

## Research Article

# ASYMMETRY IN JUDGMENTS OF MORAL BLAME AND PRAISE: The Role of Perceived Metadesires

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**Abstract**—An important consideration in judging the blameworthiness (or praiseworthiness) of an action is whether the agent had sufficient control over it. In three experiments, we investigated judgments of moral blame and praise elicited when individuals were presented with vignettes describing actions that were performed either carefully and deliberately or impulsively and uncontrollably. Experiment 1 uncovered an asymmetry between judgments of positive versus negative actions—negative impulsive actions elicited a discounting of moral blame, but positive impulsive actions did not elicit a discounting of moral praise. Experiments 2 and 3 showed that this asymmetry arises because individuals judge agents on the basis of their metadesires (the degree to which the agents embrace or reject the impulses leading to their actions). Individuals assume that an agent would embrace an uncontrollable positive impulse, and reject an uncontrollable negative impulse.

In cases of wrongdoing, explanations of behavior that point to the relative uncontrollability of an action are often used to reduce moral culpability. For instance, the presence of an uncontrollable impulse has been used to mitigate blame. Accordingly, individuals who commit a crime because of an overwhelming emotional impulse (i.e., a “crime of passion”) are often judged less harshly than they would be if they committed the same crime in a rational, deliberate manner. This is common not only in judgments of legal culpability, but also in naive judgments of moral blame. For instance, behaviors that are a result of internal impulses due to mental illness, extreme emotional episodes (as in “sight of adultery” cases), or undue suffering and pain are often considered instances in which the agent is compelled, albeit by a force internal in origin (an “irresistible impulse”), to behave in a way that under “normal” circumstances he or she would not. Control appears compromised under such conditions, and control is considered a necessary condition for the ascription of responsibility in nearly every normative theory of moral blame (Aristotle, trans. 1998; Fincham & Jaspars, 1979; Shaver, 1985; Simester, 1998; Weiner, 1995).

Judgments of responsibility are not limited to cases of wrongdoing and blame, however; responsibility for a positive action can make an individual worthy of praise (although most research on moral responsibility has focused on judgments of blame; e.g., Alicke, 2000; Shaver, 1985). The research reported here focuses on how individuals take information about intention and control into account when arriving at judgments of moral praise versus moral blame.

In many cases, praise for positive actions is discounted when there is an absence or reduction of control (Weiner & Kukla, 1970). For instance, when determining how much to credit success, individuals cal-

culate the degree of controllability the agent had over the outcome and then use this information to judge the individual’s causal responsibility for the outcome before finally determining how much praise he or she deserves (see Weiner, 1995, for a review).

However, careful calculations of controllability are not so common when making judgments of moral praise. Impulsive positive acts, such as compulsively donating money (an act that one may regret at a later time), rarely receive treatment analogous to impulsive negative acts. There is thus an apparent asymmetry in judgments of moral blame and moral praise.

It would seem rational to hold individuals to the same standards of responsibility regardless of the valence of their actions. According to Kant (1785/1998), for instance, acts that are in some way outside an agent’s control, as positive as they might be, do not qualify for true moral evaluation. But an asymmetry may not reflect an underlying bias favoring positive acts. In cases of behaviors that are internally compelled, one way to judge the degree to which an individual is responsible for an action is to determine the agent’s second-order desires (or *metadesires*; Frankfurt, 1973, 1987). A second-order desire can be defined as an individual’s higher-order acceptance or rejection of a desire or an impulse. In the case of a drug addict, for instance, there is a second-order desire (not to be an addict) and a first-order desire (a compulsion to continue to take drugs). Making a fair moral pronouncement on the addict’s actions would necessitate taking into account the fact that an important part of that person (perhaps the most essential part) does not want to do what he or she is doing.

