

The Price of Good Intentions

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Abstract

Prior work has shown that positively intentioned agents are held more responsible, causal, and blameworthy for subsequent bad outcomes than negatively intentioned agents are held for good outcomes. Across a series of studies, we investigate the underlying expectations that produce this asymmetry. We find that, in the absence of explicit information about the action performed, actions of positively intentioned agents who produce bad outcomes are inferred to be worse than actions of negatively intentioned agents who produce good outcomes (Study 1). While both agents are judged to be incompetent (Study 2), positively intentioned agents are attributed more control over subsequent negative outcomes (Study 3) and are also considered more pivotal in bringing them about (Study 4). Together these results suggest that well-intentioned agents are seen as having more control, perhaps because, we believe they are in a better position to modify their future behavior to bring about positive outcomes.