

# People attribute moral obligation and blame, regardless of ability

November 6 2015

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

New research from the University of Waterloo debunks the age-old moral philosophy that if you are unable to do something, then you are not morally obligated to do it.

Professor John Turri and postdoctoral researcher Wesley Buckwalter of the Department of Philosophy at Waterloo investigated the link between

being morally obligated to do something and having the ability to do it. Traditional philosophical wisdom says that "ought implies can."

However, their recent study found that people routinely attribute [moral](#) obligations to people who cannot fulfill them.

"In one experiment, participants considered a case where two swimmers are drowning," explains Buckwalter. "Because the drowning swimmers are so far apart, the lifeguard on duty can save one or the other but not both of them. Despite acknowledging that the lifeguard is literally unable to save both swimmers, the overwhelming majority of participants judged that the lifeguard was still obligated to do so."

The research team conducted eight experiments to test the link between a range of moral requirements and abilities in ordinary moral evaluations. Participants were assigned to groups, asked to read a story that described different inabilities (short-term or long-term, physical or psychological), and then asked to answer questions about [moral obligation](#) or blame.

The study also revealed important differences between the way people perceive physical and psychological inabilities.

"People are less willing to believe that an agent is unable to drive a car due to clinical depression than due to physical injury," said Professor Turri. "Moreover, people are more willing to blame agents suffering from psychological inabilities. This asymmetry may reflect the assumption that people can just get over mental inabilities, such as [clinical depression](#), in ways that they cannot just get over, say, a broken leg."

These findings may also apply to issues such as the refugee crisis European nations are facing and the immigration reform at the forefront of U.S. politics.

"One important practical question is the extent to which these nations have the ability to help all those in need around the world," said Buckwalter. "But another question involves figuring out what these nations have a moral obligation to do. Our results show that, in most people's minds, the moral question is not settled simply by learning, for instance, that a nation cannot take in more refugees."

Professor Turri, Buckwalter, and their research colleagues are currently studying why [people](#) are more likely to blame or stigmatize those with mental disabilities. Progress on this question could have important social benefits, such as improving the treatment and experience of mental health patients.

**More information:** Wesley Buckwalter et al. Inability and Obligation in Moral Judgment, *PLOS ONE* (2015). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0136589](#)

Provided by University of Waterloo

Citation: People attribute moral obligation and blame, regardless of ability (2015, November 6) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-11-people-attribute-moral-obligation-blame.html>

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