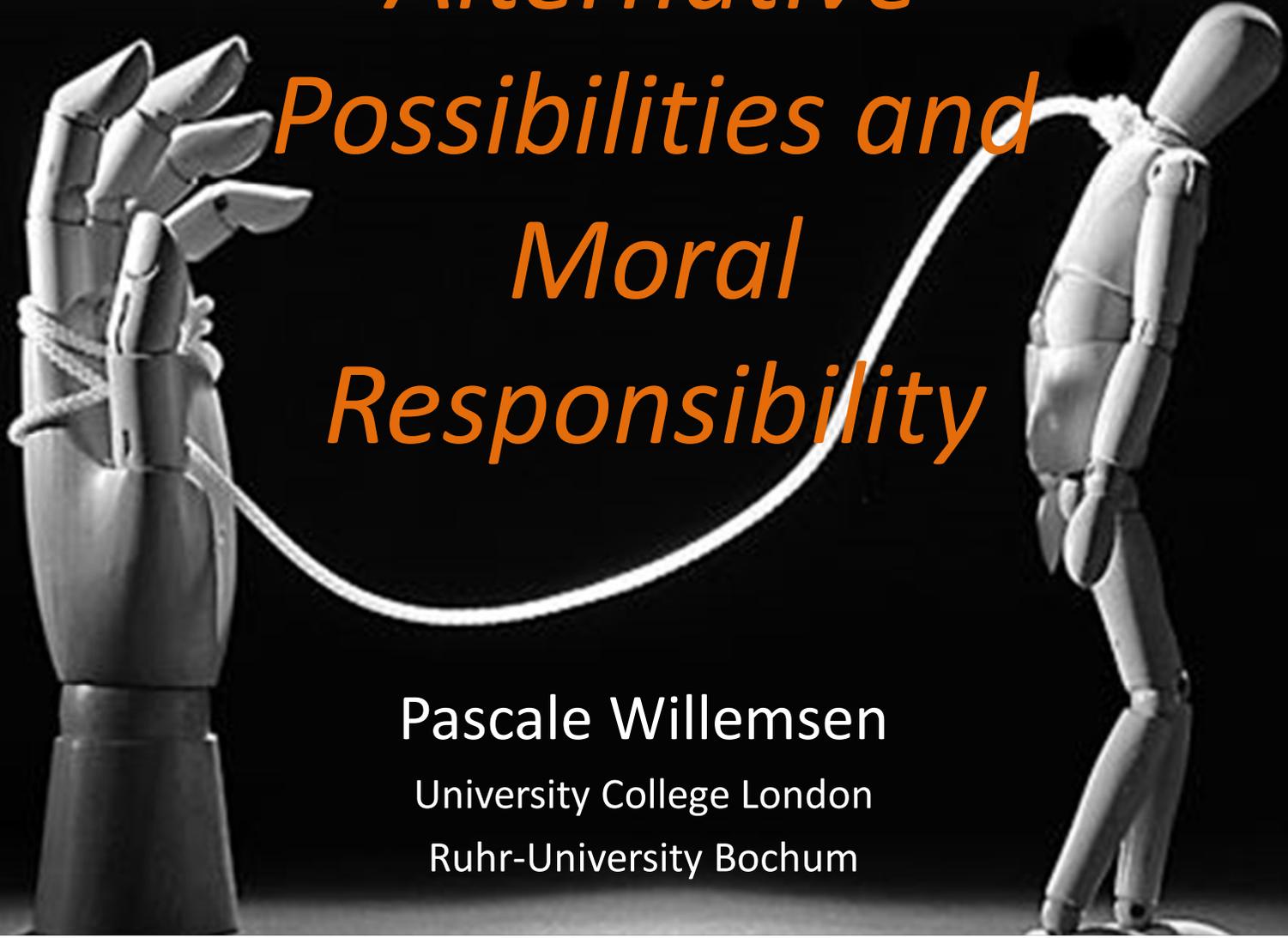
