

In God's shoes: Embodying the avatar of the supreme moral authority modulates psychophysiological indices of one's own morality

ABSTRACT:

Background

The term Proteus effect refers to the changes in attitudes and behavior induced by the characteristics of an embodied virtual agent. Whether the effect can extend to the moral sphere is currently unknown.

Aims

To investigate if embodying virtual agents (i.e., avatars) with different characteristics modulate people's moral standards differentially.

Method

In Study 1, we investigated moral judgments by requiring participants to embody an avatar resembling the Christian God in His anthropomorphic appearance or a control human avatar and to perform a text-based version of incidental and instrumental dilemmas in a virtual environment. For each participant we recorded i) chosen options (deontological vs. utilitarian), ii) decision times, iii) postdecision feelings and iv) physiological reactions (skin conductance response and heart rate). In Study 2, we investigated moral actions by requiring participants to take part at virtual scenes by acting their decision. In this second experiment we implemented the two most popular dilemmas in the virtual environment, i.e., the Trolley and the Footbridge dilemma and we recorded the very same measures. In both studies we expected participants in the God-avatar to differently experience moral conflict and mitigate the "Do not Play God" principle, leading to i) more utilitarian decisions, ii) less negative post-decision feelings and iii) physiological arousal. Indeed, the principle refers to the conviction of not being in the position to decide who lives and who dies, that in turn results in a preference for the deontological resolution (i.e., inaction).

Results

In both Study 1 and Study 2, we found that embodying God vs. a control avatar did not change the performance indicating that no strong Proteus effect was at play in our experimental conditions. We interpreted this result by examining the constraints and limitations of our task, reasoning about the necessary conditions for eliciting the Proteus effect. Importantly, we presented compelling effects concerning dilemma type, chosen option, personality traits and religion affiliation.

Conclusions

Our studies expand the literature on moral decision making by indicating that immersive virtual reality scenarios may help to reproduce in the laboratory real-life scenarios and test complex mental processes in naturalistic but still highly-controlled settings.

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Keywords

Body ownership illusion, Proteus effect, Moral conflict, Moral dilemmas, virtual reality

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