

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

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Poster Session #2

Meeting Link:

<https://gsb-columbia-edu.zoom.us/j/95276728768>

## Abstract

This paper investigates the relation between decision agency and felt culpability for behavior. Two conditions were contrasted: (1) the individual makes a decision and takes action; (2) the same action is taken in compliance with an authority figure's decision. Although the legal system holds individuals who make the decision more culpable for a negative outcome (per Nuremberg defense), our results indicated that individuals who 'obeyed orders' felt more culpable (responsible, guilty, and regretful). This outcome was a reversal of our own expectations and occurred both in a hypothetical programming of a self-driving car scenario, as well as in two moral-dilemma scenarios regarding COVID-19. Better understanding the conditions in which decision agency will increase or decrease feelings of moral culpability has important implications not only for firms developing autonomous systems/products but also for policy and lawmakers who are setting the protocol for how we, as a society, act and judge moral responsibility.

## Key Findings

1. Participants who imagined themselves to be the actor (programmer or mayor) felt more culpable if they followed their superior's orders (low agency condition), than if they made the decision themselves (high agency condition).
2. Changing vantage point, from first-person to third-person, reverses the effect: those who make their own decision are judged by others to be more culpable than those who just followed orders.
3. Low agency leads to greater feelings of culpability in both a stylized trolley-dilemma and real-world policy tradeoff decisions (reopening bars & restaurants; testing delivery workers for COVID-19)
4. The relationship between decision agency and felt culpability holds for Democrats but not for Republicans. We are currently exploring reasons for this effect of political identity.

## Programming Autonomous Vehicles

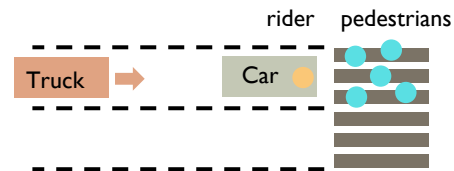
Imagine that you are a programmer for autonomous cars.  
How will you program the car in case of an accident?

- **Deontological:** save the rider above all else
- **Utilitarian:** save as many people as possible above saving the rider



**High Agency condition:**  
It is solely your choice

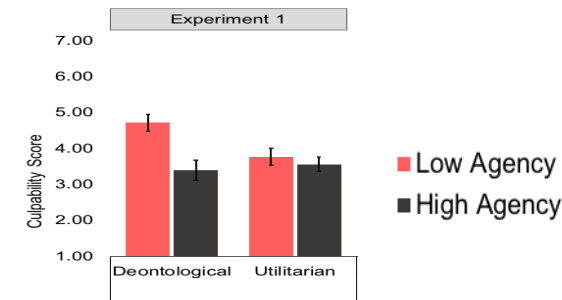
**Low Agency condition:**  
The CEO decided for you



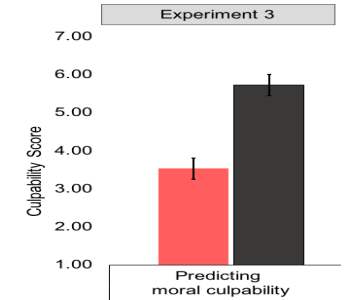
**Key DV: Programmer's Moral Culpability**

- Responsibility
- Guilt
- Regret

## First-Person Results



## Third-Person Results



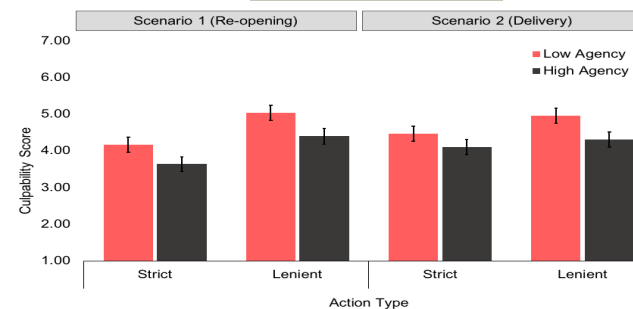
## Reopening the Economy Post COVID-19

Imagine that you are the mayor of a mid-sized city in the US.  
How will you reopen the economy?



- **Strict policy:** more COVID-19 prevention and less economic growth
- **Lenient policy:** more economic growth and less COVID-19 prevention

## Scenario Results



## Political Party Results

