Gaining Perspective on Perspective Taking

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A COMMENTARY ON Irina Cojuharenco and Francesco Sguera (2015), "When Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking Matter for Ethical Judgment: The Role of Time Hurriedness," *J Bus Ethics* 130(3): 717–725, http://doi.org/10.0.3.239/s10551-014-2259-8

ABSTRACT

Cojuharenco and Sguera's study shows that both perspective taking (empathy) and empathic concern (intuitionism) can reduce the acceptability of lying. This critique outlines a number of conceptual difficulties and limitations with their dualistic model. Specifically, they conflate ethical reasoning with perspective taking and empathic concern with intuitionism. Moreover, by limiting moral thinking to these binary options it restricts the ways in which ethical judgements can be made.

COJUHARENCO AND SGUERA (2015) argue for a dual process model of ethical judgements. Specifically, ethical judgments can take the form of two routes: reasoning or intuition. The ethical reasoning route, they argue, necessitates placing oneself into another's situation as a way of capturing the relevant aspects of the dilemma and then applying principles to make moral judgements. The intuitive route uses emotional 'gut reactions' to make ethical decisions by relying on empathic concern (compassion and warmth) towards others. Given these

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two perspectives, the authors investigate the extent to which these routes are impacted by time hurriedness. In regards to the moral acceptability of lying to protect a company, the authors found that those individuals in a hurry (had less time) resorted to empathic concern or intuition, whereas those not hurried (had more time) used reasoning or perspective taking to make ethical judgements.

Unfortunately, Cojuharenco and Sguera's dual process model rests on a number of conceptual inconsistencies which detract from the perspective taking and empathetic routes they espouse. Perhaps most troubling, however, is that they present a false dichotomy between these two positions that calls into question the conclusions of their research.

The Perspective Taking Route

Although defining empathy is difficult, the notion of 'stepping into another's shoes', 'taking another perspective', or 'understanding another's point of view' all tend to fall under the general concept. Empathy, in other words, has a cognitive dimension whereby the simulation of another's beliefs and desires is a necessary component to understand their moral predicament. Unfortunately, this is not how Cojuharenco and Sguera define perspective taking. The authors define it as the decision maker imagining "himself or herself in the situation of the party who may be harmed by the chosen course of action" (2015: 717). The problem is that in imagining oneself in a particular situation, he or she is not taking the perspective of another person but merely projecting their own beliefs, wants, and values. In projecting one's own mind onto the situation, there is no guarantee the other person will share such beliefs and values and make comparable moral judgements.

This criticism is supported by the contemporary literature on perspective taking/empathy. John Deigh (1995: 759), for example, defines empathy as involving, "taking another's perspective and imaginatively participating in this other person's life." In other words, an individual doesn't project their own mental states onto another person, but understands *what it is like* to be another in those particular circumstances. Most importantly, in order to empathize or take another's perspective, the individual must quarantine their own emotions and mental states to avoid contamination, while at the same time repre-

senting the targets situation and thereby "preserving a separate sense of self" (Coplan 2011: 15). Unfortunately, the authors have misdefined empathy and, therefore, it leaves open the possibility of individuals coming to asymmetrical justifications about lying if the projective beliefs are difference between the empathizer and empathizee.

The authors might argue, in response, I am being disingenuous to their definition of 'perspective taking' because one of their examples clearly falls within the parameters of empathy defined above. Here is the example they use:

> For example, in deciding whether to support the sale of a potentially hazardous product, a marketing professional may benefit from understanding the customer's perspective on product use and the impact that the product may have for the health of the customer. The ability of the individual to imagine how decision situations look from the point of view of the other person, what interests, needs, and concerns the other person may face is typically referred to as perspective taking, and it develops gradually from childhood to adulthood. (Cojuharenco and Sguera 2015: 717)

In this example, the sales professional was clearly taking the customer's perspective on the products use and impact and seems to quarantine their own mental states accordingly. But implicit in this example is the understanding that the perspective taker and other individual's beliefs, desires and emotions will be congruent. But the ability to step into the shoes of another has been called into question by cross-cultural studies. For example, research has found that Americans tend to have difficulty perspective-taking beyond their own egoistic view because American culture emphasizes the independence or separation of self and other. In contrast, Chinese individuals tend to have an easier time perspective taking because Chinese culture emphasizes the interdependence of self and other (Wu and Keysar 2007). It is the difference between American individualism and Chinese collectivism which can account for one's empathetic abilities. In the example above, it's questionable how helpful perspective taking will be for an American marketing manager making ethical judgements if their self-orientation prevents or inhibits them from empathizing with others from other cultures. Moreover, because Cojuharenco and Sguera already recognize the role of universal principles in making moral judgements, a more effective strategy would be the application of a principle such as, "Do not market products that harm customers" sans

empathy. The extent to which people use perspective taking as a necessary component of moral judgments should be questioned.