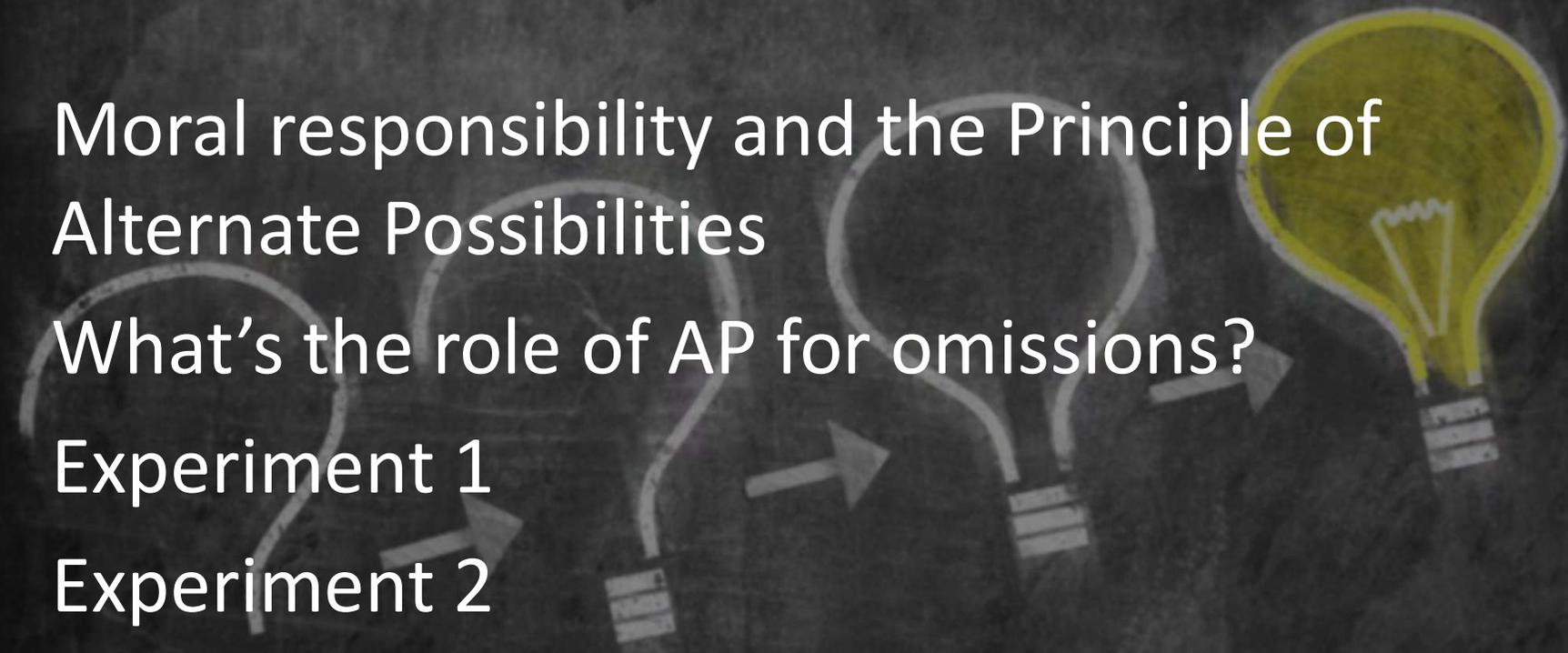


