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## Are morally good actions ever free? ☆

Cory J. Clark<sup>a,\*</sup>, Adam Shniderman<sup>b</sup>, Jamie B. Luguri<sup>c</sup>, Roy F. Baumeister<sup>a,d</sup>, Peter H. Ditto<sup>e</sup><sup>a</sup> Florida State University, United States<sup>b</sup> University of Michigan, United States<sup>c</sup> University of Chicago, United States<sup>d</sup> University of Queensland, Australia<sup>e</sup> University of California, Irvine, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that people ascribe more responsibility to morally bad actions than both morally good and neutral ones, suggesting that people do not attribute responsibility to morally good actions. The present work demonstrates that this is not so: People ascribe more free will to morally good than neutral actions (Studies 1a-1b, Mini Meta). Studies 2a-2b distinguished the underlying motives for ascribing freedom to morally good and bad actions. Free will ascriptions for immoral actions were driven predominantly by affective responses (i.e., punitive desires, moral outrage, and perceived severity of the crime). Free will judgments for morally good actions were similarly driven by affective responses (i.e., reward desires, moral uplift, and perceived generosity), but also more pragmatic considerations (perceived utility of reward, counter-normativity of the action, and required willpower). Morally good actions may be more carefully considered, leading to generally weaker, but more contextually sensitive free will judgments.

## 1. Introduction

In October 2015, the Concord, Massachusetts police department began issuing citations to their residents for behaviors such as crossing the street at marked crosswalks, wearing seatbelts, and yielding to pedestrians. These citations did not bring fines or jail time but rather could be redeemed for ice cream at a local café. The peculiarity of these good-behavior citations gained the community media attention. However, the program was not adopted as a permanent policy for incentivizing law-abiding behavior within the community. Whereas most governments have penal systems for punishing rule breakers, very few have systems for rewarding rule followers or philanthropists (see Fig. 1).

On a societal level, establishing accountability for harmful actions and outcomes is highly prioritized above establishing accountability for helpful actions and outcomes. This same moral valence asymmetry has been found repeatedly in individual judgments of accountability. People ascribe more responsibility to morally bad actions and outcomes than morally good ones (e.g., Alicke, 1992; Knobe, 2003; Reeder & Spores, 1983). Expanding on this work, recent research has demonstrated that “bad is freer than good” (p. 26): People attribute more free will to bad actions and actions with bad outcomes than good actions and actions with good outcomes (Feldman, Wong, & Baumeister, 2016). These and many similar results seem to suggest that people are disinclined to assign responsibility for good actions. To our knowledge, however, no work has compared responsibility judgments for morally good actions

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 1107 W. Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4301, United States.

E-mail address: [cclark@psy.fsu.edu](mailto:cclark@psy.fsu.edu) (C.J. Clark).

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to morally neutral ones. Because rewarding prosocial behavior, like punishing antisocial behavior, is beneficial for group functioning, we hypothesized that reward and praise motives might also increase ascriptions of free will. Therefore, we expected that people would ascribe more free will to morally good actions than morally neutral ones, but, replicating past work, free will judgments would be higher for morally bad actions than both morally good and neutral actions.

The present research also sought to test the hypothesis that responses to morally good actions would be more context-sensitive than responses to bad actions. Outrage, indignation, and other emotional responses to bad actions produce strong impulses to punish, regardless of whether the punishment will have any deterrent effect (e.g., Carlsmith, Darley & Robinson, 2002; Crockett, Özdemir, & Fehr, 2014). These impulses motivate individuals to perceive harmful actions as freely performed, which helps to justify punishing the wrongdoers (e.g., Clark et al., 2014). In contrast, positive emotional responses to morally positive actions may increase sensitivity to contextual features of the act, consistent with the generally broadening effect of positive emotion (e.g., Frederickson, 2001, 2013; Frederickson & Branigan, 2005). When people witness morally good actions, they may more carefully evaluate whether the behavior is deserving of praise and whether rewarding the behavior would encourage future good behavior. We hypothesized that free will judgments for morally bad actions would be driven predominantly by affective punitive motives, whereas people might more carefully consider a variety of relevant features when determining whether morally good actions were freely performed.

