Moral illusions

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Abstract

Just as optical illusions can trick our visual senses, our moral sense can be misled by moral illusions. In this thesis, I investigate whether moral illusions can arise from mental shortcuts (availability bias), cognitive biases (attribution bias), contextual factors (possibility to avoid information), and decision rules (democratic decision-making).

The results in the thesis provide two main findings. First, I find that moral illusions occur in competitive situations where many people compete for the same reward. In Essay I, I find that inaccurate beliefs about procedural fairness can motivate people to act selfishly, and that simple information cues about procedural fairness can reduce such behavior. In Essay II, I demonstrate that increased confidence has polarizing effects on meritocratic beliefs and that success (as opposed to failure) decreases preferences for redistribution. Second, the results show that moral behavior can be surprisingly similar across contextual factors. In Essay III, I find that the possibility to avoid information about other people’s the efforts has limited effects on selfish behavior. In Essay IV, the results show no evidence that democratic decision-making, as opposed to individual decision making, increases selfish and immoral behavior.

Taken together, the results in the thesis suggest that our moral sense have many similarities with our visual perception. In most cases, it is not significantly affected by contextual factors. However, when the information is vague or uncertain, the brain sometimes fills in missing information and creates images that does not match with reality. The analogy between optical illusions and moral illusion can help us to better understand our own, and others’, moral behavior. We may not always agree with everyone’s interpretations of reality, but we can understand where they come from.
Sammanfattning

Precis som optiska illusioner kan lura ögat, kan vårt moraliska sinne vilseledas av moraliska illusioner. I denna avhandling undersöker jag om moraliska illusioner kan uppstå av mentala genvågar (tilgänglighetsbias), kognitiva biaser (attributionsbias), kontextuella faktorer (möjlighet till att undvika information) och beslutsregler (demokratiskt beslutsfattande).

Avhandlingens huvudresultat kan sammanfattas i två punkter. För det första finner jag att moraliska illusioner förekommer i konkurrensvägda situationer där många människor tävlar om samma pris. I Studie I finner jag att felaktiga uppfattningar om procedurättvisa kan motivera människor att agera självaktigt, och att information om procedurättvisa kan minska sådant beteende. Jag visar även att självförrående har polariserande effekter på meritokratiska övertygelser, och att erfarenheten av framgång (i kontrast till misslyckande) minskar preferenser för omfördelning av resurser (Studie II). För det andra visar resultaten på att moraliskt beteende även kan vara förvånansvärt lika över kontextuella faktorer. Jag finner att möjligheten att undvika information som om andras ansträngningar har begränsade effekter på självaktigt beteende (Studie III). Dessutom visar resultaten inget empiriskt stöd för att demokratiskt beslutsfattande, jämfört med individuellt beslutsfattande, ökar omoraliskt och självaktigt beteende (Studie IV).

List of Essays

This thesis is based on the following essays, which will be referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

**Essay I:** Kajsa Hansson, Emil Persson, Shai Davidai, Gustav Tinghög. *Losing sense of fairness: How information about a level playing field reduces selfish behavior*

**Essay II:** Kajsa Hansson, Oda K. S. Sund. *Confident winners in a meritocratic world.*

**Essay III:** Kajsa Hansson. *Finding a moral excuse: How information about relative efforts affects selfish behavior*

**Essay IV:** Kajsa Hansson, Emil Persson, Gustav Tinghög. *Voting and (im)moral behavior*
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Introduction

Optical illusions can sometimes trick our visual senses. They occur when there is an error in how the brain interprets what the eyes are seeing. The Delboeuf illusion, for example, shows two black dots. Many people who see the image for the first time perceive the dot surrounded by the small circle as larger than the dot surrounded by the large circle. Yet, the two black dots are of identical size.