If perceptions of second-order desires are used by naive judges as input into moral pronouncements of impulsive actions, these desires may help to explain the hypothesized asymmetry between judgments of blame and praise. Second-order desires mitigate blame because they inform the judge of the “true” intentions of the agent. Similar assumptions about second-order desires may be at work in judgments of positive behaviors. However, in the case of a positive act, individuals likely assume that the second-order desire is consistent with the first-order impulse, and thus see no need to discount moral praise. Across most cases, then, metadesires are assumed to be positive, leading to differential effects on judgments of blame and praise.

In the following studies, we tested two hypotheses. The first was that there is an asymmetry between judgments of blame and praise for deliberate and impulsive acts: Impulsive, uncontrollable positive acts are judged no differently than deliberate positive acts, whereas impulsive negative acts are judged as less blameworthy than deliberate negative acts (the asymmetry hypothesis, Experiment 1). The second hypothesis was that this asymmetry can be explained by appealing to the assumptions held by naive judges about the agent’s second-order desires (the metadesire hypothesis, Experiments 2 and 3). Specifically, we hypothesized that naive judges assume that impulsive negative acts are accompanied by conflicting (positive) second-order desires, but that impulsive positive acts are accompanied by consistent (positive) second-order desires. The belief that individuals consistently possess positive second-order desires may be the driving force behind the hypothesized asymmetry.

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**Table 1.** *Sample stimuli across all conditions (taken from Experiment 2)*

Valence	Mental state	
	Deliberate	Impulsive
Positive	Jack deliberately and intentionally gave the homeless man his only jacket, even though it was freezing outside.	Because of his overwhelming and uncontrollable sympathy, Jack impulsively gave the homeless man his only jacket even though it was freezing outside.
Negative	Jack calmly and deliberately smashed the window of the car parked in front of him, because it was parked too close to his.	Because of his overwhelming and uncontrollable anger, Jack impulsively smashed the window of the car parked in front of him because it was parked too close to his.

## EXPERIMENT 1

### Method

#### Participants

One hundred eighty-nine undergraduates at Yale University participated for course credit.

#### Materials and procedure

Each participant read three vignettes describing behaviors performed by three fictional individuals. Mental state (deliberate, impulsive) of the character in the story and valence (positive, negative) of his behavior were manipulated between subjects. For instance, in the positive condition, one vignette was about a man who gave an elderly woman \$50 to cover her grocery bill. In the negative condition, one vignette told about a man who walked out on his \$50 bill at a restaurant. In the deliberate cases, the agent committed the action because of well-reasoned beliefs. In the impulsive cases, the agent was described as having acted out of a compelling urge (e.g., overwhelming sympathy or anger; see Table 1 for sample stimuli<sup>1</sup>).

Participants judged the fictional individuals on the basis of their described behavior. Responses for three dimensions intended to be measures of moral sanctions were made on 9-point, semantic differential scales, anchored by positive and negative attribution terms, with a midpoint indicating neutrality (e.g., 1 = *extreme blame*, 5 = *neither*, 9 = *extreme praise*). Specifically, participants judged the agents by rating how moral or immoral the behavior was, how much praise or blame the agent should receive for his action, and how positively or negatively the agent should be judged. To facilitate analyses, we calculated scores by taking the distance of each individual's rating from the midpoint of the scale (rating minus 5 for positive acts, 5 minus rating for negative acts). This yielded an easily interpretable scale of moral sanctions independent of valence, with a maximum possible score of 4 (for negative acts, 4 = extreme blame; for positive acts, 4 = extreme praise).

1. A full list of the experimental stimuli used in all three experiments reported here is available from the first author.

