

# Value-Driven Tradeoff Reasoning in Consumer Choice

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Most of the choices people make reflect a desire to maximize consequences. Moral choices involving “protected values,” however, are largely motivated by proscriptions on actions (e.g., “do not allow companies to pollute for a fee, even if pollution credits reduce pollution”).

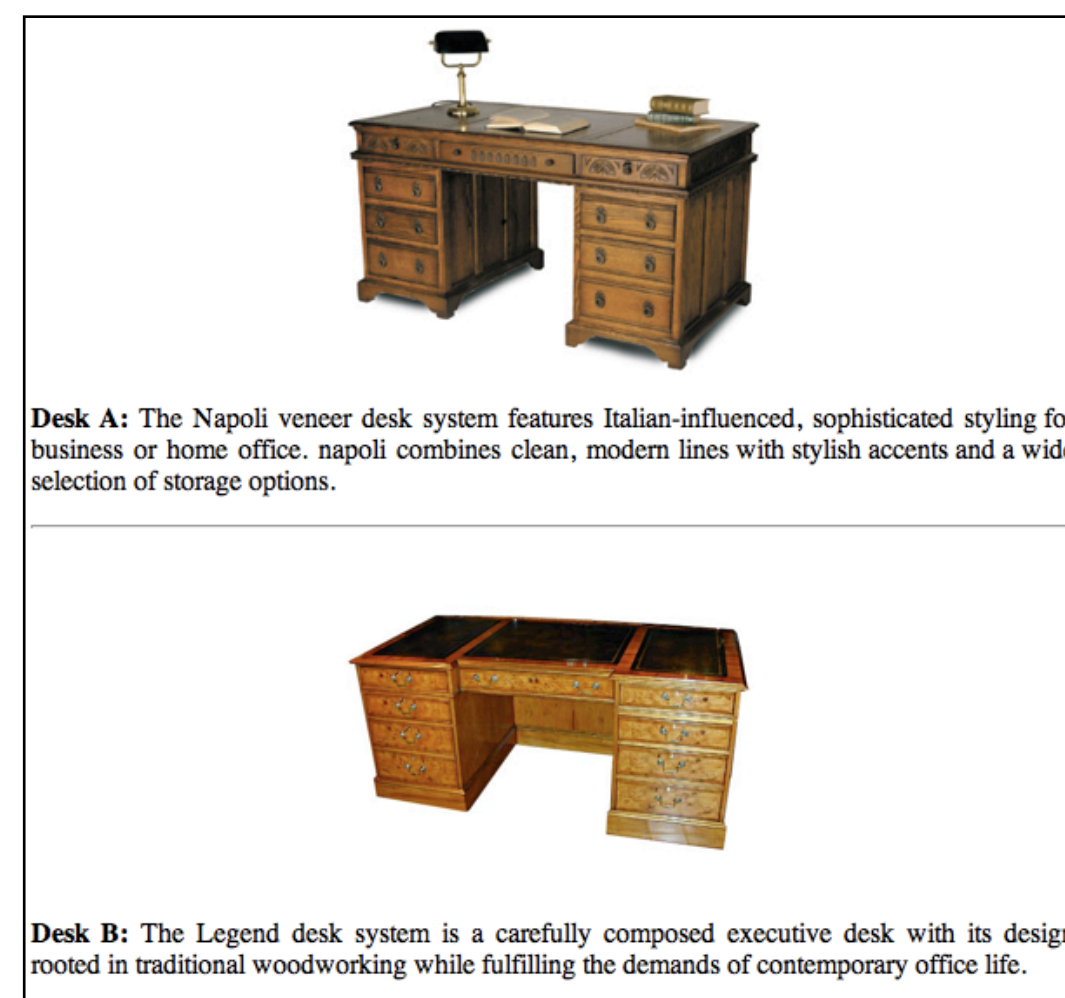
In four consumer choice studies, we examine how thinking about proscriptions and consequences may depend on the decision maker’s values and on the choice context. We find that when presented with ethically-relevant information, participants with a ‘protected value’ (PV) are both more and less consequentialist in their consumer choices than people without PVs. Because those with a PV care deeply about the issue at hand, their choices vary depending upon what information they attend to (Bartels & Medin, 2007) and what reasons are available for making a decision (Shafir, 1993).

