

# Causal Forces: Past & Future Impact Beliefs

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## Introduction to Temporal Causal Beliefs

The human ability to understand and attribute causality is fundamental to navigating the world. However, the perception of causal forces is not static; it shifts dramatically depending on whether we are analyzing events that have already transpired (the **past**) or anticipating outcomes that are yet to occur (the **future**). This area of psychological inquiry focuses on the systematic differences in how individuals assign influence to various factors--such as personal effort, external circumstances, luck, or inherent traits--when looking backward versus looking forward. These temporal causal beliefs profoundly influence decision-making, emotional regulation, and self-perception. Understanding this asymmetry requires moving beyond simple attribution theory to examine the psychological mechanisms, like motivational drives and cognitive biases, that color our chronological reasoning. The way we frame the forces that shaped yesterday is fundamentally distinct from how we envision the forces that will shape tomorrow, often leading to predictable patterns of explanatory bias.

A central tenet of this investigation is the recognition that temporal distance itself acts as a modifier of perceived influence. When events are distant, whether in the deep past or the far future, abstract, stable, and internal causes (e.g., personality, societal structure) often gain explanatory power. Conversely, when events are proximal, concrete, unstable, and external causes (e.g., specific actions, momentary luck, immediate environmental factors) tend to dominate the causal landscape. This cognitive distancing effect, often linked to construal level theory, helps explain why we might attribute a historical figure's success primarily to their **innate genius**, while attributing our own potential future success to **specific planning** and immediate effort. The differential weighting of internal versus external forces across the temporal spectrum reveals a dynamic and often self-serving system of causal attribution designed to maintain psychological equilibrium and promote adaptive behavior.

The temporal location of an event determines the informational constraints under which causality is assessed. Retrospection benefits from certainty regarding the outcome, leading to deterministic explanations, while prospection is characterized by inherent uncertainty, necessitating explanations that emphasize malleability and control. This distinction highlights that causal beliefs are not purely descriptive; they are deeply prescriptive, serving the dual functions of explaining what happened and motivating future action. The psychological utility of these beliefs often overrides the pursuit of objective causal accuracy, driving the systematic biases observed when comparing how we explain the forces of the past versus the potential forces of the future.

## Defining Causal Forces: Internal versus External Loci

Causal forces are typically categorized along established psychological dimensions, most notably the locus of causality, which distinguishes between internal and external factors. **Internal causal**

**forces** reside within the agent--traits, abilities, effort, intentions, and stable personality characteristics. These forces imply agency and personal responsibility, often yielding strong emotional responses like pride or guilt. Conversely, **external causal forces** originate outside the agent--environmental conditions, luck, the actions of others, task difficulty, or systemic constraints. The perceived balance between these loci is crucial, especially when evaluating performance or predicting success. In general, people exhibit a strong tendency to favor internal attributions for positive outcomes (a self-enhancing bias) and external attributions for negative outcomes (a self-protective bias), but the temporal frame significantly modulates the strength and direction of these biases, particularly when comparing retrospective analysis to prospective prediction.

Further complexity is introduced by considering the stability and controllability of these forces. Stable causes (e.g., intelligence, immutable laws of nature) are perceived as consistent over time, suggesting that similar outcomes will occur again in the future, while unstable causes (e.g., temporary mood, luck, specific effort exerted on one day) are variable and transient. Controllable forces are those the individual or group can influence (e.g., preparation, strategy, choice of environment), while uncontrollable forces are unavoidable (e.g., natural disasters, genetic predispositions, the actions of powerful, distant others). The interaction between locus, stability, and controllability dictates the emotional and behavioral responses to an event. For instance, attributing a failure to an internal, stable, and uncontrollable cause (lack of inherent talent) leads to feelings of hopelessness and resignation, whereas attributing it to an internal, unstable, and controllable cause (insufficient effort) motivates future action and persistence. These complex dimensions are selectively applied depending on whether the event is being used to explain the fixed past or plan the malleable future.

The categorization of causal forces is not always objective; it is heavily influenced by motivational needs. When explaining a past failure, it is psychologically easier to categorize a force as external and unstable (e.g., "The market was just bad that month") than to acknowledge an internal, stable deficiency. Conversely, when anticipating future success, individuals are motivated to perceive internal, controllable forces as highly stable and potent (e.g., "My dedication will ensure success consistently"). The very definition and categorization of a causal force--whether it is stable or unstable, internal or external--is therefore a dynamic cognitive process aimed at optimizing psychological well-being and promoting goal pursuit across the temporal divide.

## Asymmetries in Past versus Future Causal Attributions

A key observation in temporal causality research is the pronounced asymmetry in attribution patterns, driven primarily by the certainty inherent in the past and the uncertainty characterizing the future. When analyzing the **past**, the outcome is known, which introduces the powerful influence of the **hindsight bias**, or the "I-knew-it-all-along" effect. This bias makes the achieved outcome seem inevitable, leading observers to overestimate the predictability of the event and the influence of

stable, necessary causes. If a historical event resulted in a major success, historians and laypeople alike tend to attribute it to strong, internal, and stable forces (e.g., the leader's vision, the nation's inherent strength), minimizing the role of chance or specific, unstable external factors that could have easily derailed the process. This retrospective determinism simplifies the past, provides a strong sense of cognitive closure, and often leads to unfair judgments of those who failed to predict the known outcome.

