

People view humans as existing for purposes and condemn those who fail to fulfill them

Casey Lewry

Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, United States

Tania Lombrozo

Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, United States

Deborah Kelemen

Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract

People often endorse explanations in terms of purposes or goals (e.g., pencils exist so that people can write with them), even when these teleological explanations are scientifically unwarranted (e.g., water exists so that life can survive on Earth). In the present research, we explore teleological endorsement in a novel domain human purpose and its relationship to moral judgments. Across two studies, we find evidence that people endorse the claim that humans exist for a purpose (e.g., to procreate, to help others) and that these beliefs relate to moral judgments against purpose violations (e.g., condemning those who do not procreate, or do not help others). We also find evidence of a bi-directional causal relationship: teleological claims about a species result in moral condemnation of purpose violations, and stipulating that an action is immoral increases endorsement that the species exists for that purpose.