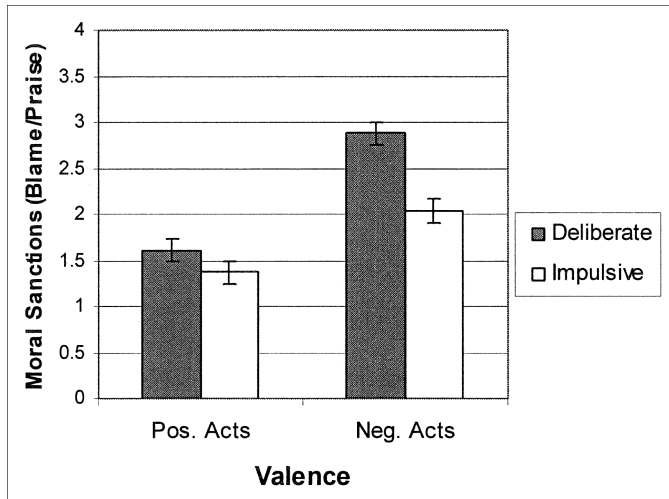
### Results

A mixed model 2 (mental state: deliberate, impulsive)  $\times$  2 (valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  3 (vignette; within subjects) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the average of the three moral-sanction variables for each vignette. The three-way interaction failed to reach significance,  $F(2, 184) = 0.16$ , n.s., suggesting that participants treated all three vignettes in a similar fashion with respect to the valence and mental-state manipulations. Because responses were highly consistent across the three questions and across vignettes, we facilitated analyses by calculating an average moral-sanction score for each participant (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ , combining vignettes). This index was used in all subsequent analyses.

Individuals assigned more extreme sanctions to negative behaviors ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) than to positive behaviors ( $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ),  $F(1, 187) = 62.80$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, individuals assigned less extreme sanctions to impulsive behaviors ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) than to deliberate behaviors ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ),  $F(1, 187) = 19.49$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, the main effect reflecting less extreme sanctions for impulsive behaviors was qualified by an interaction between the valence of the behavior and its accompanying mental state,  $F(1, 185) = 5.80$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Fig. 1). Follow-up comparisons revealed that discounting for impulsive actions was present only in the negative condition; participants assigned less blame for impulsive negative acts than for deliberate negative acts,  $t(185) = 5.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , but similar praise for impulsive positive acts and deliberate positive acts,  $t(185) = 1.30$ , n.s.

### Discussion

As predicted, the agent's mental state had different effects on judgments of moral blame and praise. Individuals did not exhibit a discounting of praise for impulsive versus deliberate positive acts, but did exhibit a discounting of blame for impulsive versus deliberate negative acts. There was a main effect of valence; negative acts were judged as more extreme than positive acts. This finding is consistent with previous demonstrations that negative acts are less normative than positive acts, and thus often garner more extreme reactions (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). Although our hypotheses were directed toward the interaction and not the main effects, in the subsequent experiments we sought to equalize the intensity of the positive vignettes to avoid potential problems associated with differential judgments of positive and negative events.



**Fig. 1.** Moral sanctions ( $\pm SE$ ) for positive (“Pos.”) and negative (“Neg.”) acts that were made impulsively or deliberately (Experiment 1).

## EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 was an attempt to replicate the asymmetry documented in Experiment 1 and to test the second hypothesis, that the asymmetry between judgments of positive and negative impulsive acts is due to individuals’ naive calculations of the agents’ second-order desires to perform the impulsive actions. To this end, for each vignette, participants were provided with information regarding the agent’s second-order desires. We expected that if participants were provided with knowledge that an agent who felt compelled to commit a positive act possessed a second-order desire not to commit this act, the asymmetry would disappear—moral sanctions would be discounted for positive impulsive acts, as they are for negative impulsive acts.

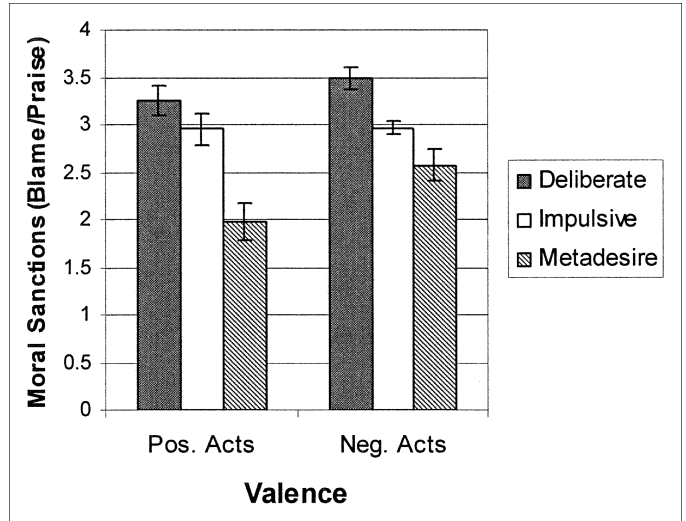
### Method

#### Participants

Forty-seven undergraduates at Yale University participated for monetary compensation.

