
Not All Heroes Wear Capes. They May Just Have More Willpower



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We instinctively see people with stronger self-control as more virtuous and more capable of realising good intentions.

We all have moments of weakness, whether overindulging in junk food, staying up to binge-watch Netflix or buying stuff we don't need. Why not, if it feels good in the moment? After all, how could choices like these be “wrong” if they don't affect anyone but ourselves?

Hold that thought. In a series of experiments, [Phyliss Jia Gai](#) of Peking University and I show that people who display stronger self-control in situations that appear morally irrelevant – like choosing exercise over fried chicken – are deemed morally superior.

It is perhaps unsurprising that we judge others for the personal choices they make, even if they appear to have little direct impact on us. This very human tendency may be why [“fat-shaming”](#) and other forms of discrimination are so prevalent. But what might explain our penchant for inferring morality from personal willpower?

Willpower as moral ability

Though moral philosophers have often regarded morality as *separate* from competence and a matter of intentions alone, my colleague and I thought that people might see self-control as a special kind of competence: that is, one *necessary* for realising good intentions. Specifically, we expected that they might view goodness as requiring both good intentions and the ability to act on them, but badness as defined by bad intentions alone. If so, then strong self-control would be thought to indicate moral virtue, but weak self-control wouldn't be seen as clear evidence of its absence.

We call this potential asymmetry the moral-ability hypothesis. It differs from two hypotheses found in past research on the folk psychology of morality: One holds that people perceive willpower as entirely distinct from morality, just like moral philosophers, while the other suggests that they both see willpower as essential to morality and its absence as essential to immorality. As described in our paper, [Willpower as moral ability](#), several experiments support our hypothesis over these prior perspectives.

In the first experiment, US-based participants recruited online read four vignettes about two females and two males facing different self-control dilemmas related to health, procrastination, budgeting and patience. An example:

Mike is a college student. He is in his dorm room and is thinking about writing an important paper for class. He notices that there are a bunch of football games on TV. He could slack off and watch TV or turn off the TV and focus on writing his paper.

Mike feels very conflicted about this decision. He feels a strong desire to watch football, and he is very tempted to do so now. However, even though he is tempted to watch football, he decides to turn off the television and focus on his paper.

Participants rated individuals who showed greater self-control as being more capable of achieving good outcomes, and thus as having better moral character. In contrast, they did *not* perceive those who failed at self-control as morally bad, revealing the distinct asymmetry we expected.

Of course, is this really about self-control, or can people get virtue points just for happening to *like* “virtuous” options more? To test this possibility, our

second experiment used the same four vignettes from Experiment 1, but added versions in which the characters did not experience self-control conflict and simply chose what they preferred.

As before, participants in Experiment 2 rated individuals who showed better self-control as having better moral character than those with weaker self-control, as well as those who merely preferred the virtuous option.

Interestingly, we also found that participants who believed strongly in free will, and thus believed that actions are caused by intentions, tended to regard a person's ability to overcome self-control conflict as particularly reflective of moral character. This pattern further supports the notion that self-control is seen as a moral ability to act on good intentions. Finally, the participants in this study were native Chinese (and read materials translated into Mandarin), suggesting that this belief may be prevalent across cultures.

An increase in interpersonal trust

Another experiment further tested whether people behaved differently towards others with varying levels of self-control. Participants (based in the US and recruited online) completed a survey about their own personal (or "non-moral") self-control (e.g. "I am bad at resisting temptations"), as well as their moral self-control in situations that do directly affect others (e.g. "I lose my temper too easily").

They were then told that they would play a "trust game" with two partners, one of whom ostensibly reported strong personal self-control while the other was less restrained (though importantly, both had the same *moral* self-control ratings).

Participants' decisions and monetary payoffs in this game were dependent on how much they trusted their partner to do the "right" thing and return money back to them. They were asked to rate each partner's moral character, decide on an amount of money to hand to the person, and estimate the amount they expected the person to return.

Similar to the findings from our previous experiments, participants rated the partner with strong personal self-control as having better moral character. More importantly, participants gave more money to this partner and expected them to return more of it, compared to their weaker-willed counterpart. These outcomes indicate that participants' trust in others was

determined by differences in personal self-control alone, regardless of their *own* reported levels of self-control.

Good intentions alone don't make Superman super

Our findings clearly show that people intuitively regard personal self-control, which we don't necessarily associate with morality, as the ability to realise good intentions. This supports our moral-ability hypothesis and its emphasis on competence alongside good intentions.

Superman, to make an analogy, isn't super because he simply has better *intentions* than everyone else. He is a paragon of virtue because of his *ability* to act on his world-saving aspirations and contribute to good outcomes more effectively than the rest of us. But thankfully, our weaker abilities do not seem to be held against us: We find that poor willpower is not viewed as enough to establish bad intentions or bad moral character on its own.

Notably, while many moral beliefs vary across populations, our results hold among participants from two rather different cultures, American and Chinese. Hence, seemingly “personal” choices may be viewed as morally relevant across individualistic and collectivistic cultures alike: even if they do not directly affect others, they may be regarded as an indication of people's ability to potentially benefit others.

These findings may have important implications in public policy contexts, where considerations of these potential benefits might inform public spending decisions. Social welfare policies around the world reveal a near-universal **reluctance to unconditionally help** the poor, with many critics worrying that “undeserved” support from the state could breed dependency. As a result, such programmes often come with strings attached. For example, able-bodied adults in certain US states are required to work, volunteer or study for a set number of hours to remain eligible for government health insurance programmes for low-income Americans.

Enhancing capabilities

Our research suggests the possibility that the personal choices of those in need are regarded as evidence that they lack the willpower necessary to generate “returns” and justify these public investments, contributing to this ambivalence towards social safety nets. Might this unwittingly undermine the **support needed to actually enhance the capabilities of the less**

fortunate?

In the business realm, our theory could be applied to firms seeking to make a positive impact to enhance their reputation and revenue. Compared to people who are generally assumed to have good intentions, and who can thus benefit from demonstrations of exceptional self-discipline alone, firms might face the opposite problem.

Take for-profit firms. They already tend to be regarded as highly competent and disciplined in realising their desired outcomes, but face a great deal of scepticism regarding their intentions. Accordingly, achieving recognition for the good they do may depend heavily on establishing that they genuinely mean well.

Just as good intentions mean little without the ability to realise them, all the impressive organisational capabilities in the world may generate little public goodwill unless they are thought to be deployed in the service of noble intentions.

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About the author(s)

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About the research

[**"Willpower as moral ability"**](#) is published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.