## Study 1

### Method

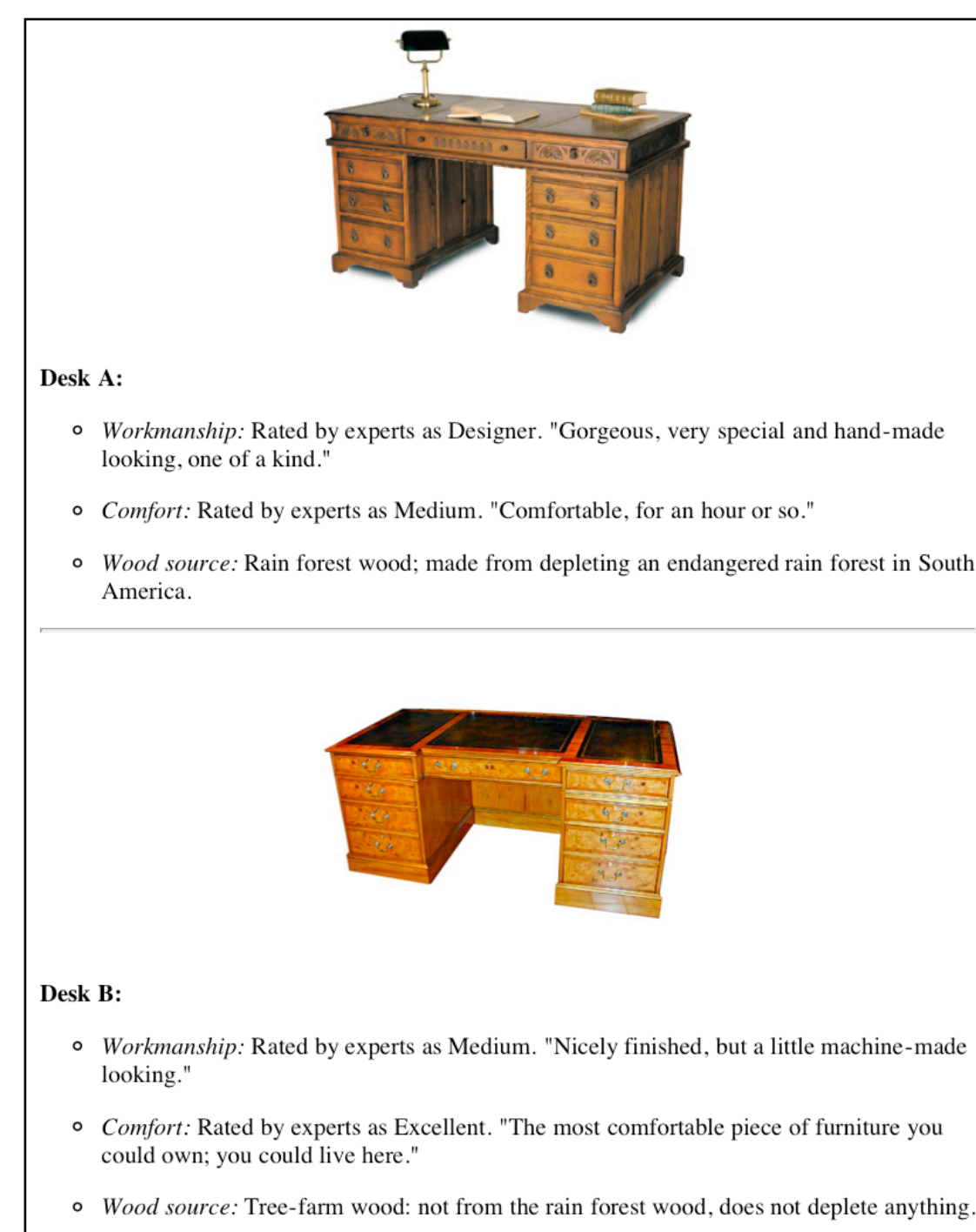
#### Step 1: Initial Preferences

- Subjects were presented with pictures and basic descriptions of two desks.
- They then rated the desirability of each desk.
- Desk A was on average considered more attractive than Desk B.



#### Step 2: Choice

- Subjects then read additional information about each desk. The crucial manipulation involved the desks’ wood source.
- In the *Impoverished Harm* condition, Desk A was made from endangered rain forest wood.
- In the *Enriched Harm* condition, Desk A was also made from endangered wood, but that “for every rain forest tree cut down, this company invests in protecting another 5 trees from being harvested in another endangered rain forest of equal size.”
- In both conditions, Desk B was described as using tree-farmed wood.
- All participants were asked which desk they would be more willing to buy.



#### Step 3: Assessing Protected Values for the rainforest

Which of the following best represents your view about cutting all the trees in sections of the rainforest to make furniture?

I do not object to this.

Protection of the rain forests should be balanced against market values.

This is not acceptable no matter how great the benefits.

### Results

Only participants with a PV were likely to choose the more unattractive desk, and this was the case in both the Impoverished Harm and Enriched Harm conditions. When the choice context allows for one to honor a PV, then subjects with PVs tend to choose on this basis, regardless of the consequences entailed and regardless of their initial preferences.