#### Materials and procedure

In a fully within-subjects design, each participant read 12 new vignettes, 2 for each of the combinations of valence (positive, negative) and mental state (deliberate, impulsive, metadesire). Each vignette described an agent who committed either a positive or a negative act. Each vignette indicated either (a) that the behavior described was deliberate and controlled, (b) that the behavior was impulsive and uncontrollable, or (c) that the behavior was impulsive and uncontrollable and that the agent would rather have not had that impulse (metadesire condition). In the positive metadesire condition, then, participants were told that the agent acted on an impulsive positive urge, yet had the second-order desire not to possess such an impulse. In the negative metadesire condition, participants were told that an agent acted on an impulsive negative urge, but wished that he did not possess such an impulse. A Latin-square design counterbalanced the order of the six conditions across participants (same-condition vi-



**Fig. 2.** Moral sanctions ( $\pm SE$ ) for positive (“Pos.”) and negative (“Neg.”) acts that were made impulsively, deliberately, or with conflicting metadesires (Experiment 2).

gnettes were always presented adjacently—only order of conditions was counterbalanced).<sup>2</sup>

In addition, in order to avoid the main effect of valence found in Experiment 1 (in which negative acts were more extremely negative than positive acts were positive), we attempted to make the positive acts described in the vignettes for Experiment 2 more extreme.

### Dependent variables

The dependent variables assessing overall moral blame and praise were identical to those in Experiment 1 and were scored in the same manner, yielding a moral-sanction scale with a maximum value of 4.

### Results

A 2 (valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  3 (mental state: deliberate, impulsive, metadesire)  $\times$  2 (vignette) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the average of the three moral-sanction variables for each vignette. There was no three-way interaction, suggesting that the two vignettes were treated equally,  $F(2, 43) = 1.13$ , n.s. Once again, because responses were internally consistent across the three questions and across vignettes (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .93$ , combining vignettes), we calculated an average moral-sanction score for each participant. A main effect for valence was again uncovered,  $F(1, 44) = 4.79$ ,  $p < .05$ ; negative acts garnered more extreme sanctions than positive acts. However, this time the effect was driven only by the differences in the metadesire condition. With the metadesire condition excluded, there was no main effect of valence,  $F(1, 44) = 1.22$ , n.s.

As predicted, there was a two-way interaction of valence and mental state,  $F(2, 43) = 5.78$ ,  $p < .01$ ; the asymmetry between positive and negative acts was replicated. Participants discounted blame for negative impulsive acts compared with negative deliberate acts,  $t(45) = 4.23$ ,  $p < .001$ , but did not discount praise for positive impulsive acts compared with positive deliberate acts,  $t(45) = 1.67$ , n.s. (see Fig. 2).

2. In Experiments 2 and 3, inserting order as a between-subjects variable revealed no order effects.

## Asymmetry in Judgments of Moral Blame and Praise

To test the hypothesis that giving participants information about the agent's second-order desires would result in a discounting of both blame and praise, we collapsed across the impulsive and deliberate mental-state conditions and compared these results with those for the metadesire condition. This analysis revealed a significant main effect,  $F(1, 44) = 66.04, p < .001$ , indicating discounting in the metadesire condition; providing information that an agent rejected his own positive impulse (despite having acted upon it) thus resulted in a discounting of praise.

