

An agent in a world of possibilities: Introductory overview of the special issue

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Abstract

Possibilities are deeply engrained in psychology's attempts to understand human behavior. This special issue offers diverse and novel insights into the role of possibilities. Two articles on morality show surprising links to mental illness and to counterfactual outcomes: People think doing immoral things is a sign of mental illness, and morally unwelcome outcomes stimulate retroactive imputation of more alternatives. Three articles address classic questions of determinism and choice: Possibilities are shaped by prior events, but pure determinism is useless for psychological theory, and meanwhile some perspectives in modern physics clash with psychological observations and experience. Imitation promotes prosociality but people are highly selective as to what they imitate.

Keywords

Possible, agency, determinism, free will, morality, mental illness, imitation

Much of human life is concerned with possibilities, and so psychology has long focused on how the person and environment direct the course of life toward particular outcomes among the many possible ones. Clinical psychology explores the possibilities of healthy, adaptive functioning as opposed to dysfunction. Social psychology explores how people respond to the structure of situations, of which threats, opportunities, expectations, and other possibilities are a key part. Developmental psychology examines on how children grow up and turn out among the different possible versions of adulthood (e.g., age of sexual debut, level of educational attainment, contact with the criminal justice system). Emotions often react to

situations depending on perceived alternatives. Even cognitive psychology moves among the possibilities of remembering or forgetting, judging this way or that, making one or another inference.

This special issue was assembled with an eye toward illuminating different perspectives on how people understand, interpret, and deal with possibilities. We have no illusions that we have covered all possible perspectives, for indeed

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scoping out the completeness of a set of possibilities is beyond the conceptual and methodological tools currently available. Nevertheless, we are excited about the issue and hope readers will share that excitement. The editing has been an adventure—and adventure itself is partly defined by uncertainty amid multiple possibilities.

Summarizing the Contents of the Special Issue

Moral Responsibility and Possibility

Moral responsibility depends on alternative possibilities. As we have argued elsewhere, moral judgments are typically about whether the person *should* have acted otherwise—which thus implicitly assumes that the person *could* have acted otherwise (Clark et al., 2014). Thus some notion of free will is strongly implied. There is no point in arguing that the window should have refused to break in response to the rock, even though the inhabitants of the house suffered from the cold air rushing in. Moral condemnation is greatly reduced if the person clearly could not have acted otherwise. Moral situations assume alternative possibilities, and morality itself is a way of comparing these alternative possibilities so as to decide which course of action is right.

In this special issue, the link between morality and possibilities is evaluated in the complementary direction by Engelmann and Hannikainen (2024). If an action produces a bad outcome, does that make preferable alternatives seem more possible, as compared to a good outcome? In a cleverly designed experimental scenario, a man is hit by a bus and killed, while a couple pedestrians are nearby. The victim's character had been manipulated to be either good or bad (or neutral, in a control condition). Participants were more likely to say that someone could have acted differently, and thereby saved the man's life, if the victim were a fine person than if he were an evil man. Naturally people prefer to save the lives of good than bad people, and although in this story the man is definitely dead, people

retroactively imputed more alternative possibilities when a good man's life had been saved than a bad one's. Morally undesirable outcomes increase perceptions of alternative possibilities.

The importance of possibilities to moral judgment is explored in a different way in the article by Maheshka et al. (2024). It has long been an accepted, if infrequently used, assumption of the legal system that a mentally ill person is less capable than other people of refraining from criminal actions (In the traditional phrase, serious mental illness robs the person of the ability to distinguish between right and wrong possible actions). And less capable means less culpable. Hence, the more mentally ill people judge a perpetrator to be, the less moral responsibility they should assign him (or her).

Yet the opposite finding emerged from their data. They asked people to consider a series of unusual actions, some of which society approves, some not: the list included pedophilia, racism, psychopathy, transgender identification, obesity, being gay, depression, schizophrenia, having a sexual fetish (unspecified), and drug addiction. Across these, the researchers found a positive link between rating something as morally wrong and rating it as indicative of mental illness. This is surprising because it directly contradicts the common moral and legal assumptions that mental illness reduces responsibility. Indeed, ratings of agency fit the standard pattern: People thought that mental illness went with lower agency and that moral responsibility went with higher agency. Yet, ironically, the more morally wrong they thought the action was, the more they also thought the person must be mentally ill to have done it.

These findings pose a challenge to society's traditional and standard ways of thinking. One possible explanation offered by Maheshka et al. is that people think only someone who was mentally ill could engage in that practice or behavior. In a sense, inferring mental illness accompanies the negative judgment. For example, participants may have thought that having sex with children is immoral, so only someone mentally ill would do that.

Determinism and Free Will

The special issue was fortunate to feature a debate about the nature of (psychological) reality. Sapolsky (2023) has recently published a book, *Determined*, which argues in favor of determinism, and it is summarized here in Sapolsky (2024). Baumeister (2024) has a book, *The Science of Free Will*, which makes a strong case in favor of free will. And a third entry into the debate, Jonathan Schooler, has no relevant book but brings in a novel perspective based on comparing the incompatible assumptions between scientific psychology and physics.

