



# Unifying morality's influence on non-moral judgments: The relevance of alternative possibilities



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## ABSTRACT

Past work has demonstrated that people's moral judgments can influence their judgments in a number of domains that might seem to involve straightforward matters of fact, including judgments about freedom, causation, the doing/allowing distinction, and intentional action. The present studies explore whether the effect of morality in these four domains can be explained by changes in the relevance of alternative possibilities. More precisely, we propose that moral judgment influences the degree to which people regard certain alternative possibilities as relevant, which in turn impacts intuitions about freedom, causation, doing/allowing, and intentional action. Employing the stimuli used in previous research, Studies 1a, 2a, 3a, and 4a show that the relevance of alternatives is influenced by moral judgments and mediates the impact of morality on non-moral judgments. Studies 1b, 2b, 3b, and 4b then provide direct empirical evidence for the link between the relevance of alternatives and judgments in these four domains by manipulating (rather than measuring) the relevance of alternative possibilities. Lastly, Study 5 demonstrates that the critical mechanism is not whether alternative possibilities are considered, but whether they are regarded as *relevant*. These studies support a unified framework for understanding the impact of morality across these very different kinds of judgments.

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## 1. Introduction

A series of recent studies have shown that people's moral judgments can impact their intuitions about issues that might appear to be straightforward matters of fact. This effect was noted early on for intuitions about whether an agent acted *intentionally* (Knobe, 2003), but it soon became clear that a very similar pattern could be found in numerous other domains. Among other things, people's moral judgments also influence their intuitions about whether an agent acted *freely*, whether an action *caused* some further outcome, and whether an agent *did* something or merely *allowed* it to happen (Cushman, Knobe, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Hitchcock & Knobe, 2009; Phillips & Knobe, 2009; Young & Phillips, 2011).

One way to explain these phenomena would be to offer an independent account for each of the separate effects. So one could construct a hypothesis about why moral considerations influence intuitions about intentional action (Guglielmo & Malle, 2010; Machery, 2008; Nichols & Ulatowski, 2007; Uttich & Lombrozo,

2010), then another separate hypothesis about why moral considerations impact intuitions about causation (Menzies, 2010; Sytsma, Livengood, & Rose, 2012), and so on. (Some have even argued explicitly that there cannot be a unified explanation of all of these effects; Hindriks, 2014.)

Here, we pursue the exact opposite approach. Rather than looking separately at each individual effect, we want to consider the widespread influence of moral cognition in these different domains, and to offer a unified explanation that applies to them all. Specifically, we will suggest that all these effects can be explained in terms of a very general principle involving the relationship between people's moral judgments and their way of understanding *alternative possibilities*.

### 1.1. The role of possibilities

Research in a number of different fields has independently argued for the importance of alternative possibilities, including work in philosophy (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Lewis, 1973), linguistics (Kratzer, 2012; for a review, see Portner, 2009), psychology (Byrne, 2005; Kahneman & Miller, 1986, for a review see, Roese, 1997), and computer science (e.g., Bello, in press; Halpern & Pearl, 2005; Pearl, 2000). In each of these cases, the central insight

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has been that our understanding of the things that occur is shaped in some fundamental way by our understanding of alternative possibilities that could have occurred but actually did not.

Intriguingly, existing theoretical work has already suggested that alternative possibilities play a role in each of the domains in which we find these surprising effects of moral judgment. As one example, consider judgments about *freedom*. Within existing theoretical work, it is widely acknowledged that the question as to whether someone acted freely depends, in part, on whether it would have been possible for that person to have done something else instead (Aquinas, 1273/1920; Aristotle, 350 BC/2002; Berlin, 1969/2002). Thus, on one view, claims about freedom like (1a) depend on claims about alternative possibilities like (1b).

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- (1) a. She did *x* freely.  
b. If she had wanted not to do *x*, she would not have done *x*.
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Similarly, within existing work on judgments about *causation*, it is widely believed that causal judgments in some way rely on representations of alternative possibilities (Lewis, 1973; Pearl, 2000). In particular, a number of accounts of causation suggest that causal claims like (2a) depend at least partially on claims about alternative possibilities like (2b).

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- (2) a. Event *x* caused event *y*.  
b. If *x* had not happened, *y* would not have happened.
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Within existing work in this tradition, there is a great deal of controversy about precisely how to spell out the relationship between alternative possibilities and judgments about freedom, causation, etc. (Halpern & Hitchcock, 2014; Nduibuisi & Byrne, 2013; Woodward, 2004). However, the details of this controversy will not concern us here. The key point is simply that judgments in each of these domains depend in some way on how we understand the alternative possibilities that could have happened, but didn't.