### Discussion

Informing participants that an agent rejected his own positive impulses (thus violating the assumption that agents want positive impulses) significantly reduced the praise that agent received. Telling participants that an agent who performed a negative act rejected his own impulse also caused greater blame discounting, as it confirmed the assumption that individuals would rather not possess negative impulses. This result is similar to previous findings regarding regret for transgressions. Agents who offer apologies or communicate regret receive less blame than those who do not (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Although metadesires by definition are judgments about simultaneously occurring desires, the metadesire vignettes in Experiment 2 may have been interpreted as indicating the agent felt regret. Therefore, in Experiment 3, we sought to tap into naturally occurring assumptions regarding metadesires, rather than provide information about metadesires.

## EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 was conducted in order to extend the previous findings by providing evidence that the asymmetry in judgments of blame and praise is mediated by assumptions regarding agents' second-order desires. Rather than providing participants with information about second-order desires, as in Experiment 2, we tried to tap into participants' assumptions about the second-order desires of the agent in question. To this end, we included questions that attempted to measure participants' beliefs about the agent's second-order desires concerning his own impulsive or deliberate actions.

### Method

#### Participants

Thirty-seven undergraduates from Yale University participated for monetary compensation.

#### Materials and procedure

Novel materials similar to those in the first two experiments were used. In a fully within-subjects design, each participant read eight vignettes, two for each of the combinations of valence (positive, negative) and mental state (deliberate, impulsive). A Latin-square design counterbalanced the order of the conditions across participants (same-condition vignettes were always presented adjacently—only order of conditions was counterbalanced). Participants judged fictional individuals by responding to three items (identical to the items in Experiments 1 and 2) intended to measure moral sanctions.

Also included were three items measuring (on 9-point, Likert-type scales) the extent to which participants believed that the agents pos-

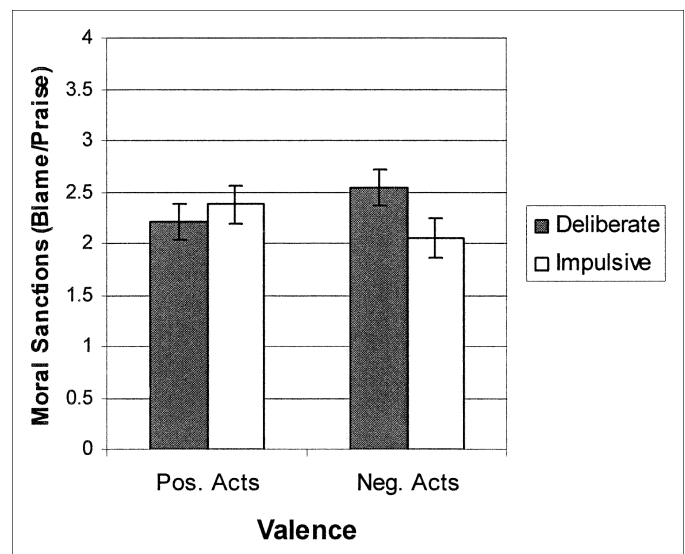
essed a second-order desire to perform the actions described. These items were as follows: "This person would rather *not* have an impulse to [perform the indicated behavior]," "To what extent do you think this person wanted to have an impulse to [perform the indicated behavior]?" and "To what extent did this person really want to do what he did?" On the response scales, 1 indicated a judgment that the person really did not want to possess such impulses and, at the opposite end, 9 indicated a judgment that the person really did want to possess such impulses (the midpoint, 5, was a judgment of "neither"). The questions were counterbalanced with the moral-sanction items to control for order effects (there were none).