### 1.1. *The good, the bad, and the neutral*

Psychology has consistently shown that negativity plays a greater role in peoples' lives than positivity (Kanouse & Hanson, 1971; Lewicka, Czapinski, & Peeters, 1992; Skowronski and Carlston, 1989). A sweeping literature review concluded that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001): people give greater weight to negative events, objects, and personality traits than good ones (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Regarding responsibility-related judgments for morally relevant behavior, myriad studies have demonstrated that people attribute more responsibility to bad actions and actions with bad outcomes than to closely matched (1) good actions and actions with good outcomes (e.g., Alicke, 1992; Knobe, 2003; Reeder & Spores, 1983), (2) neutral actions and actions with neutral outcomes (e.g., Cushman, Knobe, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008; Knobe & Fraser, 2008), and (3) less bad actions and actions with less bad outcomes (e.g., Walster, 1966). Most relevant to the present work, people attribute more free will to morally bad actions and outcomes than to morally good (e.g., Everett et al., 2017) and morally neutral ones (Clark et al., 2014).

This body of work seems to suggest that people do not attribute responsibility to morally good actions, but very little work has compared responsibility judgments for morally positive actions to morally neutral ones. In one cross-cultural analysis, participants from the U.S. and India attributed less intentionality to actions with helpful side-effects than neutral side-effects, seeming to suggest that people do not attribute responsibility to helpful actions (Clark, Bauman, Kamble, & Knowles, 2016). However, in these same studies, praise motives were strong predictors of intentionality judgments for actions with helpful side-effects, seeming to suggest that praise motives do increase attributions of responsibility. To our knowledge, no similar work has compared responsibility judgments between morally positive and neutral actions where the moral valence of the action was not a mere side-effect. Thus, it remains unknown whether praise motives elicit heightened responsibility judgments for morally positive actions relative to morally neutral ones. The first goal of the present research was to investigate these differences in the context of free will judgments. We sought to examine whether exposure to morally positive actions, and subsequent motives to praise, would increase free will judgments. We readily concede that bad actions and subsequent punitive motives elicit the strongest free will judgments—but good actions and praise motives may elicit stronger free will judgments than morally neutral actions.

### 1.2. *Free will judgments*

At least since the days of Aristotle, philosophers and other intellectuals have debated the existence of human free will, a debate revived in recent years by neuroscientists and psychologists (e.g., Bargh, 2008; Baumeister, Clark, & Luguri, 2015; Libet, 1985; Soon, Brass, Heinze, & Haynes, 2008; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999). Despite a persistent lack of consensus among the philosophical and scientific communities on the issue, members of the general public believe strongly in free will, across ages and cultures (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005; Nichols, 2004; Sarkissian et al., 2010). Furthermore, folk beliefs in this concept are relevant to a variety of real-world moral consequences. For example, an experimental manipulation that reduces free will beliefs causes an increase in antisocial behavior (Baumeister, Masicampo & DeWall, 2009; Protzko, Ouimette, & Schooler, 2016; Vohs & Schooler, 2008) and a decrease in punitiveness (Shariff et al., 2014). Performing antisocial acts and declining to punish others who misbehave both can weaken the moral consensus that helps society benefit its members.

#### 1.2.1. *Motivated free will judgments*

Many factors contribute to free will beliefs, including the powerful subjective experience of conscious will (Wegner, 2002, 2003) and observations about causality (Nichols, 2004). However, one driving factor is a strong motive to justify punishing immoral behaviors (Clark, Baumeister, & Ditto, 2017). In five studies, Clark et al. (2014) demonstrated that exposure to the morally bad actions of others, and subsequent desires to punish immoral actions lead people to attribute more free will to such actions and to believe more in the general human capacity for free action. These findings provided empirical support for Nietzsche's (1889, 1954) contention that the concept of free will was invented to satisfy instincts to judge and punish others.

When it comes to moral responsibility judgments, the general consensus is that people ought to be punished only for actions that they freely chose (Nichols & Knobe, 2007). Accordingly, when people desire to punish others for harmful actions, they increase their perceptions that the misdeeds were performed freely. In other words, desires to hold others morally responsible (particularly for immoral actions) influence judgments about the very factor necessary to warrant moral responsibility: whether the person performed the action of

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