*Alternative
Possibilities and
Moral
Responsibility*



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Agenda

1. Moral responsibility and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities
 2. What's the role of AP for omissions?
 3. Experiment 1
 4. Experiment 2
 5. Conclusion
- 

Setting the Stage



The Principle of Alternate Possibilities

- An agent can only be held morally responsible...
 - ... if she could have done otherwise
 - ... if she choose her course of action













Is Luther claiming that he didn't have free will when we put up the 95 theses?

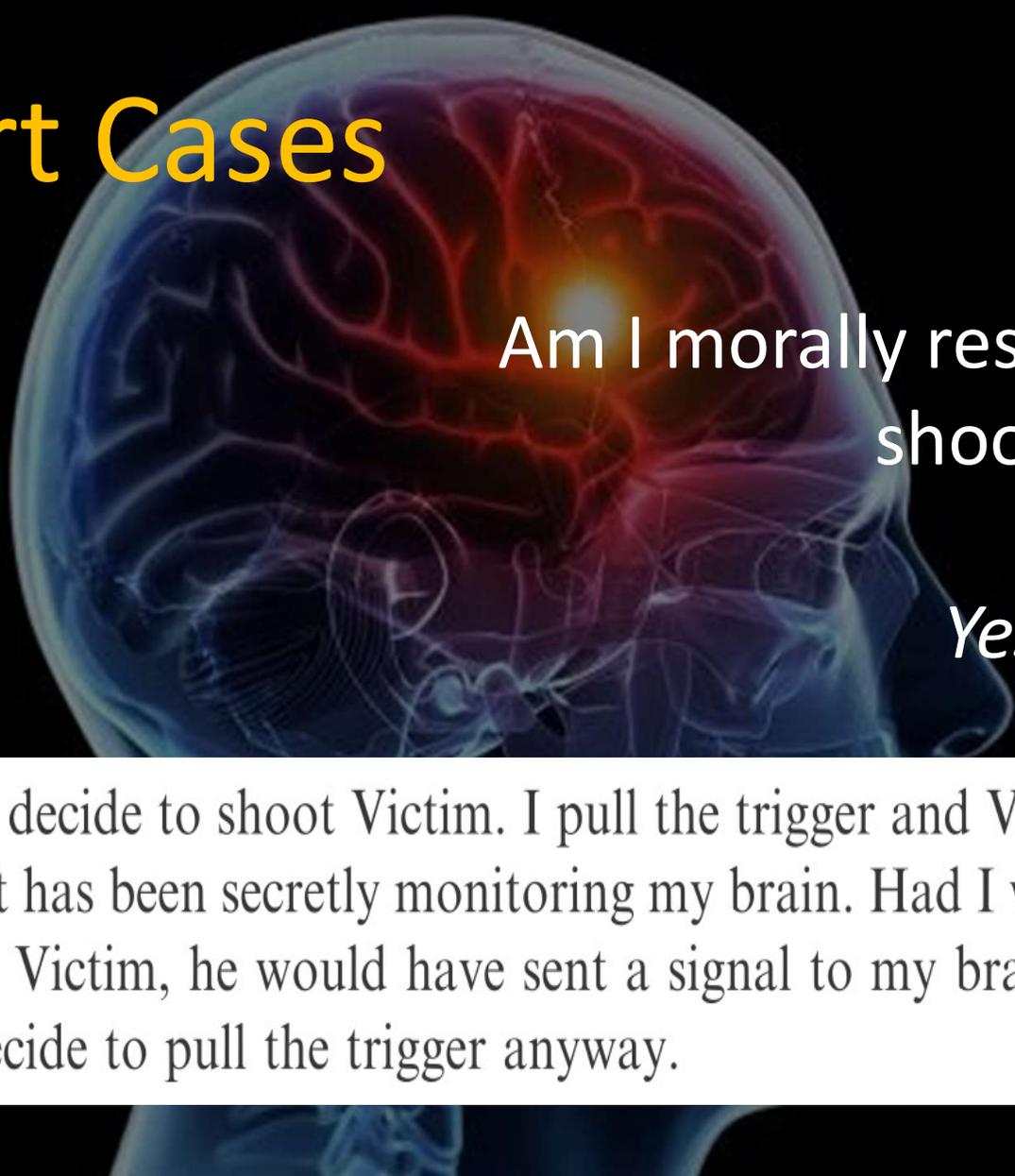
Is Luther denying moral responsibility for it?

The Self-Identification View

- Alternate possibilities are irrelevant for moral responsibility
- What's relevant is that the agent identifies with the action he performs
- And that there is a causal link between what the agent wants and how he acts



Frankfurt Cases



Am I morally responsible for shooting victim?

Yes, definitely!

Shooting: I freely decide to shoot Victim. I pull the trigger and Victim dies. An evil neuroscientist has been secretly monitoring my brain. Had I wavered in my decision to shoot Victim, he would have sent a signal to my brain that would have made me decide to pull the trigger anyway.

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities

- An agent can **only** be held morally responsible if she could have done otherwise
- Shooting provides a counterexample to PAP
- Therefore, we can reject PAP
- *Or can we?*



Frankfurt Cases

Sharks: While walking by the beach, I see a child drowning. I think I could jump into the water and save him but I deliberately refrain from doing so. The child drowns. Unbeknownst to me, the water is infested by sharks. Had I jumped in, the sharks would have attacked me and prevented me from saving the child.¹

Am I morally responsible for not saving the child?

Rather not.