### Results

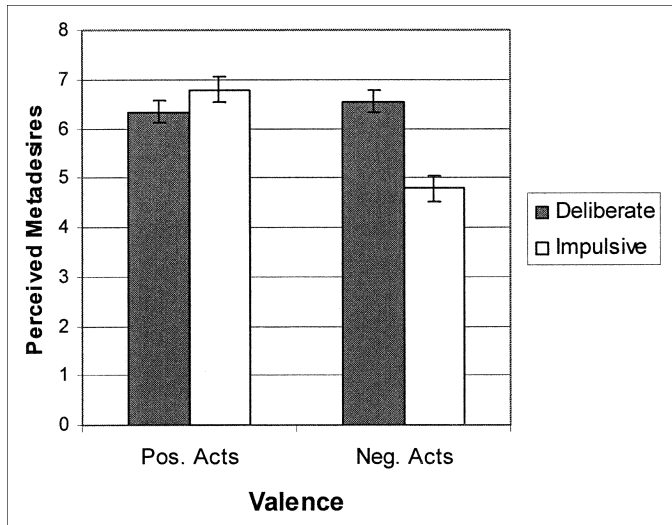
A 2 (valence: positive, negative)  $\times$  2 (mental state: deliberate, impulsive)  $\times$  2 (vignette) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on the average of the three moral-sanction variables for each vignette. An unexpected three-way interaction emerged, indicating that the two vignettes were judged differently by participants. This effect seemed driven by the tendency of participants to give greater blame for deliberate negative acts in the first vignette than the second, and less praise for deliberate positive acts in the first vignette than the second. However, when moral-sanction scores were averaged across both vignettes, the responses were highly correlated (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). Subsequent analyses were conducted using this combined moral-sanction index.

As predicted, there was a two-way interaction of valence and mental state,  $F(1, 35) = 10.51, p < .01$ ; the asymmetry between positive and negative acts was replicated. Participants discounted blame for impulsive negative acts compared with deliberate negative acts,  $t(35) = 3.03, p < .01$ , but did not discount praise for impulsive positive acts compared with deliberate positive acts,  $t(36) = 1.16, n.s.$  (see Fig. 3).

To analyze participants' ratings of the agent's second-order desires (the degree to which they were in accord with the agent's first-order impulses), we computed an overall metadesire index by taking the average of the three metadesire items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). There was a significant interaction in participants' ratings of the agent's second-



**Fig. 3.** Moral sanctions ( $\pm SE$ ) for positive ("Pos.") and negative ("Neg.") acts that were made impulsively or deliberately (Experiment 3).



**Fig. 4.** Beliefs ( $\pm SE$ ) about whether the agent’s metadesires were consistent with positive (“Pos.”) and negative (“Neg.”) acts that were made impulsively or deliberately (Experiment 3).

order desires. The pattern was the same as in participants’ judgments of blame and praise: Participants believed the second-order desires of agents who performed positive acts were consistent with their impulses ( $M = 6.8, SD = 1.5$ ), whereas they believed that agents who performed negative impulsive acts had conflicting second-order desires ( $M = 4.8, SD = 1.6$ ),  $F(1, 35) = 21.94, p < .001$  (see Fig. 4).

To test the hypothesis that assumptions about the agent’s second-order desires accounted for the asymmetry in discounting for impulsive positive and negative acts, we conducted a within-subjects mediation analysis. Table 2 presents results from three general linear models. The first model showed that the independent variable (valence-by-mental-state interaction) indeed predicted the asymmetry,  $F(1, 35) = 11.98, p < .001$ . The second model showed that the independent variable (valence-by-mental-state interaction) was related to the mediator, perceived metadesires,  $F(1, 35) = 21.94, p < .001$ . If perceived metadesires mediated the asymmetry effect, controlling for perceived metadesires would eliminate the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The third model showed that controlling for perceived metadesires attenuated the effect of the valence-by-mental-state interaction on moral sanctions,  $F(1, 34) = 1.05, n.s.$  This model was calculated by conducting an ANOVA on

the residualized moral-sanctions variable, with the effect of perceived metadesires partialled out.

**Discussion**

Experiment 3 demonstrated that the asymmetry effect is mediated by participants’ naive assumptions regarding the agent’s second-order desires. It also demonstrated that individuals assume that most people want to possess positive impulses—that is, unless the agent consciously and deliberately performs a negative action. This assumption of universally positive metadesires is strongly related to the asymmetry in judgments of deliberate and impulsive positive and negative acts.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The current studies investigated why the information that a behavior is compelled and under limited control by an agent has differential effects on judgments of praise for positive acts and judgments of blame for negative acts. Praise was distributed in equal amounts regardless of whether behaviors were described as deliberate and voluntary or as impulsive and involuntary. In contrast, when judging the blameworthiness of an act, individuals made liberal use of the same mental-state information and discounted blame accordingly. We have presented evidence that this pattern of results was found because individuals take into account an agent’s second-order desires when determining how to judge involuntary behavior. However, there are some plausible alternative explanations for these findings.