![Delboeuf illusion](image)

Figure 1. The Delboeuf illusion

Just as patterns, colors, and lights can trick our visual senses, judgment and decision-making are vulnerable to cognitive biases, mental shortcuts, and situational factors. Therefore, we can expect that there exist moral illusions: Moral judgments based on biased perceptions of reality. For example, the attribution bias postulates that people tend to explain their successes with their inherent ability, while they quickly embrace bad luck as an explanation when they fail (Frank, 2016; Kelley and Michela, 1980; Zuckerman, 1979). This tendency can make successful people believe that the world is meritocratic and that economic inequalities are fair, while people who fail to succeed are likely to think that procedures and inequalities are unfair. Another example is whether the possibility of sharing guilt with others can make people justify more selfish behavior (Rothenhäusler et al., 2018). In democratic choice contexts, this may lead people to act more selfishly and immoral because the outcomes are always supported by a majority.

As an example of how people can be affected by moral illusions, consider Lance Armstrong. He was a professional road racing cyclist and won Tour de France seven times in a row, from 1999 to 2005. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Armstrong admitted for the first time that he had been using banned performing-enhancing drugs for years (BBC, 2013). Armstrong explained how he
had developed a complex system to maintain secrecy, with drug smugglers and doping doctors, within and outside the sport and his team. But when Armstrong was asked whether he felt like he was cheating, he answered: “No, and that’s the scariest part.” During the seven years that Armstrong won Tour de France, 20 out of the 21 top three finishers were also found to have doped at some point in their careers (Blanding, 2013). In fact, Armstrong even encouraged his teammates to use performing enhancing drugs to match his performance. He continued: “I looked up the definition of ‘cheat’, which is to gain an advantage on a rival or foe that they don’t have. I didn’t view it that way. I viewed it as a level playing field” (BBC, 2013).

One important question for understanding such unethical behavior is when people can convince themselves that their selfish behavior is morally justified. In particular, when can cognitive biases and situational factors affect people’s perception of morality? In this thesis, I will explore four different pathways to “moral illusions.” I use a broad definition of morality – to include non-selfish motives such as equality, meritocratic fairness, and generosity, as possible notions of “right” and “fair.” Indeed, people’s notions of morality are subjective (in the eye of the beholder), and I will not address the question of whether, e.g., a certain type of fairness principle is “good” or “bad.” Instead, I define a moral illusion to occur when people fail to live up to their own notion of “good morality.” This means that they would have acted differently with objective information or under different situational factors.

The thesis builds on the literature which has proposed that people often tend to exploit a “moral wiggle room” to justify selfish behavior (for a review, see Dana et al., 2012). This literature has suggested that people often exploit uncertainties in decision-making contexts to act selfishly without feeling that what they are doing is morally wrong. While the moral wiggle room literature has primarily focused on how people rely on uncertainties about the consequences of their actions, I add to the literature by exploring how uncertainty about procedural fairness and relative efforts affects people’s selfish behavior. Further, moral illusions can occur without monetary incentives. For example, people’s experience of success and failure may alter people’s preferences for redistribution without any direct selfish motives in the decisions.

**Aims**

The aim of this thesis is to increase the understanding of how moral illusions can alter selfish behavior and preferences for redistribution. Specifically, I address four research questions (as potential pathways to moral illusions), each in its own essay:

**Pathway 1** (Headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry): How does information about a level playing field affect selfish behavior?
Pathway 2 (Attribution bias): How do success and level of confidence affect preferences for redistribution?
Pathway 3 (Self-image concerns): How does the possibility to avoid information about other people’s efforts affect selfish behavior?
Pathway 4 (Diffusion of responsibility): How does voting affect (im)moral behavior?

In the introduction to this thesis, I will present these four pathways to moral illusions and summarize the results from the essays. Before that, I will start with a general methodological discussion and a brief review of previous research.

Experiments and moral behavior
The method used in this thesis to detect moral illusions is incentivized behavioral experiments. Experiments enable researchers to create controlled environments in which people can choose between options that have consequences for themselves and/or for other people. For example, in a typical laboratory experiment participants can be asked to give money to charity, share the money that they have earned with another participant, or distribute sums of money between two other participants. The merit of using experiments is to study the causal effect of a specific intervention (e.g., information, situational factor, or decision rule) on people’s behavior. To do so, we randomly assign participants to different treatments and compare the behavior of those who received the treatment with those who did not. Because randomization ensures that the assignment to the condition is independent of other sources of variation, any difference across conditions can thus be linked to the causal variation in the treatment (List et al., 2010). By now, the literature based on economic experiments shows that people act unselfish and morally praiseworthy even in economic games where the interaction with others is one-shot, the identities of the participants are never revealed, and the recipients cannot punish or respond to the decision-maker (Camerer, 2011).