Frankfurt Cases

Sharks: While walking by the beach, I see a child drowning. I think I could jump into the water and save him but I deliberately refrain from doing so. The child drowns. Unbeknownst to me, the water is infested by sharks. Had I jumped in, the sharks would have attacked me and prevented me from saving the child.¹

Am I morally responsible for not saving the child?

Rather not.

But I am for deciding not to help, my indifference, being the kind of person I am...



An Asymmetry between Actions and Omissions?

The Action/Omission Asymmetry (AOA)

This is the thesis that whereas an agent can be morally responsible for doing something which he cannot avoid doing, no agent can be morally responsible for failing to do something which he cannot do.

Fischer & Ravizza 1991, p. 261

Whereas an agent can be responsible for an *action* even if he couldn't have done otherwise, an agent cannot be responsible for an *omission* if he couldn't have done otherwise.⁴

Sartorio 2005, p. 461

Thus, these cases in conjunction with “Hero” (and a whole array of cases of positive agency) suggest that actions and omissions are asymmetric with respect to the requirement of alternative possibilities. That is, it seems that moral responsibility for an action does not require the freedom to refrain from performing the action, whereas moral responsibility for failure to perform an action requires the freedom to perform the action. A similar asymmetry is suggested for moral responsibility for consequences and moral responsibility for omissions: moral responsibility for a consequence does not require the freedom to prevent the consequence from occurring, whereas moral responsibility for failure to perform an action requires the freedom to perform the action.

Fischer 1995, p. 48

Objections

Fischer & Ravizza (1991), Clarke (1994),
Fischer (1995):

- Sharks and Shooting are not relevantly similar
- Sharks in the wrong contrast
- The point of intervention makes a difference



Frankfurt-Style Omission Cases

Frankfurt-style omission case (FSOC): I see the child drowning, I think I can save him by jumping into the water, but I freely decide not to jump in. This time there are no sharks in the water, but the evil neuroscientist is monitoring my brain. Had I wavered in my decision, he would have made me decide not to jump in.



Am I morally responsible for not saving the child?

Yes, definitely!

Fischer & Ravizza, Clarke

- There is **no moral asymmetry** between actions and omissions when we compare Shooting with FSOC
- APs are **equally irrelevant** for actions and omissions
- What's relevant is the **point of intervention**



Jeremy Byrd

- Agrees with Fischer and Clarke that Sharks is the wrong contrast
- But disagrees on why
- What's different is the **intervener**
- Only human agent's can play the role of a Frankfurt-style intervener
- The **point of intervention is irrelevant**



Carolina Satorio

- Agents are **not morally responsible** in either Sharks or FSOC
- If the agent is not morally responsible in Sharks, then the agent cannot be morally responsible in FSOC
- In both cases there is **no causal path** from the agent to the outcome
- Thus: the agent is not morally responsible for the death

Empirical Predictions

	Defenders of AOA	Clarke 1994, Fischer 1995	Sartorio 2005	Byrd 2007
Actions	APs are irrelevant for moral responsibility; an agent can be morally responsible for actions he couldn't have avoided			
Omissions	APs are necessary	APs are irrelevant; an agent can be morally responsible for omissions he couldn't have avoided		
Is there an asymmetry?	Yes, with respect to AP	No	Yes, a causal asymmetry	No
Other relevant factors?	No	Yes, Point of Intervention	No	Yes, Intervener

Empirical Predictions

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Experiment 1



Design – Exp. 1

- 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design
- Independent Variables:
 - Behaviour (actions vs. omission)
 - Intervener (person vs. nature)
 - Point of Intervention (behaviour vs. decision)
- Questions:
 - Cause
 - Moral Responsibility
 - 3 Blame questions

