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Moral hindsight for good actions and the effects of imagined alternatives to reality



Ruth M.J. Byrne*, Shane Timmons

Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Five experiments identify an asymmetric moral hindsight effect for judgments about whether a morally good action should have been taken, e.g., Ann should run into traffic to save Jill who fell before an oncoming truck. Judgments are increased when the outcome is good (Jill sustained minor bruises), as Experiment 1 shows; but they are not decreased when the outcome is bad (Jill sustained life-threatening injuries), as Experiment 2 shows. The hindsight effect is modified by imagined alternatives to the outcome: judgments are amplified by a counterfactual that if the good action had not been taken, the outcome would have been worse, and diminished by a semi-factual that if the good action had not been taken, the outcome would have been the same. Hindsight modification occurs when the alternative is presented with the outcome, and also when participants have already committed to a judgment based on the outcome, as Experiments 3A and 3B show. The hindsight effect occurs not only for judgments in life-and-death situations but also in other domains such as sports, as Experiment 4 shows. The results are consistent with a causal-inference explanation of moral judgment and go against an aversive-emotion one.

1. Introduction

In daily life, we sometimes hear about morally good actions, for example, recent media reports have highlighted the actions of Syria's 'white helmets', the civilian first responders who risk their lives in airstrikes to rescue survivors, and they are regarded as humanitarian heroes. Yet there has been little research on how people reason about such self-sacrificial acts of virtue. Research on morally good actions has focused on emotional responses and it has shown that observers of such actions are often emotionally uplifted, an experience termed 'moral elevation' (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Aquino, McFerran, & Laven, 2011; Diessner, Iyer, Smith, & Haidt, 2013; Schnall & Roper, 2012). Observers of morally good actions often wish to emulate them, to engage in prosocial behavior to do something good to improve the welfare of others (e.g., Cox, 2010; Freeman, Aquino, & McFerran, 2009; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). But there has been little research to examine the cognitive processes that underlie judgments about morally good actions. We address two issues: first, we test whether judgments that a morally good action should have been taken are affected by outcome knowledge that it succeeded or failed. For example, suppose you hear that a Syrian 'white helmet' risked his life to pull a child from the rubble of a bombed building. Is your judgment that he should have done so affected when you hear that his action succeeded and the

outcome was good, the child lived; or when you hear that he failed and the outcome was bad, the child died? Second, we test whether judgments that a morally good action should have been taken are affected by imagined alternatives to the outcome. For example, suppose you hear that the Syrian 'white helmet' pulled the child from the rubble and the child lived. Is your judgment that he should have pulled the child from the rubble amplified by a counterfactual about how the outcome could have been different, such as, 'if he hadn't rushed to pull the child from the rubble, she would have died'? A counterfactual is an imagined alternative to reality and the example illustrates a downward comparison to a worse world. Is your judgment that he should have pulled the child from the rubble diminished by a 'semi-factual' about how the outcome could have been the same, such as, 'even if he hadn't rushed to pull the child from the rubble, she would have lived anyway'? A semi-factual is an imagined alternative to reality that results in the same outcome as reality. We examine whether judgments that the action should have been taken are affected by these imagined alternatives. We report the results of five experiments to address these questions.

1.1. Outcome knowledge

The first question we examine is whether judgments that a morally good action should have been taken are affected by outcome knowledge

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology and Institute of Neuroscience, Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin, Ireland.
E-mail address: rmbyrne@tcd.ie (R.M.J. Byrne).

that it succeeded or failed. We examined judgments about whether Ann should have run into traffic to save Jill who fell before an oncoming truck. We compared judgments when Ann's action succeeded and hence the outcome was good, Jill sustained minor bruises, compared to judgments when Ann's action failed and hence the outcome was bad, Jill sustained life-threatening injuries. Outcome knowledge affects judgments about morally *bad* actions (e.g., Baron & Hershey, 1988; Fleischhut, Meder, & Gigerenzer, 2017; Oeberst & Goekenjan, 2016). Consider two protagonists who threw bricks over a wall from an overpass bridge; one person's brick hit a car and killed the driver and the other person's brick hit the pavement without accomplishing the intended harm. Both protagonists carried out the same action with the same knowledge and the same intention, yet participants' judgments of blame and punishment are harsher for the person whose brick hit a car and killed the driver compared to the one whose brick hit the pavement (e.g., Lench, Domskey, Smallman, & Darbor, 2015; Martin & Cushman, 2016a). But it is a matter of luck whether a car was passing underneath the bridge at the time each one threw a brick (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Young, Nichols, & Saxe, 2010). The effects of outcome knowledge on judgments about morally bad actions may arise either from emotional reactions to the aversive outcome, or from causal inferences about whether the outcome could have been foreseen.

