Sometimes Psychopaths Get it Right: 
A Utilitarian Response to “The Mismeasure of Morals”

There is a growing trend among researchers interested in moral psychology of classifying utilitarian judgments as morally optimal. A recent and highly publicized study titled “The Mismeasure of Morals” (Bartels and Pizarro, 2011) calls this practice into question. The study purportedly provides evidence that in non-clinical populations, most subjects who opt for utilitarian solutions to sacrificial moral dilemmas possess traits typically associated with psychopathy, such as callousness and a proclivity for manipulation. According to the authors, these findings give researchers reason to refrain from classifying utilitarian solutions to these dilemmas as optimal moral judgments because “adopting such a method can lead to the counterintuitive inference that ‘correct’ moral judgments are most likely to be made by the individuals least likely to possess the character traits generally perceived as moral.”

I provide a two-fold critique of “The Mismeasure of Morals.” First, I argue that the published data do not support the authors’ conclusion. Bartels and Pizarro do not provide any indication of what it means to be “high” on a measure of psychopathy. They split their sample into three equal groups, identifying those with scores falling in the highest third, relative to their sample, as “high.” Without presenting norms for the measure of psychopathy it is difficult to know how to interpret the authors’ classification of those “high” in psychopathic traits. Moreover, consideration of the statistical correlations between utilitarian preferences and higher scores on the anti-social personality measures suggests that the personality measure leaves much more unexplained about utilitarian preferences than it explains. For example, the squared correlation between utilitarian preference and psychopathy is 14%, indicating that only 14% of the variance in utilitarian preferences can be accounted for by psychopathic traits.
Although I deny that there is evidence that the majority of individuals who endorse utilitarian solutions to sacrificial dilemmas possess psychopathic traits, it is still worth asking what the upshot would be if we found such evidence. What if it turned out that the majority of individuals who prefer utilitarian solutions are *bona fide* selfish, callous, manipulative scoundrels? Would this warrant diminished confidence in the optimality of utilitarian moral judgments? In the second part of my critique I argue that the answer to this question is No. Issues of character should be kept distinct from the issue of correct moral judgment. There are some situations in which people with certain anti-social character traits have an easier time choosing the morally correct response. Sacrificial dilemmas are prime examples of such situations. When the optimal outcome requires causing deliberate harm to an innocent individual, a lack of empathy and a selfish disposition are highly beneficial. We can imagine it being the case that very few people without these traits are able to overcome their aversion to sacrificing innocent people, thus opting for the non-utilitarian solution. But this would tell us nothing about which solutions are correct.