To measure selfish behavior and preferences for redistribution, I use different versions of the dictator game (Kahneman et al., 1986). The dictator game is a simple and non-strategic economic game: The decision-maker (the dictator) decides how to allocate sums of money between two (or more) people. In the experiment presented in this thesis I use two versions of the dictator game. The first version is the original one where the dictator divides a sum between herself and the recipient (stakeholder design). In the second version the dictator distributes sums of money between two other participants in the study (spectator design). The recipient is a passive player who only receives the amount that the dictator has allocated for her. To measure the trade-off between self-interest and morality, I use a stakeholder design, where decision-makers decide the distribution between themselves and a recipient (either another participant or a charity
organization). To measure preferences for redistribution I use a spectator design, where the decision-maker’s choices affect the pay-off for two other players but not for themselves. Because spectator decisions do not involve their own monetary pay-off, decision-makers can implement distributions of earnings in line with their fairness views, without having to make a trade-off between their monetary self-interest and fairness. All decisions involve money at stake, which means that their decisions have consequences for themselves and/or other people.

A potential concern with economic experiments is whether the observed behavior reflects the behavior of the population. Indeed, many studies demonstrate a self-selection bias among people who volunteer to participate in experiments. The difference is however economically small, and the behavior of such participants is fairly similar to the general population (see e.g., Exadaktylos et al., 2013). So even if economic experiments show that many people act unselfish and in line with a certain fairness principle, this does not necessarily provide evidence that a certain proportion of the population acts in this way in related contexts. Nevertheless, no research can provide evidence about the degree to which people are selfish because all research, including field experiments and observational data, focuses on a specific set of situations with a particular set of people. To better understand the validity and generalizability of experimental findings presented in this thesis, I will start by presenting previous research on selfish behavior and preferences for redistribution.

**Selfish behavior and preferences for redistribution**

When are economic inequalities morally justified? To answer this question, the normative literature in political philosophy and economics has suggested that this depends on the source of the inequality (Arneson, 1989; Bossert and Fleurbaey, 1996; Cappelen et al., 2007; Fleurbaey, 1995; Gaertner and Lars, 2007; Konow, 2000; Roemer, 1996). According to this view, inequalities caused by internal factors (e.g., performance and differences in effort) should be deemed fairer than inequalities caused by external factors (e.g., brute luck or an unlevel playing field). There is now a large literature showing that this fairness ideal is prevalent both in the lab and in the field.

Studies from the field show a strong correlation between people’s belief about the sources of inequality and their acceptance of economic inequalities and unethical behavior. For example, people who view success in life as largely due to external factors, such as luck and connections, are more supportive of redistribution policies than people who view success as due to hard work and effort (Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Fong, 2001; Gärtner et al., 2017). However, they are also more accepting of unethical financial behaviors, such as theft and false
financial claims, than people who view success as a result of hard work and effort (Hansson et al., 2021).

The experimental literature has focused on the causal effect of information about the source of inequality on preferences for redistribution. The general finding is that a large majority consider information about the source of inequality when making redistribution decisions, although they vary with regard to the importance they assign to the source of inequality (Cappelen et al., 2022). People are for example more likely to redistribute resources between rich and poor when inequalities are due to luck than when inequalities arise due to differences in performance (Almás et al., 2020; Cappelen et al., 2007; Tinghög et al., 2017). Procedural fairness also plays an important role in selfish and moral behavior. When institutions violate procedural fairness norms, people are often more likely to engage in selfish and unethical behavior, such as cheating, theft, and destruction (see e.g., Fehr, 2018; Gill et al., 2013; Greenberg, 1990). Further, the literature on effort-based fairness show that people tend to justify more selfish behavior when they are informed that they have worked harder than others while being more generous to people who have exerted similar, or higher, efforts (e.g., Cherry et al., 2002; Oliver, 2021; Oxoby and Spraggon, 2008; Ruffle, 1998) Unlike the essays presented in this thesis, this line of literature is based on full information about the source of inequality.