First, it may be that there are differential motives underlying the distribution of blame and praise. Praise may be offered instrumentally, whereas blame may be offered on the basis of just deserts. According to this view, what is important about moral praise is the overall promotion of good deeds via the mechanism of social rewards. A second, related explanation for the current findings is that positive behaviors are not processed as carefully as negative behaviors. The lack of difference in praise for voluntary versus involuntary actions may arise because individuals confronted with prosocial acts simply do not expend the cognitive energy necessary to calculate a discount in praise; this would lead to differential patterns of discounting for behaviors for which control is compromised.

Although plausible, these explanations fail to account for the reduction of moral praise documented in Experiment 2, as well as the discounting of praise found in other studies that seem to indicate that the just-deserts principle is at work in judgments of praise (Pizarro, Bloom, & Uhlmann, 2002; Reeder & Spores, 1983). Under some conditions, positive acts are scrutinized more carefully than negative acts, because engaging in positive behaviors might be due to a blind following of societal norms or to self-

**Table 2.** Results of repeated measures general linear models testing whether perceived metadesires mediate the asymmetry in moral judgment

Independent variable	df	MSE	F	p
Model 1: dependent variable = moral sanction				
Valence $\times$ Mental State	1, 35	3.78	11.98	.001
Model 2: dependent variable = perceived metadesires				
Valence $\times$ Mental State	1, 35	43.70	21.94	.001
Model 3: dependent variable = moral sanction				
Valence $\times$ Mental State (controlling for perceived metadesires)	1, 34	0.34	1.05	.31

## Asymmetry in Judgments of Moral Blame and Praise

presentational concerns (i.e., trying to appear moral when one is not). It is doubtful whether one can assume that negative information is processed more systematically than positive information across the board.

Parsing the will into higher- and lower-order intentions, or desires and metadesires, may add to an understanding of moral attribution, and we propose that this distinction underlies the present findings. The concepts are used here to inform a theory about moral attributions: Individuals spontaneously assume that an agent compelled by a desire would, if given the chance to deliberate, make a pronouncement about that desire (or at some time in the past has in fact made a pronouncement about that desire).<sup>3</sup> When an individual wishes that he or she did not possess a desire, the conflict is taken as informative—people judge that individual on the basis of the desire with which he or she most identifies. In addition, people tend to assume that, all things being equal, individuals possess positive metadesires. Judgments of moral blame and praise for acts committed under diminished control, then, are colored by the assumed presence of a positive metadesire.

The fact that individuals make use of the distinctions presented here, and possess a lay theory about second-order desires, should not be surprising. Everyday behavior is replete with examples of people who possess second-order intentions and exert second-order control over their impulses (Elster, 2000; Schelling, 1984). Although cases of drug addiction offer the clearest examples, one need not look to such extremes. Dieters, for instance, may choose not to drive by fast-food restaurants for fear that they may give in to temptation. Individuals may choose not to watch violent movies or listen to violent music to avoid being negatively influenced by the images and ideas presented in such media. These are examples of individuals actively constructing contingencies in their environment because they are aware that, down the line, they may be unable to control themselves through sheer will. Such examples of second-order control in everyday life, in turn, provide the template for understanding the impulsive actions of other individuals. Arriving at accurate judgments of moral blame and praise may require a fairly complex view of human intention and control.

3. The types of first-order desires typically in question are the ones that grip individuals such that they do not feel they have (nor do others think they possess) direct control over their actions. Such intentional states are within the limits of what we term “internal” to the agent. What would not be included are events that are purely accidental or externally controlled. The desire itself must be the proximal mental cause of the act.

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