The Empathic Route

The second route to ethical judgements is what Cojuharenco and Sguera call empathic concern or intuition. They argue (2015: 717) these kinds of judgements are fast and emotionally-based requiring that "the decision maker is able to rely on feelings of compassion and warmth toward the party who may be harmed by the chosen course of action." To illustrate this route, they suggest a marketing professional would be unwilling to lie about hazardous products if they feel compassion towards the customer and worry about the products consequences to them.

To support their claim, Cojuharenco and Sguera's cite Haidt's (2001) social intuitionist model. Haidt's intuitionist model states that moral judgements do not depend on well thought out reasons or logical arguments but on intuitions grounded in the evolutionary development of emotions such as disgust, contempt, and anger (Schnall et al 2008). Generally speaking, moral conclusions are drawn first and reasons/arguments to support these judgments are given post hoc.

But their appeal to Haidt's work is problematic. If our empathic concern towards others is intuitive and spontaneous, the assessment of moral dilemmas that fall outside of evolutionary-primed emotions may fail to register. For example, the marketing of deodorant does not have the emotional reactive consequences as, say, the marketing of 'knives' or 'sharp pointy sticks' to children. Similarly, other issues, such as insider trading or CEO pay do not have the same visceral emotional reaction and thus may fall outside the intuitionist moral framework. It's hard to see how evolution has prepared us to address some of the contemporary ethical issues within business (Pava 2009).

Most worrying, the authors conceptually confuse intuition with *sympathy* or fellow-feeling. To sympathize entails a heightened sensitivity to another's suffering or potential suffering which can arouse a genuine concern to help. Although, intuitive moral judgment might rely on compassion and concern for others in some circumstances, as noted earlier, research shows it's disgust, contempt, and anger that are the main moral motivators. Moreover, Haidt's model does not rule out other moral judgements based on universal moral principles, human

rights, and other ethical norms formed through social processes as relevant to ethical decision making.

The Acceptability of Lying

Despite these problems, Cojuharenco and Sguera argue that perspective taking and empathic concern should be seen as a continuum of sorts, whereby individuals, given the time sensitive nature of specific circumstances, may use them more or less to shape ethical judgements. Unfortunately, Cojuharenco and Sguera's dual-process model create a false dichotomy: perspective taking or empathic concern. Their approach fails to consider the extent to which moral judgements are shaped by peers (Keith, et al 2003), institutional codes of ethics/ laws (Kaptein and Schwartz 2008), and/or obligations and duties. For example, an employee might lie to someone from the Environmental Protection Agency about the dumping of toxic material into a river because their supervisor told them to do so. A CEO might lie to the media about an impending takeover because insider trading laws forbid such disclosure before the public is notified. Or, perhaps, after reflecting on the morality of lying to customers, an employee decides it can be justified on a utilitarian duty to maximize the good. In all of these cases, it's unclear what role perspective or empathic concern play in such moral judgements when one can appeal to a host of other moral justifications beyond the binary alternatives presented.

Recent research also suggests that one's ability for ethical concern has two important antecedents: the extent to which one values other's welfare and adopting another's perspective (Batson et al 2007). In other words, for those one likes, loves and feels protective towards, the more likely they are to adopt his or her perspective and thereby express empathic concern. This conclusion is contrary to Cojuharenco and Sguera's account of moral justification. First, if empathic concern is not separate from perspective taking, but necessary for it to occur, the dualistic model collapses. Second, the moral justification of lying to protect the company, if grounded in empathic concern, will be highly contingent upon the extent others are valued. Although Cojuharenco and Sguera are silent on this issue, one should see a greater decrease in the acceptability of lying between individuals and those they like, love or feel protective towards in association with time hurriedness.

Conclusion

Cojuharenco and Sguera present an interesting application of perspective taking and empathic concern to the moral judgement of lying. Given time pressures in today's work environment, they found hurriedness played an important role in regards to whether empathy or intuitive formed ethical decisions were used. However, their conclusions are founded on conceptual confusions that need to be carefully assessed in order to provide greater clarity to their arguments.

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