The 'aversive-emotion' explanation suggests that the bad outcome leads people to experience a more negative reaction when the attempt to harm succeeds, a driver was killed by the brick, compared to when it fails, no-one was harmed by the brick. The emotional response evoked by the bad outcome overshadows any consideration of the protagonists' intentions. There has been extensive debate about negativity biases (e.g., Rozin & Royzman, 2001) and the relative contribution of emotional and cognitive processes to moral judgments about bad actions (e.g., Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001; Mikhail, 2007; Gubbins & Byrne, 2014). The alternative 'causal-inference' explanation suggests that people consider whether the individual could have known what the outcome would be. They judge the brick-thrower who killed a driver harshly because they decide, with hindsight, that he could have known that his bad action of brick-throwing would succeed in harming a person (e.g., Baron & Hershey, 1988; Martin & Cushman, 2016b). People construct a causal model that links the action to its intended and expected outcome (e.g., Cushman, 2013; Timmons & Byrne, 2018). When there is a clear causal link between the action and the outcome, they consider that an individual who carried out the action could have known what the outcome would be. People with outcome knowledge tend to believe they would have predicted the outcome all along, perhaps because of mistaken beliefs about its predictability before it occurred (e.g., Fischhoff, 1975; Roese & Vohs, 2012). Hence people allocate blame and responsibility to the brick-thrower whose brick kills a driver. They judge the lucky brick-thrower who did not harm anyone leniently because they decide, with hindsight, that he would have known that his bad action of brick-throwing would fail to harm anyone. The aversive-emotion and causal-inference explanations make similar predictions for outcomes from morally bad actions, but they make different predictions for outcomes from morally good actions.

We test the two explanations for judgments about whether an agent should have carried out a morally *good* action, for example, judgments about whether Ann should have run into traffic to save Jill who fell before an oncoming truck. We examined judgments when Ann's action succeeded and hence the outcome was good, Jill sustained only minor bruises, and judgments when Ann's action failed and hence the outcome was bad, Jill sustained life-threatening injuries. The two explanations make different predictions, as Table 1 shows. The aversive-emotion hypothesis predicts an effect of outcome knowledge for morally good actions that fail and result in a *bad* outcome, such as when Jill sustains life-threatening injuries. People will judge that the morally good action should have been taken less often when they know it failed, compared to when they do not know the outcome, because they experience a

Table 1

Predictions of two competing hypotheses for judgments that a morally good action should have been taken, after information is provided about the outcome or imagined alternatives (relative to judgments made prior to receiving such information).

Hypothesis	Aversive-emotion	Causal-inference
Outcome knowledge		
Good outcome		
<i>Jill sustains minor bruises</i>	No effect	Amplify judgments
Bad outcome		
<i>Jill sustains serious injuries</i>	Diminish judgments	No effect
Imagined alternatives		
Counterfactual, Good outcome		
<i>Jill's (minor) injuries would have been worse</i>	Amplify judgments	Amplify judgments
Counterfactual, Bad outcome		
<i>Jill's (serious) injuries would have been worse</i>	Amplify judgments	Amplify judgments
Semi-factual, Good outcome		
<i>Jill's (minor) injuries would have been the same</i>	No effect	Diminish judgments
Semi-factual, Bad outcome		
<i>Jill's (serious) injuries would have been the same</i>	No effect	Diminish judgments

negative reaction to the bad outcome. The aversive-emotion hypothesis predicts no effect of outcome knowledge for morally good actions that succeed and result in a good outcome, such as when Jill sustains minor bruises. People will judge that the morally good action should have been taken as often when they know it succeeded, compared to when they do not know the outcome, because the aversive-emotion hypothesis is based on negative emotional reactions. The focus on negative emotions rather than positive ones can be considered akin to the proposal that people weight losses more than gains (e.g., Kahneman, 2011; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

The predictions of the causal-inference hypothesis are different. It predicts a moral hindsight effect for *good* outcomes, because the good outcome provides confirmation of its causal link to the action, Ann rushed to save Jill and her action resulted in the outcome that Jill was saved. People can construct a causal model in which the action is clearly linked to the outcome. They decide, with hindsight, that Ann could have known that her action would save Jill. People will judge that the morally good action should have been taken more often when they know it succeeded, compared to when they do not know the outcome. The causal-inference hypothesis predicts no effect of outcome knowledge for morally good actions that fail and result in a bad outcome. Participants attribute a high degree of responsibility for a bad outcome to a protagonist despite their good intentions (e.g., Kominsky, Phillips, Gerstenberg, Lagnado, & Knobe, 2015; Sarin, Lagnado, & Burgess, 2017). A bad outcome may provide disconfirmation of the causal link between the good action and its expected good outcome, Ann rushed to save Jill but her action did not result in the outcome that Jill was saved, although people have difficulty reasoning about disconfirmation (e.g., Cherubini, Castelvecchio, & Cherubini, 2005). But a bad outcome may not disconfirm the causal link between the good action and the expected good outcome, and instead may indicate that other disabling factors intervened to prevent the outcome, for example Ann rushed to save Jill and held her down as the truck drove over them and her action would have succeeded but for other factors, such as attempts by Jill to escape, last-minute manoeuvres by the truck-driver, and so on (e.g., Byrne, 1989; Oaksford & Chater, 2017). Hence, people will not decide, with hindsight, that Ann could have known that her action would not save Jill. They will judge that the morally good action should have been taken as often when they know it failed, compared to when they do not know the outcome. We test whether a moral hindsight effect occurs for good actions when they succeed and lead to good outcomes (in

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