



Bad is freer than good: Positive–negative asymmetry in attributions of free will



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ABSTRACT

Recent findings support the idea that the belief in free will serves as the basis for moral responsibility, thus promoting the punishment of immoral agents. We theorized that free will extends beyond morality to serve as the basis for accountability and the capacity for change more broadly, not only for others but also for the self. Five experiments showed that people attributed higher freedom of will to negative than to positive valence, regardless of morality or intent, for both self and others. In recalling everyday life situations and in classical decision making paradigms, negative actions, negative outcomes, and negative framing were attributed higher free will than positive ones. Free will attributions were mainly driven by action or outcome valence, but not intent. These findings show consistent support for the idea that free will underlies laypersons' sense-making for accountability and change under negative circumstances.

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1. Introduction

The idea that people have the capacity to make free, autonomous, and responsible choices is one fundamental assumption of most, if not all, modern civilizations. Although most cultures operate based on some degree of belief in freedom of choice, people vary in how much they regard human beings, including themselves, as capable of making free choices (e.g., Baumeister, 2008; Paulhus & Carey, 2011). They also differ in their perceptions of how much free will they have compared with others (Gray, Knickman, & Wegner, 2011; Pronin & Kugler, 2010), and how much free will is exerted in certain situations (Helzer & Gilovich, 2012). Such fluctuations in free will beliefs and attributions of free will are far more than idle metaphysical speculations, having been shown to alter cognition and behaviors (e.g., Alquist, Ainsworth, & Baumeister, 2013; Vohs & Schooler, 2008) and with important legal and societal implications (Greene & Cohen, 2004; Roskies, 2006).

Over two millennia, philosophers have been debating what the concept of free will means, how it should be defined, and what purpose it serves. Despite the long-standing debate there has so far been very little convergence with several schools of thought and countless views conceptualizing free will in different—sometimes conflicting—ways. In recent years, a group of experimental philosophers and social-cognitive psychologists have begun to look beyond the academic and philosophical debate on the meaning of free will and have instead examined laypersons' beliefs, cognition, and the behavioral consequences related to the elusive concept of free will.

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A growing body of literature examining free will beliefs and attributions has converged on the idea that in laypersons' minds the concept of free will is associated with moral responsibility. The belief in free will has been shown to promote socially responsible and moral behavior, such as more honesty (Vohs & Schooler, 2008), better learning from emotional experiences (Stillman & Baumeister, 2010), and more prosocial behavior (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009). The theory underlying these findings is grounded on the philosophical argument that free will is a prerequisite for holding people morally responsible for their actions (Kant, 1788/1997). The link between free will and moral responsibility is also reflected in the attributions people make to agents, with immoral agents perceived as having higher free will and higher perceived blameworthiness (Phillips & Knobe, 2009), resulting in more retributive behavior (Shariff et al., 2014), as well as activating the belief in free will so as to allow punishment of these agents (Clark et al., 2014).

However, studies on free will beliefs and cognition are not limited to morality and moral situations but have extended to broader behavior in everyday life to reflect a wider view of the self as an active agent who is free to choose actions and pursue goals. The laypersons' concept of free will is theorized as a core mechanism that enables the person to better pursue what he/she wants (Dennett, 2003; Edwards, 1754/1957; Hume, 1748). Those who believe in free will enjoy greater self-efficacy and less helplessness (Baumeister & Brewer, 2012), have higher levels of autonomy and more proactivity (Alquist et al., 2013), exhibit better academic performance (Feldman, Chandrashekar, & Wong, 2016) and job performance (Stillman et al., 2010), and have more positive attitudes and higher perceived capacity for decision making (Feldman, Baumeister, & Wong, 2014). These findings are not about morality but rather about agents capable of change to improve their own behavior and take responsibility for their actions. To exemplify that free will attributions are about more than just morality, it has been shown that free will attributions are affected by self-serving biases differentiating between perceptions of the self and of others. Pronin and Kugler (2010) showed that people tend to perceive themselves as having more free will than others, perceiving their own behaviors as less predictable, and their own futures as less determined and more driven by intent. If free will were mainly about holding people responsible and punishing them for immoral actions, it would make little sense for people to attribute high free will to themselves, because that simply increases their own vulnerability to punishment.

We propose that the concept of free will extends beyond morality and punishment to encompass change and accountability more broadly. In our use of the term 'accountability' we refer to the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility. Thus, if a behavior or an outcome deviates from the expected, then an accountable person accepts his or her own role and seeks to learn from mistakes and correct future action. Using this view, the popular notion of free will may have evolved to enable proactivity and learning by promoting people to see themselves as more accountable for their own actions (Baumeister, 2008). A judgment based in accountability (moral, legal, performance, learning, and otherwise) is essentially a decision about whether a person should have acted differently in a particular situation, especially if the outcome was undesirable or if it did not meet with expectations (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). To assert that someone *should* have acted differently only makes sense if one assumes that the person *could* have chosen to act differently. This assertion implies that the actions and outcomes, although subject to many causes, were not fully coerced or predetermined, in the sense that there was no room left for agentic choice (Nichols, 2006). Choice has been shown to be an important factor in people's perception of agency and freedom (Barlas & Obhi, 2013; Bode et al., 2014; Feldman et al., 2014), and the assumption that a person could have chosen to act differently in the same situation is the essence of most laypersons' conception of free will (Monroe, Dillon, & Malle, 2014; Monroe & Malle, 2010; Stillman, Baumeister, & Mele, 2011).

The conceptual link between free will and accountability provides the basis for the proposition that attributions of free will would be higher for negative actions or outcomes because these attributions allow people to perceive that change is possible and accept their personal role in affecting such change. This would not be merely for the sake of punishment, but also to promote change and learning (Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013). Negative outcomes are generally undesirable, and they motivate people to engage in counterfactual thoughts about what could have happened differently (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese, 1997), yet to allow for the possibility of controlled change, negative outcomes would more specifically trigger a search for what the agents involved could have chosen to do differently to prevent, correct, or overcome the negative outcome (Alquist, Ainsworth, Baumeister, Daly, & Stillman, 2015).

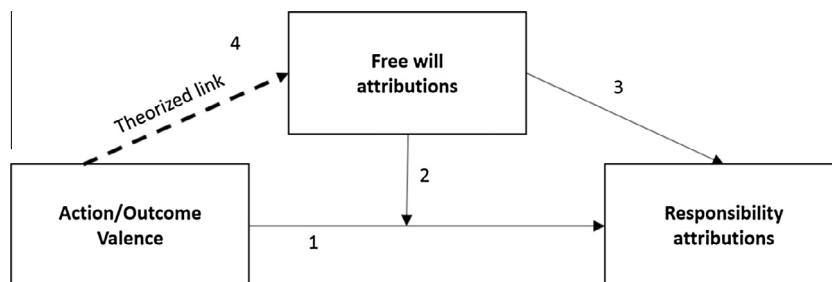


Fig. 1. Free will attribution model: Attributions of responsibility for actions/outcomes depend on the perceptions of free will (#1 and #2). Theorized link: The conceptual link between free will and responsibility (#3) leads to a cognitive association between valence and free will attributions (#4) – negative actions and outcomes trigger higher attributions of free will.

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