

Counterfactual and Semi-factual Thoughts in Moral Judgements about Failed Attempts to Harm

Mary Parkinson¹, R. M. J. Byrne²

¹Operations and Supply Chain Management Group, Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, University College Dublin

²Reasoning and Imagination Lab, Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin
{parkinsm, rbyrne}@tcd.ie

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2 Summary

People judge that an individual who attempts to harm someone but fails should be blamed and punished more when they imagine how things could have turned out worse, compared to when they imagine how things could have turned out the same, or when they think only about what happened. This moral counterfactual amplification effect occurs when people believe the protagonist had no reason for the attempt to harm, and not when the protagonist had a reason, as Experiment 1 shows. It occurs for intentional failed attempts to harm and also for accidental near-misses, as Experiment 2 shows, but not for failed attempts in which the harm occurs anyway by another cause, for both general judgments about the event and specific judgments about the individual's actions, as Experiments 3 and 4 show. The implications for understanding the role of counterfactual thoughts in moral judgement are discussed.