Determinism is the notion of the “clockwork universe,” a popular although controversial view in the 1700s (the Enlightenment), when natural science, then called natural philosophy, began to uncover causal patterns everywhere, and some thinkers began to speculate that everything was caused, indeed causally inevitable. Determinism thus presents a challenge to the very idea behind this journal, because it asserts that nothing is possible other than what actually happens. As LaPlace (1820) explained, a super-smart mind could in principle predict the future with 100% accuracy, given sufficient knowledge about the present and of all the laws of nature. Thus, the future is already fully and entirely determined.

The editorial plan was to have Sapolsky (2024) make the strongest possible case for determinism, but he used his pages to argue the related problem of free will. Although most people have long thought that strict determinism contradicts free will—indeed, Spinoza was reproached as a determinist because that supposedly denied key tenets of Christian faith—many philosophers today find ways of reconciling the two. However, Sapolsky seems to accept the multiplicity of possibilities, what Baumeister and Lau (2024) call “the reality of mere possibility,” and instead by determinism means only that everything is caused. It seems he is not asserting the classic form of determinism that denied alternative possibilities, and indeed in subsequent email discussions he averred that

LaPlace was clearly wrong and the future does contain multiple alternative possibilities. To him, determinism merely means causality, and free will would be an exemption from causality.

The reality of mere possibility is strongly asserted by Baumeister and Lau. They hold that possibilities are so central to psychological theory that the classic philosophical position of determinism is useless. Psychological theories typically focus on how individuals make behavioral choices among multiple options, so the deterministic assertion that those options are not really possible is unhelpful, indeed counterproductive.

The exchange between Sapolsky and Baumeister, which was conducted partly in these pages, partly by collegial exchanges over email, and partly in an online debate (Open to Debate: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xeb98U9d1hg>), suggests room for a compromise in this age-old debate. Both scholars go to some length to reject an extreme version of the other view, which neither endorses, so it may be possible to meet in the middle. Sapolsky rejects free will as being totally exempt from all prior and external causes; Baumeister’s (in press) theory of free will does not assert such exemption or even see why it would evolve in the first place. According to Baumeister, free will is for adapting to culture, for which it is necessary to be highly albeit flexibly responsive to a complex social environment.. Baumeister and Lau reject the full determinism that insists there is only one possible future.

Multiple possibilities may be an unavoidable assumption in psychological theory, as Baumeister and Lau claim, but physics is less certain. Schooler and Riddle (2024) offer a fresh perspective. They are psychologists but have delved deeply into modern physics. One major perspective in modern physics, such as the block universe, follows Einstein and others in saying that time itself is an illusion. Hence past, present, and future as we think of them exist all together. This fits quite well with the deterministic perspective. Yet Schooler and Riddle also recognize the powerful

psychological realities that our lives are lived in time and move through it, and the everyday experience is one of making choices among multiple possibilities.

Physicists' theory of the block universe is hard to reconcile with the psychologists' focus on behavioral choice. Schooler and Riddle do not presume to offer the supreme truth as an integration (or as rejecting either side as wrongheadedly baseless), but the profound tension between the two, which they explore insightfully, is exquisite food for thought. They make the important conclusions that (a) the deterministic block universe is a defensible viewpoint, but (b) it is not defensible to insist that it is the only defensible viewpoint.

Imitation and Possibility

We extended an invitation to Genschow to contribute. He has made important contributions to the literature on belief in free will, but for this issue, his group took us in a fascinating different direction. Oomen and Genschow (2024) explore one of the most basic and frequent social behaviors—imitation—through the lens of possibilities. Indeed, their first point is that imitation is not nearly as common or widespread as one might think, because people have many opportunities for imitation and only avail themselves of a few of these possibilities. So they ask: When do people imitate others, and when do they not?

Their answers invoke some key themes about the broader question of how people negotiate an environment full of alternative possibilities. People imitate more when they seek to form a social bond with the other person (and imitation does seem to have this benefit, at least sometimes). Self-focus reduces imitation, while focusing on the others increases it, as does having a prosocial mindset. Although mobs may involve imitation of antisocial behavior, most evidence indicates that people imitate prosocial actions and gestures more than antisocial ones. Likeable people are imitated more frequently

than disliked ones. All these combine to underscore the power of imitation for promoting social bonds and prosociality in general. While this is an appealing and elegant conclusion, Oomen and Genschow also note that the literature has gaps and conflicts, that replication success has been uneven, and that there is ample room (thus many appealing possibilities!) for further and more rigorous research.

Conclusion

The assumption that humans have agency and multiple possibilities for action—right or wrong—is useful for science, social coordination, self-regulation, and for understanding intuitive human experience. Perceptions of possibilities underlie human morality and probabilistic explanation and prediction of human behavior. We therefore think the study of how possibilities—the reality of them and the perception of them—influence human behavior is central to the goal of human behavioral sciences. We hope this special issue sparks interest in these topics and inspires future research on the study of possibilities.

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