

# Are Beliefs Voluntary in Moral Decision?

Ying Chen

WLSA Shanghai Academy, Shanghai, China

1911521128@mail.sit.edu.cn

**Abstract.** For each individual, the standards of morality are completely different. People will make decisions based on their life experiences, social environment, family education, and other factors to develop their moral standards. The essay argues that beliefs are voluntary to guide an individual's decisions and actions. Based on the moral experiment, people struggle with the importance of their family or personal will. Some people might make their decision based on others' thoughts and feel regret after many years. However, their belief and moral system guide them to determine the results, and they have complete responsibility for their action. In this essay, I will first discuss voluntary belief from the perspective of doxastic voluntarism and folk psychology. The second perspective will adopt psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud. Finally, this essay will demonstrate the necessity of voluntary belief using a moral accountability argument grounded in social psychology.

**Keywords:** Moral decision, voluntary belief, doxastic voluntarism, folk psychology, psychoanalysis, and social psychology.

## 1. Introduction

Morality is the sum of behavioral norms that regulate the relationships between individuals and society. People cannot live in isolation from the group. A person living in society must consider the interests of others or their group. Otherwise, it will cause disputes or conflicts. The significance of morality and individuals' decision-making on morality also vary among different age groups. Research author Jean Decity said preschool children and adults differentiate between intentional or accidental injuries when assessing whether the perpetrator has done something wrong. However, adults are less likely than children to believe someone should be punished for damaging objects, especially if the behavior was accidental [1].

The moral dilemma revolves around the topic of whether girls should go abroad. The story's general plot is as follows: A girl has been studying abroad and hasn't come home for a long time. After returning home, she suddenly realized that her grandmother was heavily ill. Her grandma told her only wish was to have her granddaughter back and study in China. The girl likes the current educational system and has a lot of friends there, but she could get better resources if she came back to China. However, she also realizes that her grandmother may be dying soon, and she doesn't know what to do when faced with her grandmother's wishes.

Based on research on existing moral dilemmas, my question is, "What should the girl do? Continue her studies abroad? Or come home as her grandmother wishes?" There are three possible answers to this question. Firstly, stick to your ideas and stay abroad to continue learning and living the life you want. Secondly, while returning to China to obtain better learning resources, I also spend the final moments with my grandmother. In addition to these two answers, I think a third compromise option is available. In real life, many famous foreign schools, such as New York University Shanghai, will come to cities in China to open their own branch schools. Even if students study on the Shanghai campus, they can still obtain a graduation certificate from New York University in the United States after graduation. If the girl in the story finds a similar school, she can accompany her family while ensuring her learning [2].

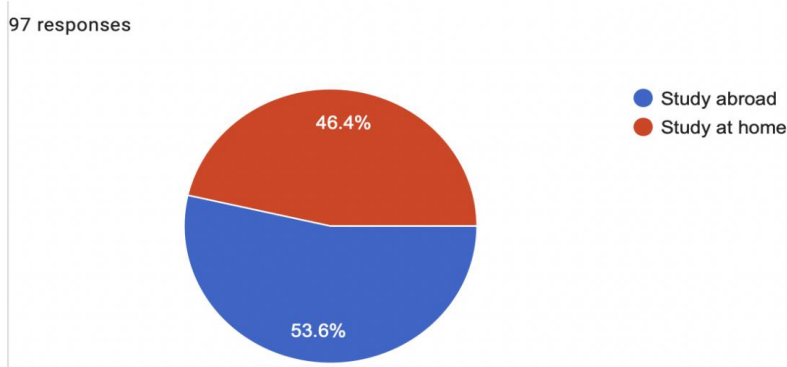
A moral dilemma exists in real life when available choices and obligations do not allow for moral outcomes. In this case, the moral argument comes from the conflict between personal goals and family expectations. It is also affected by personal opinion towards the comfort zone. To be more specific, a girl wants to stay abroad simply because she has a lot of friends and is very adaptable to studying and living in a foreign environment. If she chooses to return to China, it will be very challenging for her.

She needs to spend time socializing and adapting to the new environment. At the same time, from the perspective of family ethics, it is also a difficult question whether her grandmother should spend limited time with her family to change the current situation [3].

## 2. Moral Experiment

### 2.1. Analysis

As shown in Figure 1, the questionnaire survey shows that a total of 97 people answered this question. Among them, 53.6% choose to continue staying abroad, while the remaining 46.4% choose to return to China.



**Figure 1.** Two or more references

In Table 1, gender differences have a very significant impact on options. Among those who choose to go abroad, 22% are women, and 32% are men; Among the people who choose to return to China, women account for 27%, and men account for 20%. The data reflects that women are more inclined to return to their home countries. This may be because women are given greater family significance from both physiological and social perspectives. Modern social culture requires women to take care of their family members based on raising children, and this characteristic is subtly linked to female roles. At the same time, the data in the questionnaire will also change due to individual differences. One of the influencing factors is emotional connection. If a person has a strong emotional dependence on their family, they are likely to choose to return to their home country. Whether an individual is rational or not will also be another critical factor. From a rational perspective, whether better resources can be obtained is the most critical issue in this moral dilemma. If the subjects are rational enough, they will tend to return to their home country. However, according to the data, most participants are biased. They are more inclined to choose based on their feelings and thoughts [4].

