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A paradox of good intentions: The impact of control on moral judgment

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Abstract: Volitional control matters greatly for moral judgment: Agents lacking control over their behavior receive less condemnation for the harms they cause. A reasonable interpretation is that this is because a lack of control indicates a lack of harmful intent, but this has never been tested. Here, we dissociate control from intent in a novel experimental paradigm. Our results show a unique effect of control that cannot be explained in terms of intent. Specifically, we find that agents receive greater punishment when they choose to act prosocially but accidentally cause harm, and lesser punishment when they are forced to act prosocially but accidentally cause harm. This surprising effect does not depend upon perceptions of intent, but rather upon perceptions of causal responsibility. Moreover, it is unique to judgments of punishment, but absent for judgments of moral character. These results clarify how, when and why control influences moral judgment.