In real life, processes that generate economic inequalities are often complex, ambiguous, and difficult to access. Consequently, people often need to rely on their subjective beliefs and personal experiences. In the following section, I will present four pathways in which cognitive biases and situational factors can affect subjective beliefs about the role of luck, procedural fairness, and relative efforts.

Four pathways to moral illusions

The headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry

The headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry is an availability bias that postulates that we tend to remember the obstacles (headwinds) we have overcome more vividly than the advantages (tailwinds) we have been given (Dávidai and Gilovich, 2016). Because we need to attend more to the barriers we face to overcome them, than those things that give us a boost, they also stand out more in our memory. In competitive contexts, inaccurate beliefs about one’s advantages and disadvantages can make people feel as if the competition had been unfairly stacked against them. Consequently, when people lack objective information about procedural fairness,

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1 Following a strict egalitarian view for example, all inequalities should be deemed unfair independent of how the inequality came about. According to strict libertarian fairness view, all initial inequalities are fair, which means information about the source of the inequality is irrelevant for their redistribution decisions (see e.g., Arneson, 1988; Cappelen et al., 2022)
people’s subjective beliefs may lead them to act in selfish manners that could “level the playing field.”

In Essay I in this thesis, my colleagues and I investigated how information about a level playing field can reduce selfish behavior. To do so, we conducted an experiment in which participants competed in dyads in a real-effort task and were given the opportunity, at the end of the competition, to act selfishly. Specifically, after learning whether they won or lost the competition, we randomly assigned participants to either receive information that both competitors competed on a level playing field (i.e., that both they and their opponent had to complete an equal number of easy and difficult tasks) or to not receive any information about the level playing field. Following, participants were given the opportunity to distribute earnings between themselves and their opponent.

The results showed that when no information was given about the level playing field, losers in the competition overestimated the unfairness of the competition to a larger extent compared to winners (overestimated the proportion of difficult tasks presented to themselves and underestimated the proportion of difficult tasks for their opponent) and could justify taking money from the winner’s prize. But when losers were informed that they were competing on a level playing field, losers became losers significantly less selfish. Winners’ altruistic behavior, however, was unaffected by this information.

The study shows how leaving people “in the dark” regarding the playing field may create an illusion of an unfair competition. Because disagreements regarding fairness may result in aggression, hostility, and conflict between successful and unsuccessful individuals, understanding when and why the outcomes of competitions are considered legitimate is extremely important. The main takeaway from this essay is that, while arranging fair procedures is important to create a more just and ethical society, informing people about this procedural fairness is key.

The attribution bias
Another cognitive bias that can distort people’s beliefs about fairness is the attribution bias. According to the attribution bias, people are motivated to see themselves in a positive light, which often leads them to attribute personal successes to their hard work and performance, while they explain their failures with bad luck (Frank, 2016; Kelley and Michela, 1980; Zuckerman, 1979). This tendency is often apparent in competitive situations, especially when the role of luck is ambiguous or uncertain (Dunning et al., 1989). When people have limited information concerning the process leading to success and failure, personal experiences in combination with their confidence in their relative performance can therefore have a large influence on people’s perceptions of how fair the world is.
In Essay II, my colleague and I conducted an experiment to examine how confidence and success affect meritocratic beliefs and preferences for redistribution. Participants competed in dyads in a trivia quiz and were informed that the outcome of the competition was determined by the performance in the quiz (merit), or by a computerized coin-toss (luck). Participants knew that the probability merit determined the outcome was between 0-100 percent, but the true probability remained unknown throughout the experiment. In the last stage of the experiment, participants were given the opportunity to redistribute money between another pair of competitors in the study (consisting of a winner and a loser).

In the experiment, we manipulated participants’ confidence in their relative ability (i.e., confidence) and the outcome of a real-effort competition. The manipulations allowed us to study their causal effect on meritocratic beliefs (defined as the probability that the outcome was determined by merit) and preferences for redistribution. To manipulate confidence, each pair of competitors was either assigned to easy or difficult trivia questions. The easy trivia questions generated a significant shift in confidence: Among participants who were given easy trivia questions 79% believed that they performed above average, while only 30% believed that they performed above average when given difficult trivia questions. We further manipulated the outcome of the competition by letting 98% of the outcomes be determined by a computerized coin-toss.