**Table 1.** Two genders comparing

Study	Female	Male	Total
Study abroad (Observed % of total)	21 (22%)	31 (32%)	52 (54%)
Study at home (Observed % of total)	26 (27%)	19 (20%)	45 (46%)
Total (Observed % of total)	47 (48%)	50 (52%)	97 (100%)

### 2.2. Discussion

Social and cultural factors mainly influence the gap in experimental data. Firstly, this may be related to individualism and collectivism. Individualism emphasizes the development of an individual, while collectivism emphasizes the contribution cooperation can bring to society. Compared to Chinese and Western cultures, they may choose to continue staying abroad in the questionnaire due to the emphasis on individualism in Western society. The answer would be the opposite if the same question were placed in Chinese society. The family plays a significant role in Chinese society. People view the family as a small unit that makes up society; a family is a small collective. The concept of collectivism can be reflected in it. Many Chinese people value their family more than themselves,

thus sacrificing their interests for the sake of their family members. At the same time, the choices may also stem from age differences. In Chinese society, there may be significant differences in the views of the post-80s and post-90s on the family. The post-80s generation is still influenced by traditional Chinese culture and believes family harmony is essential. With the development of the times, more and more young people see marriage and family as a constraint, and they believe that individual freedom and development are the most important for them. Such a generation difference can also significantly impact questionnaire data [5, 6].

From the perspective of moral psychology, this moral dilemma involves two core principles. Firstly, maintaining Honey. Secondly, Showing care and love to people. This topic also reminds me of moral psychologists' discussion of free will. Most people will feel regret in the future, blaming that they make the decision based on others' thoughts instead of their valid will.

Nevertheless, people's cognitive thoughts are guided by their own, and their belief is voluntarily controlled by themselves. Specifically, people should be responsible for their decision. This evokes more philosophers to concentrate doubts on the question "whether people have the free will to control their belief"? Taking a joint event in life to illustrate. When a student picks up their bag and rushes downstairs, a question slowly arises in their mind: "Did I close the door?" In the student's memory, they should have made a habit of closing the door, but it doesn't seem like they have done that. Under the gambler's psychology, the student chooses to let go and believes that the door has already been closed since going back to check the door will make the student half an hour late. In daily life, this is a prevalent example of how voluntary beliefs are formed when faced with choices. The term belief here is defined as the process of decision-making. The definition of voluntary is similar to free will, which means done or brought about by one's own will (Merriam-Webster). The debate around voluntary belief and free will have been widely discussed for centuries. Many philosophers, such as John Martin Fischer and Sam Harris, believe that human agent does not have free will and that free will is a human illusion. However, in cultural and social psychology, Nuckolls and Clark et al. suggest that beliefs can be voluntary.

### 3. Literary Reference

#### 3.1. Doxastic Voluntarism and Folk Psychology

Supported by doxastic voluntarism and folk psychology, people are willing to control their beliefs. The term doxastic voluntarism is generally defined as having the same type of willful control over one's beliefs that one has over their actions (Turri Rose Buckwalter 3). Doxastic voluntarism could be composed of direct and indirect voluntary control. Indirect voluntary control refers to the disability of a person to have direct voluntary control over their behaviors. If they choose to take other intermediate actions, they can cause these behaviors (Vitz). For instance, if the lights in this room are on, the person will believe that the room is on, so that they will turn off the lights.

On the contrary, if the lights in this room are dark, he will choose to turn on the lights. Indirect voluntary control is also supported by cognitive psychology, which states that people have the right and the ability to decide their beliefs. For example, confirmation bias illustrates a tendency to search for information supporting our preconceptions and ignore or distort contradictory evidence (Klein 1).

The term belief perseverance also assists the ability to choose their own beliefs. Different from confirmation bias, belief perseverance suggests that people have a high possibility to hold on to beliefs even when evidence proves those beliefs to be wrong. For example, a person enjoys eating hamburgers. They eat at least two hamburgers every day. Even though they see that hamburgers are junk food and cannot be eaten frequently, they still believe that beef, lettuce, and tomato in hamburgers are all protein and dietary fiber, which are healthy. Insisting that hamburgers are healthy food is a kind of belief perseverance. Both the two psychological effects reveal that people will automatically filtrate the information which is undesirable to them and leave the message they want to generate their belief.

