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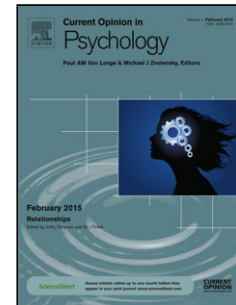
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The influence of understanding and having choice on children's prosocial behavior  
Nadia Chernyak & Tamar Kushnir

Humans are remarkable moral evaluators. A search through the NYtimes.com reveals that the words “good” and “bad” appeared nearly 3 million times in news articles since 1851; the words “morality” and “justice” nearly 700,000 combined. But one needs not look through news articles to appreciate our intuitive preoccupation with moral evaluation: The propensity for moral evaluation - to carve up the world into “oughts” and “ought nots” – is shared by ancient philosophers and modern day humans.

This inclination is also shared by very young children. Even infants are able to distinguish between those who harm and those who help others, preferring the latter over the former [1]. By the early preschool ages, children make those evaluations explicitly known through words such as “good” and “bad” [2], and through their verbal and behavioral protests when others don't accord with social norms [3,4].

We argue that even more striking, however, is our ability to move from mere *evaluators* to full-fledged moral *agents*, capable of changing the world to become not what it is, but also what it “ought” to be. This ability emerges initially as what is likely non-conscious and non-reflective prosocial behavior: Between the first and second year of life, children move from recognizing that others have intentions and goals [5,6] to helping others fulfill and enact those goals[7]. Similarly, children move from empathizing with those in distress or being content with observing people helping [8] to actively rectifying that distress through offering their own toys, resources, and comfort [9,10]. Thus, infants and young children eventually are not only capable of judging what ought to happen but actively ensure that it does.

During the preschool years, children become capable of reflecting on actions in a new way, and we argue that this in turn has important behavioral consequences. Around the ages of 4-5, children start to explicitly articulate beliefs about possible and impossible events [11] and, relatedly, possible and impossible human actions [12]. This emerging understanding of choice, which continues to develop into school-age, likely rests on more general abilities for counterfactual [13]and future thinking [14]. Peter may have established a habit of drinking milk every day for breakfast, but he is certainly capable of choosing to drink orange juice. Alice may have wanted to play with trains today, but she could have effectuated a different outcome and played with Legos instead. In short, in scenarios involving human actions, children not only consider what occurred in this world, but articulate beliefs about alternative possible worlds, as long as those worlds are “near” in the sense that they don't violate the physical and epistemic laws of ours [16, though see also 15 for alternative developmental accounts].

Critically, these developments have consequences for how young children think about their own actions. Just as children become able to imagine that events in the world could have been different from how they turned out [e.g., “my room could've been clean instead of messy today”], they can imagine how their own actions could have been different as well [“I could have made my room clean instead of messy”]. . As a result, children not only consider causes, effects, and alternative realities, but also place themselves as the causes of their own effects, capable of creating their own alternative realities. For example, by four years of age, a child will make a drawing, but then reflect that she didn't have to draw that, and could have in fact drawn something else instead [12,17]. As they do for others' actions, children appreciate that they themselves could have desired other things, drawn different shapes, effectuated alternative outcomes, so long as those outcomes follow the laws of the physical world. For example,

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