The results showed that confidence had a polarizing effect on meritocratic beliefs: While winners and losers with a low level of confidence had similar meritocratic beliefs, increasing the level of confidence caused winners to believe that the outcome was more likely to be determined by merit compared to losers. We further found that winners redistributed significantly less than losers, while confidence had no significant causal effect on preferences for redistribution. Thus, even in the absence of direct selfish motives, the effect of success and failure can have a large influence on preferences for redistribution.

The main take-way from the study is that confidence is important for understanding people’s meritocratic beliefs, while the experience of failure and success translate to preferences for redistribution. In other words, disagreements about the causes of inequality are most likely to occur among people who expect to succeed, while disagreements about redistribution are most likely to occur between successful and unsuccessful people.

Self-image concerns

As with almost any desirable human trait, people are often motivated to maintain a positive moral self-image. In the economic literature, self-image concerns are often described as the desire to not feel selfish and immoral (Dana et al., 2012). Many scholars have proposed that moral behavior may be partly motivated by self-image concerns, rather than a true desire for acting moral (Dana et al., 2012; Gino
et al., 2016). To take selfish acts with lower self-image costs, people can strategically avoid information that can suggest that their actions are unfair to others.

In Essay III, I explored whether people avoid information about other people’s efforts to justify an economic advantage. In a large-scale experiment, participants were monetarily rewarded for completing a real-effort task and could split their reward with another worker in the study. To study how the possibility to avoid information about the worker’s effort affects selfish behavior, one group of participants was informed about the worker’s effort level (i.e., no possibility to avoid information), while the other group could avoid learning about the other worker’s effort level. To explore whether people avoided information about the worker’s effort to feel less selfish (i.e., due to self-image), a third group was asked to distribute an effort-reward between two other workers and were also given the possibility to avoid information about one of the worker’s efforts.

As expected, participants who were informed about the other worker’s effort gave away more money to a worker who had exerted high effort, than if the worker had exerted low effort. Among participants who could avoid information about the worker’s efforts, a majority (57%) chose to do so. But the main result of the study showed that the group of participants who were given the possibility to avoid information were only slightly more selfish (they kept more of their reward) compared to the participants who were directly informed about the worker’s efforts. Thus, despite the high rate of information avoidance, the possibility to avoid information about relative efforts had limited effects on selfish behavior. Further, I found that participants with no monetary stakes in the decision avoided information about relative efforts to a significantly lesser extent than participants who were asked to reward the worker from their own pocket. The results suggest that people avoid information to feel less selfish, but not to justify more selfish behavior.

The implications of the findings can be interpreted in different ways. A first interpretation is that high rates of information avoidance could generate a moral illusion. If people want to act according to an effort-based notion of fairness, attending to information about other people’s efforts is crucial. But given that the possibility to avoid information had a rather limited impact on selfish behavior, it may be that most people who found the information relevant for their decision acquired information. In fact, people who acquired information and were informed that the worker exerted no effort were increasingly more selfish than the average person who was presented with identical information by the experimenter. Thus, an alternative interpretation is that people who attend to information about relative efforts also want to find ways to justify selfish behavior.
Diffusion of responsibility

Diffusion of responsibility is a psychological phenomenon whereby a person is less likely to take moral responsibility when other people are present (Darley & Latane, 1968). Diffusion of responsibility in the context of collective decisions is perhaps best understood using the concept of “shared guilt” (Rothenhäusler et al., 2018). The underlying idea is that collective decisions, as opposed to individual decisions, may increase people’s ability to take selfish actions because they can share feelings of guilt together with others. In an individual choice context, people must bear all the guilt themselves.

In Essay IV, my co-authors and I built on the theory of guilt sharing and investigated how voting affects immoral behavior. We conducted three experiments in which participants were asked to decide between money for themselves or a donation to a charitable cause. Participants were assigned to either a voting condition or an individual condition, i.e., to either make their decisions collectively by voting or individually. We investigated how voting affected selfish behavior in large groups (49 people), small groups (5 people), and tested both the effect of majority rule and median voting.

