



Why we forgive what can't be controlled

Justin W. Martin*, Fiery Cushman

Department of Psychology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, William James Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 May 2015

Revised 14 October 2015

Accepted 17 November 2015

Keywords:

Moral psychology

Morality

Punishment

Control

Intentional action

Causation

ABSTRACT

Volitional control matters greatly for moral judgment: Coerced agents receive less condemnation for outcomes they cause. Less well understood is the psychological basis of this effect. Control may influence perceptions of intent for the outcome that occurs or perceptions of causal role in that outcome. Here, we show that an agent who *chooses* to do the right thing but accidentally causes a bad outcome receives relatively more punishment than an agent who is *forced* to do the “right” thing but causes a bad outcome. Thus, having good intentions ironically leads to greater condemnation. This surprising effect does not depend upon perceptions of increased intent for harm to occur, but rather upon perceptions of causal role in the obtained outcome. Further, this effect is specific to punishment: An agent who chooses to do the right thing is rated as having better moral character than a forced agent, even though they cause the same bad outcome. These results clarify how, when and why control influences moral judgment.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Charles Whitman murdered his wife and mother on a July night in 1966. The following morning he continued the killing spree, climbing a clock tower and using a large arsenal of rifles to indiscriminately murder passersby below. His spree left 13 dead and 32 wounded.¹ If Whitman was in control of his behavior then nobody could be more deserving of punishment. Yet, in an unusual suicide note Whitman professed love for his family and regret for the deeds he was about to commit. He described the recent onset of strangely violent thoughts, and requested an autopsy to determine whether there was an abnormality in his brain. There was: His autopsy revealed a growing tumor that impinged on a cluster of subcortical structures. Suppose, then, that Whitman's behavior was in some sense beyond his control. As heinous as his actions were, would this fact change our desire for retribution?

Many past studies suggest that it would: Agents who lack control over their behavior receive less condemnation for harms they cause (Alicke, 2000; Cushman, Dreber, Wang, & Costa, 2009; Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Darley, 1995). But, what is it about lacking control that lessens moral judgment? In other words, what is the psychological basis of this effect? One intuitively appealing possibility is that control impacts moral judgment through representations of intentionality. If a person strikes

another during a seizure, for instance, their lack of control indicates that they likely did not cause harm intentionally. This inference follows because behavioral control implies a correspondence between intention and outcome, while a lack of control makes a mismatch possible. Returning to Whitman's case, potentially we forgive him because viewing his actions as uncontrollable leads us to assume that he lacked a culpable mental state—i.e., an intention, desire, motive, etc. to kill. Indeed, this connection between intentionality and control is well documented (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Weiner, 1995).

Yet, Whitman's case seems a poor example of this mechanism. His behavior was intentional in any ordinary sense of the word: He meticulously planned and then executed an attack on nearly four-dozen people, murdering 13 of them. Rather, it feels intuitively as if the tumor “made” Whitman murder, by forcing him or robbing him of alternative courses of action. In other words, Whitman's lack of control seems to deprive him of causal responsibility for the crime. It wasn't really Whitman who did it—his diseased brain did.

This illustrates an alternative possibility: That control influences moral judgment by modifying ascriptions of causal responsibility. Past research clearly demonstrates that moral judgment is sensitive to a person's role in causing harm, in addition to the role played by their intent to cause harm (Cushman, 2008; Guglielmo, Monroe and Malle, 2009; Piaget, 1965; Weiner, 1995; Young, Cushman, Hauser, & Saxe, 2007). Yet, there is less *prima facie* appeal to the possibility that we forgive uncontrollable action because we don't hold an actor causally responsible for it. After all, we routinely apply the concept of causal responsibility to inanimate

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: justinmartin@g.harvard.edu (J.W. Martin).

¹ Details taken from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/the-brain-on-trial/308520/>.

objects and events to which the notion of “control” simply does not apply. For instance, we judge a storm to have caused a forest fire without positing that the storm has “control” over the lightning. By analogy, can’t a person who lacks control over their behavior still be causally responsible for the harm that follows from it?

Answering this question depends upon a careful decomposition of behavioral control. At first blush, we might suppose that Whitman was a cause of the murders if, absent Whitman, the murders would not have occurred, in just the same way that lightning might cause a forest fire (no lightning, no fire). In this sense it is trivially true that Whitman was the cause. Following this logic, if Whitman is to be excused for his behavior on the basis of a brain defect, it could not be because he failed to *cause* the deaths of the people who he shot.