N = 340, Tested on Mturk

Stimuli – Omissions

	Person	Natural World
	While walking by the beach, Tom sees a child drowning. The beach is completely empty and there is nobody else around who could save the child. Tom believes that he could jump into the water and save the child with minimal effort and inconvenience. Tom notices that the child is the neighbour's kid who he detests and wants dead. He deliberately decides not to go attempt to save the child. He decides not to jump into the water and continues his walk. The child drowns.	
Decision	Unbeknownst to Tom, an evil neurosurgeon has implanted a microchip into Tom's brain and is secretly monitoring his brain. Had Tom wavered in his decision not to jump into the water, the neurosurgeon would have sent a signal to Tom's brain that would have ensured that Tom decided not to jump in anyway. As a consequence, Tom could not have saved the child either way.	Unbeknownst to Sean, he recently got exposed to a chemical substance that affects Sean's behaviour . Had Sean wavered in his decision not to jump into the water, the drug would have ensured that he decided not to jump in anyway. As a consequence, Sean could not have saved the child either way.
Behaviour	Unbeknownst to John, an evil busybody is observing the situation and controlling the gate of a cage filled with sharks . Had John jumped into the water, the evil busybody would have released the sharks and they would have attacked Dan and prevented him from saving the child. As a consequence, John could not have saved the child either way.	Unbeknownst to John, the water is infested by sharks . Had John jumped into the water, the sharks would have attacked him and prevented him from saving the child. As a consequence, John could not have saved the child either way.

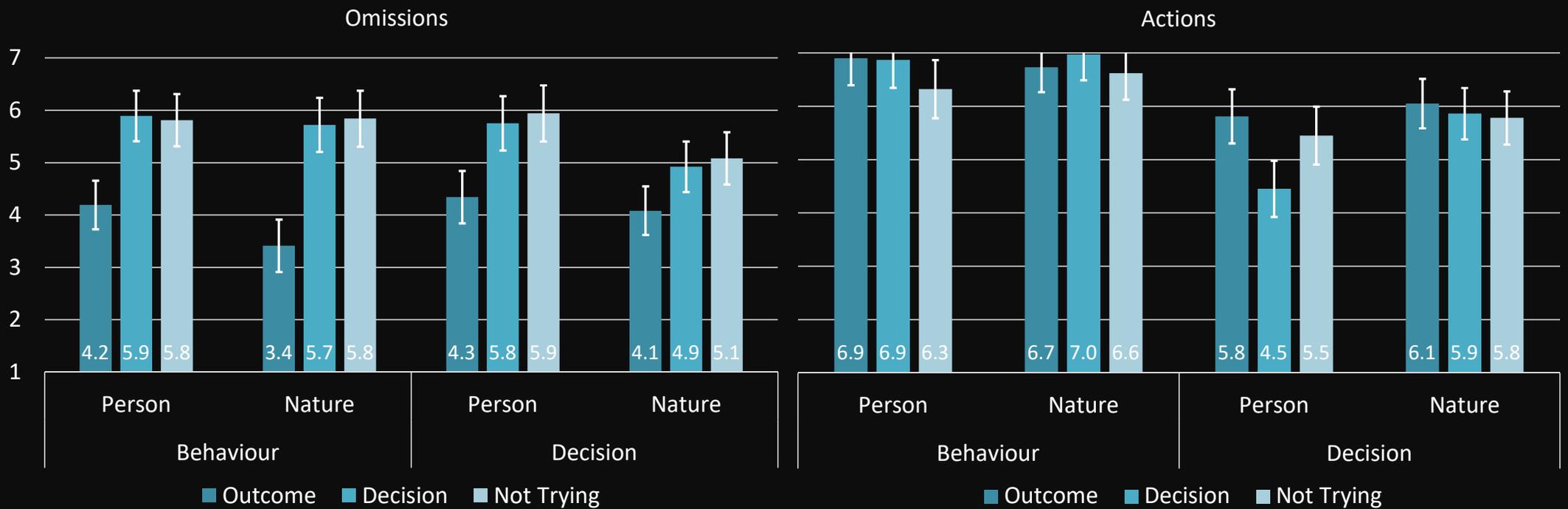
Results – Moral Responsibility

How much do you agree with the following statement: „AGENT is morally responsible the VICTIM's death.”

- Main effect of Behaviour, $p < .001$
- Behaviour * Intervener, $p < .01$
- Behaviour * Point of Intervention, $p < .001$
- Intervener * Point of Intervention, $p < .01$