While most people would agree that we have indirect voluntary control over our actions, some might find direct voluntary control challenging. Direct voluntary control refers to “acts which are such that if a person chooses to perform them, they happen immediately (Vitz).” Going back to the scenario above, when considering whether the door is closed, the student believes they do close it. During this process, they do not evaluate evidence related to the condition of the door and choose to make their own decisions directly. Experiments conducted by folk psychology also show that people have direct voluntary control over their beliefs. Traditionally, folk psychology has been used to represent how we understand or rationalize psychological behavior daily (Turri Rose Buckwalter 5). John Turri, David Rose, and Wesley Buckwalter conducted seven successive experiments and utilized mental state simulation to study whether people have voluntary control over their beliefs. The results demonstrate that belief is voluntary and perhaps is the most voluntary propositional attitude. Take the fifth experiment, immediate belief and actual belief, as an example: to address the concerns that the belief is only immediately voluntary and subjects do not ascribe to the agent’s intentions, the experiment asked participants whether a character who chooses to believe would form the belief “immediately.” It then asked whether the character “actually” holds the belief (Turri Rose Buckwalter 31). The result of the experiment shows that participants would form an immediate belief over the character’s decision without evaluating evidence from the experiment. Experiments from folk psychology reveal that people at least have some form of direct voluntary control of their beliefs [7].

### 3.2. Psychoanalytic Perspective

Besides doxastic voluntarism, psychoanalysis shows that people’s minds actively control belief. Psychoanalysis believes that individual minds could be explained as “suppressed impulses, internal conflicts, and childhood trauma to individual psychological life and adjustment (APA Dictionary of Psychology).” Within psychoanalysis, the relationship between infants’ emotional attachment style and behavior could be used to support voluntary belief. Charles W. Nuckolls suggested that voluntary action arises from contradictory orientations between emotional attachment to mothers and desire for autonomy between 1-24 months of child development. A person’s relationship with their mother and mental growth is generally divided into six stages. From the Normal Autistic Phase (birth to 1 month) to the Phase of Normal Symbiosis (1-5 months), the infants at this time are a closed psychological system undisturbed by external stimuli (Mahler & Furur, 1968). They develop human symbiosis only with their mother, self, and not-self, are not yet differentiated, and in which there is little awareness of the distinction between inner and outer experience (Brandell 140). However, the desire for autonomy begins to immerse from the Differentiation Subphase (5-9 Months); infants can make more apparent sensory discrimination between self and object and are no longer dependent on their mothers’ bodies. The sense of autonomy intensifies during the stages of the Practicing Subphase (9-15 Months) and the Rapprochement Subphase (15-24 Months). “The early sense of omnipotence and the accompanying ideal self have been replaced by a new anxiety about separation (Brandell 142).” At this time, infants will generate internal conflict. On one side, they hope to establish a secure attachment with their mother to eliminate anxiety, but they also have a strong desire to be separate and omnipotent. The trait is consistent with the definition of voluntary action, demonstrating that people tend to develop out of contradictory orientations between emotional attachment and desire for autonomy [8].

### 3.3. Moral Perspective

In the above sections, I have demonstrated the possibility of voluntary belief from folk psychology, cognitive psychology, and psychoanalysis. In the following section, I will illustrate that it is necessary to believe that people have voluntary beliefs and voluntary behavior to reach social stability based on a moral standard. Take the 911 event and the terrorists as an example. On the morning of 11 September 2001, 19 Al Qaeda terrorists took control of four commercial planes in the United States, causing grievous consequences for humanity. But if beliefs are involuntary, the behavior conducted by terrorists could be explained as something unconscious rather than intentional. To maintain social

stability, it is necessary to discipline people with their actions and firmly believe that beliefs are voluntary from a higher level of moral standard [9, 10].

Although some philosophers argue that we should not be responsible for our actions, it has been tested that having voluntary belief could promote social improvement. According to the five successive experiments conducted by Cory J. Clark et al., a key factor promoting belief in free will is a desire to hold other people morally responsible for their wrongdoings. The fifth experiment, which examines the relationship between understanding others' immoral behaviors, found that the real-world prevalence of immoral behavior (as measured by crime and homicide rates) predicted free will belief on a country level. The results indicate that the murder rate is positively correlated with the level of belief in free will, which means that belief in free will is stimulated partly by the exposure to others' harmful behaviors and the associated impulse to punish (Clark et al. 12). The importance of being disciplined by the moral standard is an essential element to maintain social harmony. Belief in free will is functional for holding others morally responsible and facilitates justifiably punishing harmful members (Clark et al. 1).

#### 4. Conclusion

Supported by doxastic voluntarism and folk psychology, people are willing to control their beliefs. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, it also shows that people's minds actively control belief, and it is necessary to believe that people have voluntary beliefs and voluntary behavior to reach social stability based on a moral standard. The human obsession with whether belief is voluntary derives from the search for humanity. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, the idea of human nature has been explored and widely discussed. Terms such as homo sapiens were specifically coined to distinguish human beings from other animal species. The obsession with voluntary belief, in other words, the obsession with the idea that we are beings capable of making decisions and performing actions, is indeed a quest for humanity. Belief is a unique, fundamental, and profound spiritual phenomenon of human beings.

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