Table 1: % choosing Desk B

| Initial Preference | Proportion with PV | Impoverished Harm (A) vs. No Harm (B) |      | Enriched Harm (A) vs. No Harm (B) |      | Both Conditions Combined |      |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
|                    |                    | No PV                                 | PV   | No PV                             | PV   | No PV                    | PV   |
| A < B (n = 23)     | 0.74               | 0.80                                  | 0.90 | 1.00                              | 1.00 | 0.83                     | 0.94 |
| A = B (n = 21)     | 0.57               | 0.50                                  | 1.00 | 0.25                              | 1.00 | 0.38                     | 1.00 |
| A > B (n = 75)     | 0.53               | 0.18                                  | 0.76 | 0.28                              | 0.67 | 0.23                     | 0.72 |
| Total              | 0.58               | 0.35                                  | 0.83 | 0.30                              | 0.82 | 0.33                     | 0.82 |

## Study 2

### Method

All procedures were similar to Study 1 except for Step 2. Desk A was described as causing less direct harm (*Impoverished Harm*) and Desk B was described as causing more direct harm but also bringing about good consequences (*Enriched Harm*).

### Results

Now, subjects with a PV were most likely to choose the Enriched Harm option. When the choice context did not allow for honoring a PV — with both options caused some degree of harm — then subjects with a PV made more consequentialist choices, regardless of their initial preferences.

Table 2: % choosing Desk B

| Initial Preference | Proportion with PV | No PV | PV   |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------|------|
| A < B (n = 15)     | 0.60               | 0.50  | 0.78 |
| A = B (n = 8)      | 0.50               | 0.50  | 1.00 |
| A > B (n = 36)     | 0.58               | 0.13  | 0.48 |
| Total              | 0.58               | 0.28  | 0.62 |

## Study 3

### Method

The procedure was similar to Study 1, but subjects now chose between three options:

- Desk A: less attractive, No Harm option
- Desk B: more attractive, Enriched Harm option
- Desk C: symmetrically-dominated option — very unattractive and very harmful

### Results

Subjects with a PV tended to choose the No Harm option that honored their protected value — even though they could justify choosing the more attractive desk because it was both more attractive and caused less harm than Desk C.

Table 3: % choosing Desk B

| Initial Preference | Proportion with PV | Enriched Harm (A) vs. No Harm (B) |      | No Harm (A) vs. Enriched Harm (B) |      |
|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|------|-----------------------------------|------|
|                    |                    | No PV                             | PV   | No PV                             | PV   |
| A < B (n = 36)     | 0.50               | 0.88                              | 0.75 | 0.78                              | 0.40 |
| A = B (n = 18)     | 0.56               | 0.33                              | 0.60 | 0.40                              | 0.60 |
| A > B (n = 83)     | 0.46               | 0.16                              | 0.56 | 0.20                              | 0.05 |
| Total              | 0.48               | 0.37                              | 0.62 | 0.36                              | 0.22 |

## Study 4

### Method

Subjects judged which of two companies was (depending upon condition) more moral or more immoral. Similar to Study 2, one company’s actions embodied Impoverished Harm and the other Enriched Harm.

### Results

Subjects with a PV were more likely than non-PV subjects to both accept the Enriched option as morally superior *and* reject it as morally inferior.

Table 4: % say Enriched Harm was more moral/immoral

|                           | More Moral? | More Immoral? | Moral + Immoral |
|---------------------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| <i>Protected Value</i>    |             |               |                 |
| Clothing                  | 0.80        | 0.30          | 1.10*           |
| Cosmetics                 | 0.92        | 0.29          | 1.21*           |
| Tuna Fishing              | 0.83        | 0.29          | 1.12*           |
| <i>No Protected Value</i> |             |               |                 |
| Clothing                  | 0.71        | 0.12          | 0.83*           |
| Cosmetics                 | 0.80        | 0.17          | 0.97            |
| Tuna Fishing              | 0.77        | 0.23          | 1.00            |

## Conclusion

Consumers with a PV are especially likely to make use of ethical attribute information. If at least one option satisfies their proscription to do no harm — even when that option is unattractive, and other options might maximize consequences — they tend to opt for the No Harm choice (Studies 1, 3, and 4). If all available options cause some degree of harm, however, subjects with PVs choose to maximize ethically-relevant consequences, regardless of their initial preferences (Studies 2 and 4). Subjects without a PV, on the other hand, choose according to their initial preferences for each option.

## References

- Bartels, D. M. & Medin, D. L. (2007). Are Morally-Motivated Decision Makers Insensitive to the Consequences of their Choices? *Psychological Science*, 18, 24–28.
- Shafir, E. (1993). Choosing versus rejecting: Why some options are both better and worse than others. *Memory & Cognition*, 21, 546–556.