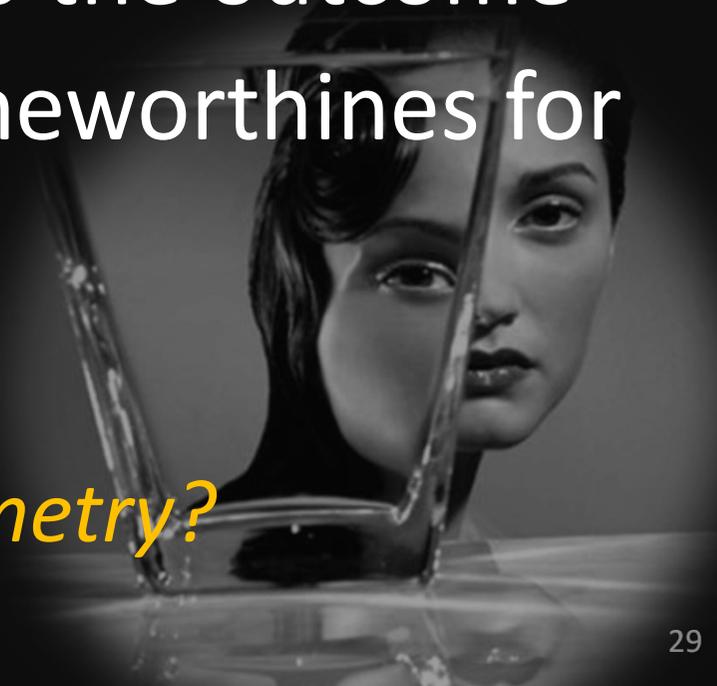
Results – Blame



Correlation with Moral Responsibility: $r(336) = .84, p < 0.001$, two-tailed

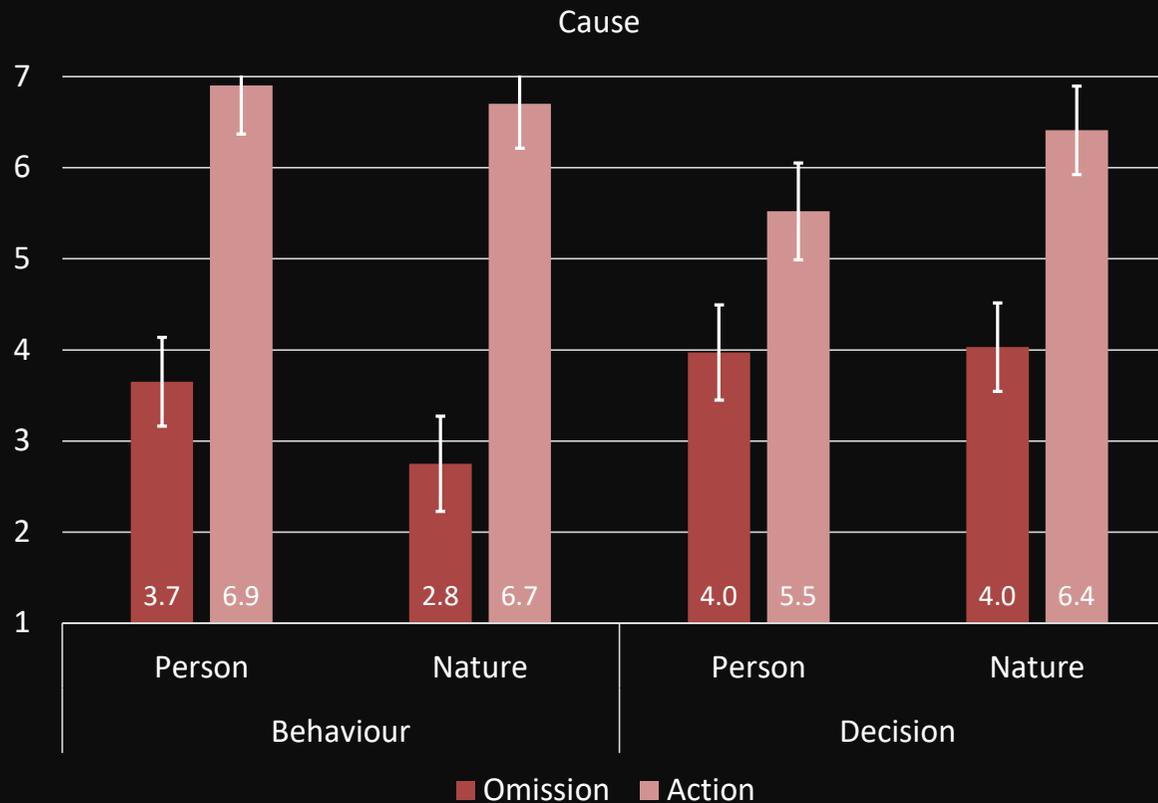
A moral asymmetry with respect to AP?