Yet, much past research indicates that people represent the causal pathway from a person to the world in a more nuanced manner. Specifically, they distinguish between the causal link from a person (e.g., Whitman) to their behavior (shooting) and the subsequent causal link from the behavior (shooting) to an outcome (deaths) (Alicke, 2000). According to this model, it is conceptually possible that Whitman’s behavior caused the deaths, and yet “Whitman” did not cause his behavior. Clearly much hinges on the boundaries of personal identity. Is Whitman to be identified with his entire physical body, including the nervous system? If so, he clearly plays a causal role in the production of all of his behaviors. Or, alternatively, is Whitman to be identified with a limited portion of his mental capacity—specifically his will, the capacity for volitional control? On this view, it is possible for Whitman’s body to have fired the shots without “Whitman” being the true cause of this behavior (construed as their “will”). And, of course, if he didn’t cause his behavior, then he didn’t cause the deaths that resulted from it. This latter conception formalizes the intuitive notion that we are not causally responsible for events over which we have no control.

Consistent with this possibility, Knobe and Nichols (2011) find that people judge an agent to be the cause of his own controllable actions (e.g., moving his hand away from a bee) but not to be the cause of his own uncontrollable actions (e.g., trembling in the presence of a bee). Applying a similar idea to the moral domain, Phillips and Shaw (2014) find that people attribute less blame to a person who is intentionally manipulated into performing a harmful action than to a person who is manipulated unintentionally. Critically, blame is reduced because people view the manipulated agent as less causally responsible for the harm she produced. Although Phillips and Shaw did not directly test ascriptions of control, their preferred interpretation is that people perceive the manipulated agent as being controlled by the other agent (and thus, presumably, lacking in control over themselves).

In sum, then, while it seems likely that there are cases in which we forgive uncontrollable actions because we do not think the agent intended harm, could it also be the case that we forgive such actions because we do not believe the agent is even causally responsible for them? Prior work has suggested that the intent and causation pathways are not mutually exclusive possibilities. For instance, Alicke (2000) proposes two independent pathways for control to influence moral judgment: One by way of intent, and another by way of causation. The causation hypothesis remains untested, however, because past studies have not successfully dissociated causation from intent when assessing the influence of control on moral judgment. Our aim is to accomplish this dissociation.

1.1. Experimental logic

Dissociating the influence of causation and intention requires situations of a particular type: an agent must be causally responsi-

ble for harm that they did not intend, and yet still be a viable target for moral judgment. Cases of moral luck, studied in both the psychological and philosophical literatures (Cushman, 2008; Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981; Young et al., 2007), present such an opportunity.² In one variety of moral luck, a person acts with good intentions but accidentally brings about a bad outcome (Cushman, 2008; Young et al., 2007). Despite their good intentions, such agents are often held to deserve punishment (Cushman, 2008). This punishment of accidental outcomes depends on the attribution of causal responsibility to the agent. Here, we make use of such cases and explore how the punishment of accidental outcomes responds to greater versus lesser degrees of control.

The logic of our design is best illustrated through a specific example. Consider a doctor who can choose between two medications in order to save her patient. Without medication, the patient will certainly die. Medication A has only a 33% chance of killing the patient, while medication B has a 66% chance of death. The doctor will be able to publish in a prestigious medical journal if either medicine fails, however, so she has an incentive to choose the bad medication. Fortunately she is a good doctor and chooses the good medicine (A); unfortunately, the patient is among the unlucky minority who dies. Consistent with prior research, we expect that participants will assign some degree of punishment to this doctor because she is causally responsible for death, despite her choice of the best possible action. That is, we expect to observe the phenomenon of moral luck.

Against this backdrop, the critical question is how participants will judge a case that proceeds identically except for one detail: As the doctor is deciding, she finds out that only medication A is available in her office. This doctor still performs a good action (choosing medication A) that leads to a bad outcome (killing the patient), but her control over the outcome is diminished because she lacks an alternative course of action. (Note that we accomplish reduced control by a manipulation of counterfactual alternatives; below, we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach in greater detail).

On the one hand, if control influences moral judgment exclusively by modifying participants’ attributions of intent, then people should judge the doctor who lacks control as harshly—perhaps even more harshly—than the doctor who exercises control. After all, the doctor with a choice of medications has demonstrably good intentions: She chooses the best medication for the patient when a selfish alternative is available. In contrast, there is ambiguity about the intentions of the doctor who lacks control: Maybe she would have chosen the good medication, but on the other hand maybe she would have chosen the bad medication had it been available in order to boost her publication record.

On the other hand, if control influences moral judgment in part by modifying participants’ attributions of causal responsibility, then people should judge the doctor with control more harshly than the doctor who lacks control. After all, both doctors contributed to the death of the patient—a highly negative outcome. Whoever is judged more causally responsible for this negative outcome will tend to receive more blame. In this case, it would be the agent who possesses control over her action.

This prediction of the causal responsibility hypothesis is so peculiar that it deserves special attention. Stated in the abstract, it seems appropriate that a person who causes harm would receive more punishment if she has more control over her action. Yet, in the specific case of an accidental harm, control is exercised in order to do the right thing: For instance, the doctor chooses the good drug. According to the causal responsibility hypothesis, it is pre-

² Although there are multiple types of moral luck (constitutive, circumstantial, causal and resultant), we focus on resultant moral luck, the type most often studied in the psychological literature.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7286344>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7286344>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)