Across a number of fields, existing work on alternative possibilities has also introduced a further idea that plays a central role in the present hypothesis: People do not treat all alternative possibilities equally. Instead, they regard certain possibilities as *relevant*, while treating others as completely *irrelevant* (Halpern & Hitchcock, 2014; Lewis, 1973; Portner, 2009; Roese, 1997). To the extent that they regard an alternative possibility as irrelevant, they will tend to ignore it entirely, and it will play little role in their judgments in any domain.

To give one simple example, suppose that a group of people is giving a presentation, and they end up doing a terrible job. As we consider what actually occurred in this case, we might regard certain alternative possibilities as especially relevant. For example, possibilities in which they had spent more time preparing might seem especially relevant. Or perhaps even possibilities in which they had simply decided not to give the presentation at all. But then there are numerous other possibilities that we would regard as completely irrelevant. Thus, we would never regard as relevant the possibility that the presentation could have been interrupted by a freak tornado, or the possibility that the earth's gravitational field could have suddenly ceased to exist. People might be capable of entertaining possibilities like these if forced to, but all the same, they would regard them utterly pointless, not even worthy of the slightest consideration.

Most importantly for present purposes, the distinction between relevant and irrelevant possibilities has been invoked to explain judgments in the specific domains under consideration here. Take the example of causation. As we noted above, it seems that

people only regard a factor as causal if, when considering alternative possibilities in which that factor does not occur, the outcome also does not occur (Lewis, 1973; Pearl, 2000). But theoretical work suggests that it is not enough for this to be true; possibilities in which this factor does not occur must also be *relevant*. In cases where such possibilities are regarded as irrelevant, people will simply reject the corresponding causal claim (e.g., Halpern & Hitchcock, 2014; Schaffer & Blanchard, in press). To illustrate this point, consider the causal claim (3a) and the corresponding claim about an alternative possibility (3b).

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- (3) a. The earth's gravitational field caused that disastrous presentation.  
b. If the earth's gravitational field had not been present, the disastrous presentation would not have occurred.
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The claim (3b) is surely true. Yet at the same time, possibilities in which the earth's gravitational field is not present seem entirely irrelevant, and thus the theory predicts that the corresponding causal claim should also be seen as absurd.

As this example helps to make clear, it is critical to distinguish between the degree to which people actively *consider* an alternative possibility and the degree to which they regard that alternative possibility as *relevant*. Previous work in social psychology has explored the impact of counterfactual reasoning, and this work has demonstrated that actively considering a particular possibility can have an important impact on many aspects of human behavior (for reviews, see Byrne, 2005; Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese, 1997). The focus of the present paper, however is on a somewhat different phenomenon. Independent of the question of whether or not people consider a particular possibility, there seems to be a question as to whether people regard that possibility as relevant. (Even if people are specifically instructed to reason about the possibility that the earth's gravitational field could suddenly disappear, they might continue to regard this possibility as completely irrelevant.) As far as we know, this approach has not yet been directly tested in experimental work, but it has been developed in considerable technical detail within the existing theoretical literature in several different fields (e.g., Bello, in press; Halpern & Hitchcock, 2014; Knobe, 2010; Kratzer, 2012; Schaffer & Blanchard, in press).

If we are seeking a unified way of explaining why people's moral judgments influence their judgments in the domains of freedom, cause, etc., then the relevance of alternative possibilities may help. That is, if we can show that people's moral judgments influence their judgments of the relevance of alternative possibilities, then we may be able to provide a unified account of morality's influence in all four of these areas. We propose to test this basic model (Fig. 1) in the current paper.

## 1.2. Morality and the relevance of alternative possibilities

Thus far, we have been considering the evidence that judgments of the relevance of alternative possibilities influence intuitions in each of the four domains. We now turn to the other link in our model – the claim that moral judgments influence judgments about the relevance of alternative possibilities. Specifically, there is a general tendency to regard alternative possibilities as more relevant to the extent that they involve replacing something morally bad (in the actual world) with something morally good (in the alternative possibilities). Some form of this basic idea can be found across a wide variety of different theoretical accounts that have been spelled out within quite different theoretical frameworks (e.g., Halpern & Hitchcock, 2014; Knobe & Szabó, 2013; Schaffer & Blanchard, in press). The precise technical implementation varies

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