

You don't need to believe in free will to be a nice person, shows new research

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Contrary to a widely-held view in psychology and other fields of research, belief in free will appears to be unrelated to moral behavior. Social psychologist Damien Crone from the University of Melbourne and Philosophy professor Neil Levy of Macquarie University and the University of Oxford conducted a series of studies of 921 of people and found that a person's moral behavior is not tied to their beliefs in free will. The results will appear in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* this month.

"For some philosophers and psychologists, the belief in free will is linked with [moral responsibility](#), and the possibility of denying free will leads to immoral behavior," says Levy, "But our findings suggest there is no need for alarm."

Recent scientific studies show most people believe in free will. A number of experimental studies further suggest that there is a connection between a person's free will beliefs (FWB) and everyday moral behaviors and desirable moral characteristics such as those higher in FWB score greater than their non-FWB peers in helpfulness and show less dishonesty.

In a series of four online studies, Crone and Levy measured participants' pro-social and anti-social behaviors, as well as their belief in free will. To test the association between people's level of FWB and their behavior, they provided opportunities for participants to engage in generous or dishonest behavior. The first game, dubbed a "charity

dictator game," allowed participants to donate all or part of a bonus payment to the Red Cross. They expanded upon this in subsequent studies, by allowing participants to choose which charity they would want to donate to.

In another task included in the latter three studies, participants played a dice game, where they could earn a bonus payment based on the roll of a die. The results of the die roll were self-reported, giving people a chance to lie about their rolls to improve their prospects. By comparing the expected and observed outcomes of die rolls, particularly whether the more lucrative outcomes were over-reported, the researchers could estimate how many people cheated in the game, and whether particular people (e.g., those who disbelieve in free will) were more likely to cheat.

Across all four studies, Crone and Levy found no correlation between FWB and participants' generosity or dishonesty.

This main finding is a null result, but the authors stress that it is unclear how earlier work ought to be interpreted in light of this result. They cannot definitively conclude that there is no association at all—free will belief may promote moral behavior in specific contexts, and perhaps that explains the mixed findings across different studies. Crone and Levy suggest that at the very least it seems that the field needs to rethink the prevalent view that belief in free will promotes moral [behavior](#) in general.

"Of all the things that might predict [moral behavior](#), [belief](#) in free will is probably a long way down the list," says Crone. "People need not worry about their free will-disbelieving friends or family members being any less generous or honest than the rest of the population."

More information: Damien Crone and Neil Louis Levy. Are free will believers nicer people? (Four studies suggest not) *Social Psychological*

and Personality Science. Online before print Summer 2018.

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