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Counterfactual thoughts and judgments about morally good actions

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Abstract: Evaluating the morality of an action is affected by thoughts about whether the outcome might have turned out differently. We report experimental results that show a moral action effect occurs for judgments about morally good actions. Participants read stories about a morally elevating situation, e.g., an agent is found to be a match as a bone-marrow donor for someone else. The agent decided to act or not to act, and the outcome turned out well or it did not turn out well. Participants created counterfactual thoughts and they also made judgments about whether the agent should have acted, and whether the agent was morally responsible for the outcome. The results show a moral action effect: participants judged that the action should have been taken, and that the agent was morally responsible for the outcome, when the agent acted compared to when they did not act, regardless of the outcome.