

Feelings of Culpability: Just Following Orders versus Making the Decision Oneself

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Abstract

This research examines the effect of agency on an individual's feelings of moral culpability. Our hypothesis was that the closer an individual is to the decision, the more culpable they would feel given an adverse outcome. We test our hypothesis using a moral trade-off paradigm adapted from the Trolley Problem but set in a more realistic (and timely) context: programming autonomous vehicles.

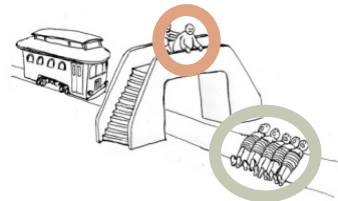
Surprisingly, we get the opposite results from what we predicted. Participants who did not have agency actually feel more morally culpable than participants who had agency to make their own choice. We replicate these results (experiment 2), and reverse them (experiment 3 and 4) by asking participants to take a third-person perspective on the scenario, predict how someone would feel in the scenario, and evaluate that person's moral culpability for an adverse outcome.

Theoretical Background

The relationship between decision and moral culpability has been studied in the Trolley Problem or Footbridge Dilemma paradigm (Foot 1978; Thomson 1985; Fischer & Ravizza 1992)

The feeling that "I did it" elevates moral responsibility

- Personal force is the determining factor (vs. physical contact or spatial proximity) of moral judgments (Greene et al., 2009).
- Harm caused by action (vs. omission), intended (vs. unintended) is less acceptable (Cushman et al., 2006; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982).
- There is a cognitive link between sense of agency and responsibility for action in moral dilemmas (Moretto et al., 2011).



The Footbridge Dilemma

What we did differently

- Realism: Highly stylized scenario → (1) self-driving car programming scenario; (2) there is a separation between action (programming) and consequence (accident)
- Focus of evaluation: How responsible is the actor? (third person judgment) → How does the actor feel about it? (first person's felt moral culpability)

References

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- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1982). The psychology of preferences. *Scientific American*, 246, 160-173.
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Experiment Setup



You have to program a self-driving car to make either

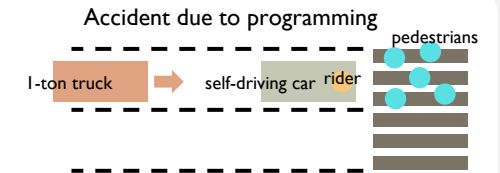
- Deontological behavior
- Utilitarian behavior

Agency condition

It is solely your choice

No agency condition

The CEO decided for you

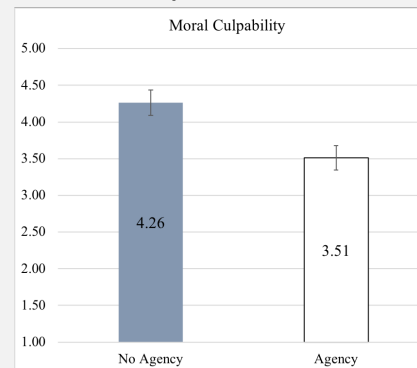


Dependent Variable: Moral Culpability

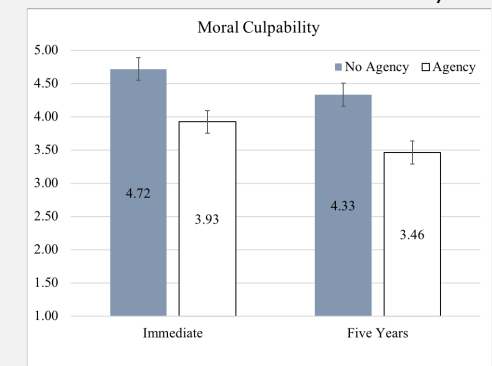
- How responsible you feel
- How guilty you feel
- How much you regret

Experiment Results

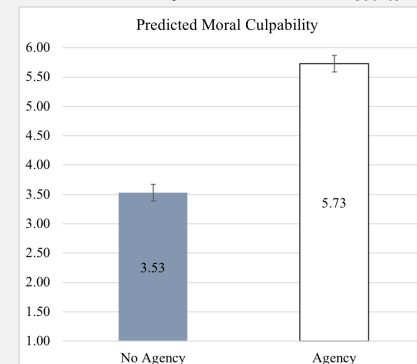
Experiment 1



Experiment 2: When accident is immediately vs. five years after programming



Experiment 3: When people predict results from exp. 1 & 2



Experiment 4: When people are first person vs. third person perspective