- There is a moral asymmetry between actions and omissions with respect to the outcome
- There is no difference in blameworthiness for the decision and not trying
- *What is the reason for the asymmetry?*



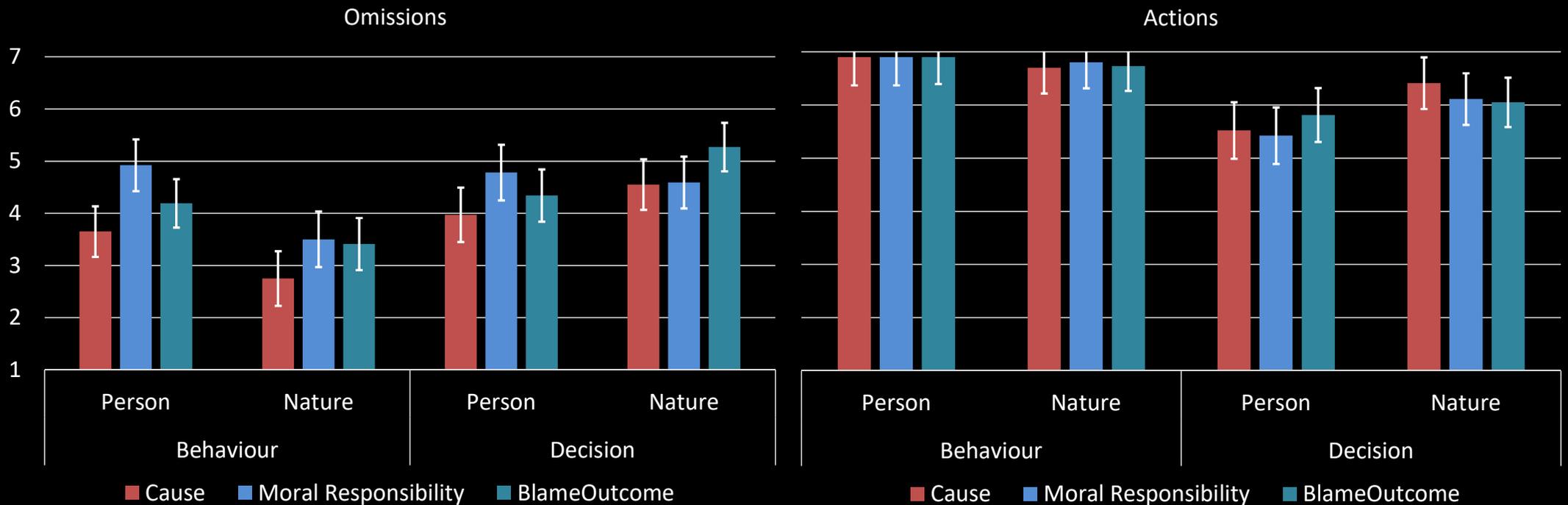
Results – Causal Responsibility

How much do you agree with the following statement: „AGENT caused the VICTIM's death.”



- Main effect of Behaviour, $p < .001$
- Behaviour * Intervener, $p < .05$
- Behaviour * Point of Intervention, $p < .001$
- Intervener * Point of Intervention, $p < .01$

Results – Moral Responsibility



Correlation between Cause and Moral Responsibility: $r(359) = .70, p < 0.001$, two-tailed

Summary

- The Point of Intervention seems irrelevant
- The Intervener seems irrelevant
- People are
 - less morally responsible and less blameworthy for omissions
 - equally blameworthy for their decisions and not trying
 - less causally relevant for the consequences of omissions



Experiment 2



Causation by Omission



- People do believe omissions to be causally relevant
 - Willemsen & Reuter, 2015
 - Willemsen, 2016
 - Henne, Pinillos, De Brigard, 2016
- They rely on counterfactual reasoning
 - Stephan, Willemsen, Gerstenberg, 2017

Causation by Omission and the causal query

- Tom caused the plants to dry up
- Tom's not watering caused the plants to dry up
- The plants dried up because Tom didn't water them.

Hypothesis:

- Different causal queries lead to different causal judgments
- People are more willing to agree to a „because“ phrasing, compared to a „cause“ phrasing



Causal Query

Cause:

AGENT caused the child's death

Because_Outcome:

The child died because AGENT didn't save him.

