

You should have checked! The importance of epistemic intentions in ascription of responsibility

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People routinely ascribe responsibility for a given outcome. What factors do they take into account during this process? We argue that people ascribe responsibility when they find a counterfactual in which some minimally benevolent intention could have caused a better outcome. We test whether this account accurately predicts how people consider the epistemic states of potentially responsible agents when ascribing responsibility. With two vignette studies, we show that people take into account epistemic factors when ascribing responsibility for a bad outcome. We find that people ascribe responsibility to agents for a bad outcome when the agents knew that the outcome could have been avoided but nonetheless pursued their course of action. However, when an agent did not know, people ascribed responsibility depending on the reasons behind this lack of knowledge. Agents were judged responsible for the bad outcome when they could have easily known about the consequences of their actions on others, but did not perform the necessary epistemic action; on the other hand, when this information was hard to acquire, people were less willing to ascribe responsibility.