introductory psychology students who completed the EPQ in their classrooms. Respondents with the most extreme EPQ scores were selected until 16 individuals—8 males and 8 females—were identified for each of the four ethical ideologies.

Stimuli. The scenarios used were drawn from Shaw's Attribution of Responsibility Questionnaire (Shaw & Sulzer, 1964). Each story describes the extent to which a person named Perry is responsible for some event. The five levels of responsibility include association, causation, foreseeability, intentionality, and justification. In addition, the described outcomes vary in value, being either positive or negative. Some examples are:

> Perry was watching a house that was burning down. As he watched, a small child appeared at a window and called for help. Most of the people there thought there was so much fire that no one should go in the house. Perry ran in and pulled the child to safety. (IV/+outcome).

> Another boy tried to kill Perry with a large knife. Perry grabbed the knife and stabbed the other boy to death to keep from being killed himself. (V/-outcome).

Procedure. Subjects completed the experimental booklets in testing booths under the direction of a male experimenter. After reading each of the randomly

ordered stories, the subject was asked several questions. Embedded in these items was the query, "How moral do you think Perry was?" which was followed by a 12-point scale with endpoints labeled "immoral" and "moral." Since the two stories were used to represent each cell of the 5 (responsibility) × 2 (outcome) factorial design, responses to these two stories were averaged to yield a single moral judgment score for each cell.

RESULTS

Sex of subject and ethical ideology served as the between-subjects factors and outcome (positive and negative), and actor's level of responsibility (levels 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) as the within-subject factors in a 2 × 4 × 2 × 5 split-plot analysis of variance. Effects of outcome, level of responsibility, and their interaction were partially qualified by the three-way interaction of ideology, outcome, and responsibility shown in Table 2; $F(12, 244) = 1.85$, $p < .05$. The predicted differences between exceptionists and absolutists were obtained. When the actor produced a negative consequence which he either foresaw or intended, absolutists judged the actor more negatively than did exceptionists, while relativists' attributions fell intermediate. When outcome was positive, judges of the different ethical ideologies were in agreement. Although this difference between absolutists and exceptionists was also anticipated for justified actions (level 5), harsher evaluations were instead displayed by situationists rather than absolutists. They evaluated the actor whose responsibility for negative consequences was partially mitigated by justifying factors more negatively than did all other evaluators.

Apart from specific differences due to ethical ideology, increases in responsiblity were associated with more favorable judgments of morality when the consequences were positive and more unfavorable judgments when the consequences were negative. At all the higher levels of responsibility—foreseeability, intentionality, and justification—the actor who was linked with a negative outcome was judged to be less moral than the actor who produced a positive outcome, but at lower levels—association and causality—outcome and morality were unrelated. Moral evaluations were most extreme at level 4, and dropped down significantly at both levels 3 and 5 ($p < .05$). A sex by outcome interaction simply showed that females' evaluations were more positive than those of males when the outcome was good; $F(1, 56) = 4.45$, $p < .05$. The means for good and bad outcomes, respectively, were: males = 8.57 and 6.19; females = 9.02 and 6.19.

DISCUSSION

In general, individuals whose actions culminated in negative outcomes were more severely judged than those who produced positive outcomes, but only if they were responsible for the consequences. However, this link between responsibility and moral judgment was greatest for subjects who were identified by their responses on the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) as absolutists. These idealistic, nonrelativistic individuals, when compared to exceptionists

TABLE 2 Effects of Ethical Ideology, Outcome, and Responsibility on Moral Judgments

Ethical Ideology	*Outcome Quality*	*Level of Responsibility*				
		I	*II*	*III*	*IV*	*V*
Exceptionists	Positive	8.22^{a}	8.00^{a}	7.66^{a}	11.22^{a}	8.75^{a}
	Negative	8.22^{a}	8.88^{ab}	4.91^{c}	2.28^{b}	7.50^{b}
Absolutists	Positive	8.72^{a}	8.53^{ab}	7.25^{ab}	11.72^{a}	8.88^{a}
	Negative	8.81^{a}	9.38^{b}	3.84^{d}	1.06^{c}	7.28^{b}
Subjectivists	Positive	7.75^{a}	8.19^{a}	7.56^{a}	11.06^{a}	8.38^{ab}
	Negative	8.28^{a}	8.69^{ab}	4.72^{cd}	1.88^{bc}	7.91^{ab}
Situationists	Positive	8.91^{a}	8.19^{a}	6.44^{b}	11.66^{a}	8.81^{a}
	Negative	8.78^{a}	9.50^{b}	4.56^{cd}	1.19^{c}	6.19^{c}

NOTE: The higher the score, the more favorable the attribution of morality. Within any level of responsibility, means without a common superscript differ at $p = .05$.

(nonidealistic, nonrelativistic), attributed less morality to the actor who either foreseeably or intentionally produced a negative outcome. Relativistic attributors' (subjectivists and situationists) judgments were, for the most part, more moderate, unless justificatory factors were present (that is, level 5 responsibility). The negative consequences of level 5 situations used in this research were quite severe—the self-defense killing of an aggressor—and situationists were apparently reluctant to accept self-defense as an excuse. Subjectivists, on the other hand, did not differentially evaluate actors whose production of either negative or positive consequences was justified.

Before considering the implications of these findings, several limitations of the current research should be noted. First, although the use of a range of stimulus materials which systematically varies both responsibility and outcome helps in determining when the ideology effects first noted by Schlenker and Forsyth (1977) will be obtained, care should nonetheless be taken in generalizing from these questionnaire findings to judgments of morality formulated during ongoing interpersonal relationships. Second, the dependent measure used in this study asked, "How moral do you think X was?" and no attempt was made to define the concept of morality for subjects. Although this wording was designed to directly measure morality (culpable responsibility for outcomes, see Harvey & Rule, 1978), the difference between this measure and other measures of morality which emphasize responsibility (Shaw & Sulzer, 1964) or openness to sanction (Sedlak, 1979) limits interstudy comparison.

These problems aside, the major implications of this research concern the impact of ethical ideology on moral judgments. Consistent with past research (for example, Sedlak, 1979; Shaw & Sulzer, 1964), moral judgments were a function of actor responsibility and consequence quality, but the size of this relationship depended, in part, on the judge's ethical ideology. When considered in the context of other research findings (for example, Forsyth, 1980; Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), a clearer picture of the judgmental patterns of individuals who

endorse the different ideologies begins to emerge. Absolutists, relative to others, attribute extra responsibility to those who produce negative outcomes, judge these outcomes less favorably, and attribute less morality to those who are to blame. Exceptionists, on the other hand, tend to be more favorable due to their willingness to overlook negative consequences and situationists are less likely to allow for justifying factors when extremely negative consequences are involved. These results suggest that the ethical ideologies assessed by the EPQ account for a portion of the systematic differences between individuals making moral judgments, and recommend the application of the measure in related areas of research to determine if these ideological differences extend to juridic judgments, dispositional attributions, and behavioral variations.

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