Because_Behaviour:

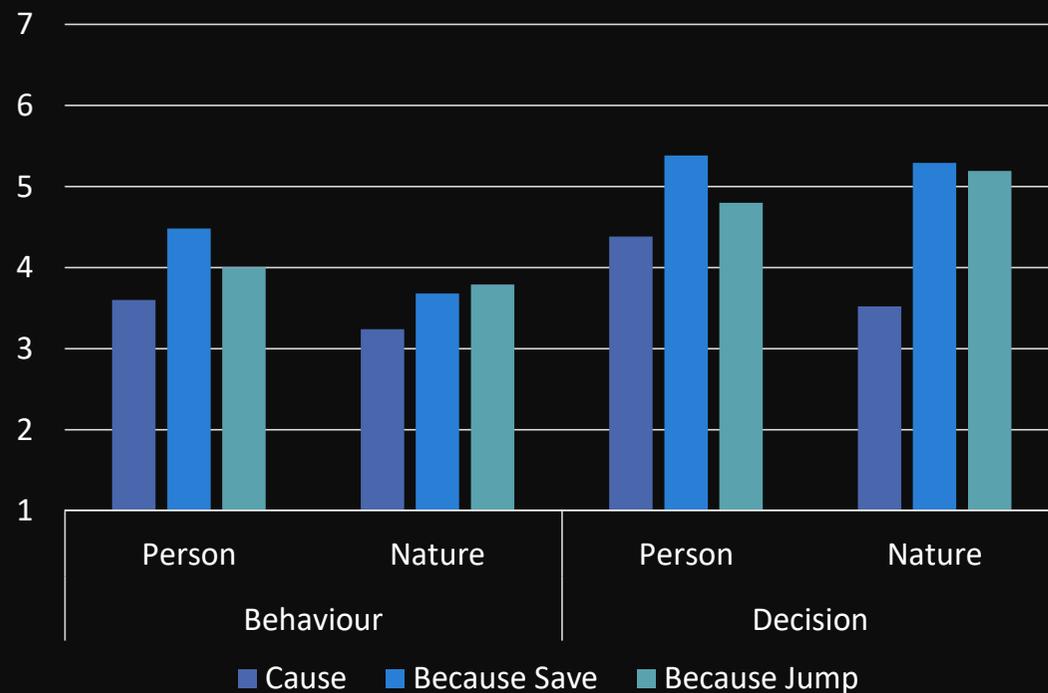
The child died because AGENT didn't jump into the water, trying to save him.

Design – Exp. 2

- 2 x 2 x 3 between-subjects design
- Independent Variables:
 1. Intervener (person vs. nature)
 2. Point of Intervention (behaviour vs. decision)
 3. Causal Query (cause, because1, because2)
- Questions:
 1. Cause
 2. Moral Responsibility
 3. 3 Blame questions

N = 363, Tested on Mturk

Exp.2 – Results



- Main effect of Question, $p < .01$
- Main Effect of Point of Intervention, $p < .001$

Discussion

- The formulation of the question has a significant impact on people's causal ratings
- Because-formulations yield agreement above the neutral midpoint
- The strength of Sartorio's argument relies on what we consider the best formulation



Open Questions & General Discussion

Philosophical Implications



- The folk tend to blame agents for their actions irrespective of AP
- However, they blame agents much less for their omission of they could not have done otherwise
- **There is a moral asymmetry between actions and omissions when the outcome is unavoidable**
- This asymmetry can be explained by differences in the causal evaluation
- → What's the underlying causal theory people apply?

Philosophical Implications



- Against philosophical assumptions the Point of Intervention and the Intervener were not relevant
- Philosophical thought experiments provide intuitions that are not generalizable

X-Philosophical Implications

- The Action/Omission Asymmetry is relevant for empirical research on compatibilism in general
- Whether a behaviour is described in terms of what the agent did or did not do matters
- Research on people's causal intuitions might help understand their moral intuitions



Individuating and describing actions

- What is the difference between
 - Failing to jump into the water with the intention to save the child
 - Not saving the child
 - The child not being saved
- Such differences in description matter!
 - Both for philosophical arguments and in experimental research



X-Philosophical Implications

- As experimental philosophers, we can show that such things matter
- But to immediately test philosophical theories, philosophers need to be more precise in how their theories should be phrased