The results provided no evidence that voting increased selfish behavior. If anything, one of the experiments showed that voting made people slightly less selfish. Further, we found no evidence that people distort their beliefs about their responsibility for the outcome when voting. Thus, even if voting could provide people with an opportunity to diffuse responsibility for the outcome, we find no evidence that they do.

This study is important because it shows that, although moral behavior can be dramatically influenced by the specific contexts in which it occurs, selfish behavior remains rather similar across an individual choice context and a democratic choice context. This study also contributes to a growing set of studies which has shown that people who have financial gain to manipulate their beliefs about morality do not always do so (e.g., Bartling and Ozdemir, 2017; Valero, 2021; van der Weele et al., 2014). It is especially important to acknowledge these contributions because focusing only on the significant findings could lead us to believe that people always look for ways to justify more selfish behavior.

Which pathways leads to a moral illusion?

One way to reconcile the findings presented in this thesis is that moral illusions are likely to occur in competitive contexts where many people compete for the same reward. Nevertheless, the studies presented in this thesis only focus on a limited set of situations, and I am cautious to draw far-reaching conclusions beyond discussing the results of the studies presented in this thesis. The remainder of this section will thus focus on two important takeaways.
First, existing theories on self-serving biases and previous research on motivated reasoning provide important reasons why success and failure can distort perceptions of morality. The literature on motivated reasoning suggests that when people evaluate propositions they want to be true, they tend to ask themselves something like: “Can I believe this” (Epley and Gilovich, 2016). The evidence needed to support such beliefs is rather easy to recruit because, after all, some evidence can usually be found even for very unlikely propositions. A person who fails to succeed is often motivated to find ways to blame the outcome on external factors to protect her self-image, just as successful people are motivated to believe that they deserve their economic success. Because these self-serving beliefs pull in opposite directions depending on if a person fails or succeeds, disagreements due to cognitive biases are very likely to occur in competitive contexts.

Another important takeaway from this thesis is that moral behavior can be very similar across contextual factors. While one might believe that moral behavior is easy to manipulate by just providing different sets of information or decision rules, this may be because researchers tend to focus on the significant findings. The “null results” presented in this thesis are just as important because they provide important insights into the economic theory and are a contrast to previous studies. Thus, the results from this thesis also suggest that there are several pathways that do not lead to moral illusions. In particular, the results from this thesis suggest that:

- Uncertainty about procedural fairness does not affect altruistic behavior for winners of a competition.
- Confidence does not affect preferences for redistribution.
- Voting does not increase selfish behavior or induce diffusion of responsibility.

**Concluding remarks**

The results presented in this thesis suggest our notion of morality can be distorted by subjective experiences. Not only is fairness in “the eye of the beholder,” but it is also influenced by experiences of success and failure, misperceptions about procedural fairness, and attention to information about relative efforts.

The analogy between optical and moral illusions can help us to better understand disagreements about morality. For example, we often disagree over the source of our success. Some people emphasize the existence of birth lotteries and point to the easy ride the well-off have had, while relatively privileged people may look back on their own lives and feel that they have struggled hard to reach their economic success. In contrast to many optical illusions there is no easy or objective answer to the extent external factors affect outcomes in life. Still, the analog to optical illusions can be useful for understanding how people’s interpretation of
reality is likely to be influenced by cognitive biases. If people can view the discussion from the perspective of a moral illusion, we may not always agree with everyone’s interpretation, but we can understand where it comes from.

Finally, one might wonder whether we can avoid moral illusions. I believe the answer to this question is yes. And no. I started the introduction of this thesis by presenting an optical illusion, where people commonly misperceive the relative sizes of two circles. Even if we now know that the dots are of equal size, the right dot still looks larger than the left. However, this knowledge may not be so useful in our daily life. I would not recommend anyone to constantly walk around with a ruler in their pocket to control that the perceived size matches their visual perceptions. But if you, for example, want to build a house and need to know the relative sizes of two objects, it could be useful to know that our visual perceptions can betray you. I believe that we should think of moral illusions in a similar way. It would be exhausting – perhaps even impossible – to constantly attend to all information in an unbiased manner. But if we want to build an ethical and fair society, I suggest that we should learn to recognize situations where moral illusions can occur.

References


The essays associated with this thesis have been removed for copyright reasons. For more details about these see:

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