



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



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“The Mismeasure of Morals”

There is a growing trend among researchers 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 authors hypothesize that utilitarian preferences may not be the product of cost-benefit analysis driven by an equal concern for the welfare of everyone. Rather, such preferences may be driven by selfishness and aided by a muted aversion to causing death. In order to assess the association between anti-social character traits of non-clinical individuals and utilitarian preferences, Bartels and Pizarro gave 208 undergraduates a battery of 14 dilemmas in which the utilitarian solution requires sacrificing an innocent person. Subjects indicated their preference for a particular solution by clicking on one of four boxes as in the following example:

In this situation, would you push the man?

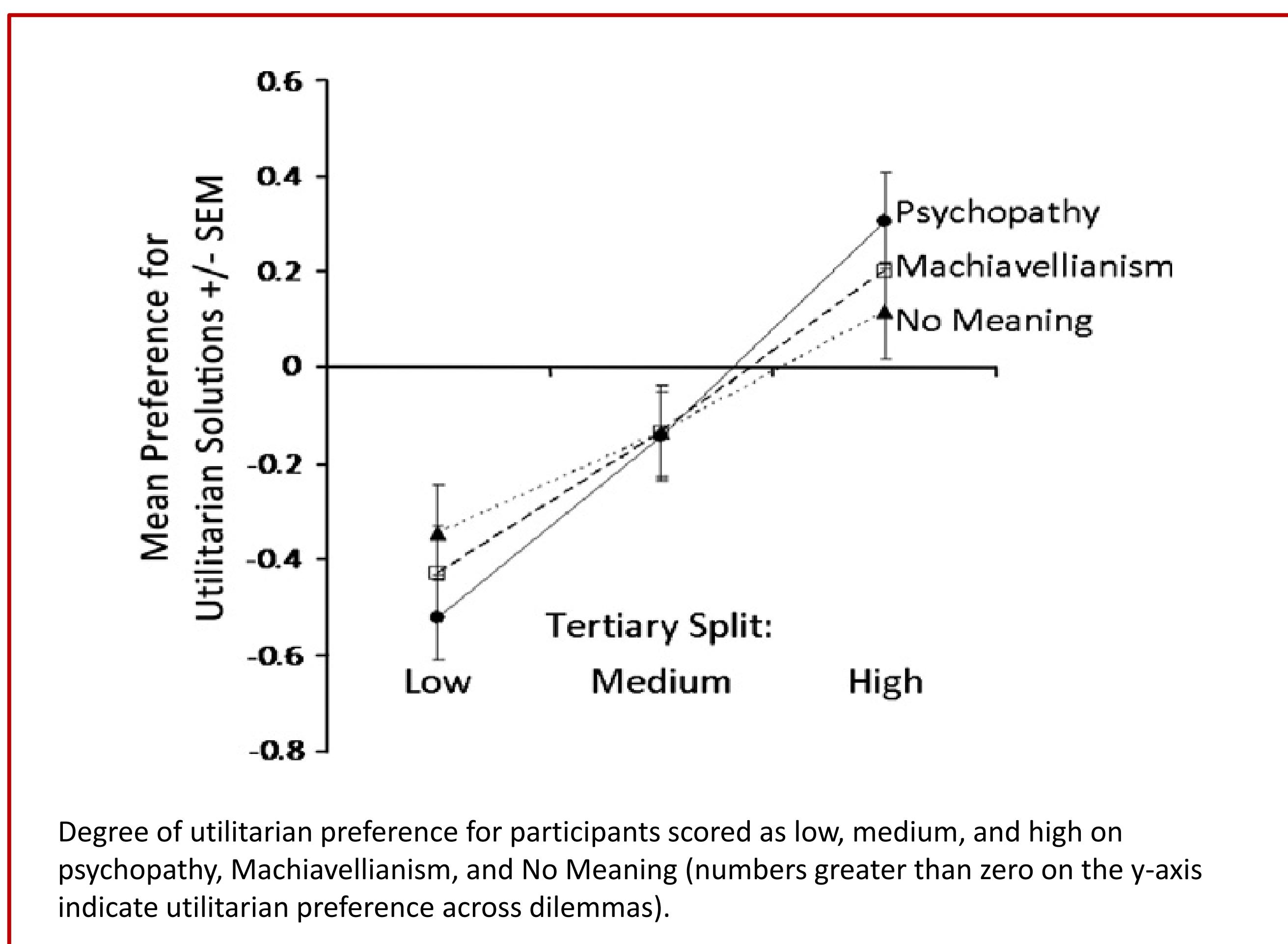
NO **-2** -1 +1 +2 YES

The data showed a correlation between higher preference for utilitarian solutions and higher scores on measures of psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and life meaninglessness. Those who scored high on the psychopathy scale, relative to their sample, had a mean preference for utilitarian solutions of roughly 0.3 on a scale ranging from -2.0 (strong non-utilitarian preference) to +2.0 (strong utilitarian preference). Those who scored high on the Machiavellianism and No Meaning scales had mean utilitarian preferences of roughly 0.2 and 0.1 respectively. These correlations are taken as evidence that utilitarian preferences often arise from emotional deficits including a muted aversion to causing death. Thus, the classification of utilitarian preferences as morally optimal is rendered dubious.

Correlations between individual differences and preferences

	Psychopathy	No Meaning	Machiavellianism
Avg. Preference	0.38*	0.21*	0.35*

* $p < .05$.



“These results question the widely-used methods by which lay moral judgments are evaluated, as these approaches lead to the counterintuitive conclusion that those individuals who are least prone to moral errors also possess a set of psychological characteristics that many would consider prototypically immoral.”

-Bartels and Pizarro, 2011, p. 154

Unsubstantiated Conclusions

The provided data do not support the conclusions drawn. One problem is that there is no indication of what it means to be “high” on a measure of psychopathy. The authors 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. Suppose the measure for psychopathy ranged from 0 to 100. Suppose the mean score of subjects with non-utilitarian preferences was 5, and the mean score of subjects with utilitarian preferences was 12. While this could be a statistically significant difference in some cases, it may not be a conceptually meaningful difference.

Suppose that the average score of all participants was 8, and the threshold for clinical psychopathy is a score of 80. If so, the difference between a score of 12 and a score of 5 is less meaningful. At the very least, it would be a stretch to conclude that members of the group of subjects whose mean score was 12 actually possess psychopathic character traits. There is a difference between being slightly more cold and callous than average, and being properly described as a cold and callous individual. As the data are presented, the extent to which the groups reflect different character traits is underdetermined. Moreover, the statistical correlations between utilitarian preferences and higher scores on the anti-social personality measures suggest that the personality measure leaves much more unexplained than it explains. 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.

Character and Moral Judgment

What if it turned out that the majority of individuals who prefer utilitarian solutions were *bona fide* selfish, callous, scoundrels? It is tempting to believe this would warrant diminished confidence in the optimality of utilitarian moral judgments, but we must resist the temptation. Issues of character should be kept distinct from the issue of correct moral judgment (Driver, 2012). There are some situations in which anti-social character traits are morally advantageous. 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. Presumably almost every selfish and callous individual would choose the utilitarian option. And we can imagine it being the case that few people without these traits are able to overcome their aversion to sacrificing innocents, thus opting for the non-utilitarian solution. But this tells us nothing about which solutions are correct.