In stark contrast, when contemplating the **future**, outcomes are inherently uncertain, and motivational biases often take precedence over deterministic reasoning. People exhibit an **optimism bias**, believing that positive events are more likely to happen to them personally than to others, and negative events are less likely. This bias manifests in causal attribution by emphasizing controllable, unstable internal forces (e.g., future intense effort, specific planned actions) as the primary drivers of success, while external, uncontrollable forces (e.g., unexpected difficulties, bad luck, systemic failure) are often discounted or minimized in personal predictions. The future is thus viewed as more malleable and susceptible to personal agency than the fixed, determined past. This asymmetry serves the critical adaptive function of promoting proactive behavior and maintaining hope, even in the face of statistical probabilities that suggest a more moderate outcome.

This temporal asymmetry is further reinforced by the shifting salience of information. In the past, the outcome itself is the most salient piece of information, guiding the causal search backward to necessary precursors. In the future, the salient information is the set of actions currently available to the individual, driving the causal search toward controllable variables. Consequently, the past is often explained through the lens of necessity (what had to happen), while the future is framed through the lens of possibility (what can be made to happen). The practical implication of this is that people often fail to adequately learn from past situational mistakes if they attribute them to internal stability, yet they remain highly motivated for future endeavors by attributing potential success to internal controllability.

## The Role of Intentionality and Agency

Intentionality, the degree to which an event is perceived as resulting from a deliberate choice or purpose, plays a crucial and differential role across temporal frames. In explaining the past, particularly negative outcomes, there is a strong psychological tendency to search for intentionality, which often leads directly to blame assignment and moral judgment. If a negative event occurred, attributing it to the malicious or negligent intent of an agent provides a satisfying, though often inaccurate, causal explanation that fulfills the need for accountability. This emphasis on agency in the past is vital for establishing moral responsibility and administering justice, focusing the causal search firmly on human decisions and volitional behavior rather than random environmental factors. Even when the outcome was clearly accidental, there is a persistent cognitive drive to find

some element of human error, foresight failure, or lack of due diligence, thereby restoring a sense of control over the chaotic nature of life.

When forecasting the future, agency shifts its focus entirely from retrospective blame to prospective **efficacy**. The belief in one's own agency--the power to exert influence over future outcomes through deliberate, intentional action--is a critical psychological resource foundational to goal setting and motivation. Individuals are significantly more likely to anticipate success and engage in sustained, goal-directed behavior if they believe their own intentional actions will be the dominant causal force driving the outcome. Therefore, prospective thinking tends to inflate the perceived impact of controllable, volitional causes, such as planning, dedication, strategic choice, and moral alignment. This emphasis on self-efficacy reinforces the motivational asymmetry: the past is often explained by unavoidable structural forces or the determined actions of others (necessity), while the future is constructed as a field where personal will and intentionality reign supreme (possibility).

This differential treatment of intentionality also affects how people view external forces. In the past, external forces are often imbued with intentionality if they resulted in harm (e.g., "The economic downturn was caused by greedy bankers"). In the future, however, external forces are often viewed as either neutral constraints to be navigated or opportunities to be leveraged by internal intentionality. The shift in the perception of intentionality across time underscores a fundamental psychological need: to find meaning and responsibility in what has occurred, while simultaneously asserting personal control over what is yet to come. This mechanism allows for moral closure regarding history while maintaining an open, actionable future.

## The Impact of Determinism and Predictability

The concepts of determinism and predictability are central to understanding temporal causal beliefs. Determinism, the philosophical view that all events are ultimately necessitated by prior causes, finds a cognitive echo when we look backward. Retrospective analysis is inherently deterministic because the outcome is fixed; the cognitive task is merely to trace the necessary path that led to it. This psychological determinism is reinforced by the aforementioned hindsight bias, which transforms probabilistic events into seemingly inevitable sequences. Consequently, causal forces in the past--especially those that led to major, stable outcomes--are often perceived as having been highly powerful, necessary, and predictable, even if they were chaotic and unpredictable in real time.

Conversely, the future is fundamentally perceived as non-deterministic in a psychological sense, despite any philosophical arguments to the contrary. The necessity of planning and the maintenance of hope rely on the belief that the future contains genuine contingency and that personal actions can alter the trajectory of events. If the future were viewed as fully determined,

effort would be futile. Therefore, the causal forces emphasized in prospection are precisely those that introduce instability and potential change: specific effort, unpredictable luck, or unique, momentary circumstances. This preference for non-deterministic, malleable causes in the future is a powerful cognitive strategy that fuels proactive behavior and facilitates risk-taking necessary for growth and achievement.

The tension between retrospective determinism and prospective non-determinism is managed through selective application of stability and controllability dimensions. When explaining a stable outcome in the past (e.g., the long-term success of a corporation), stable causal forces (e.g., strong founding principles, market dominance) are chosen to maintain the sense of inevitability. When planning a stable outcome in the future (e.g., sustained personal health), controllable, unstable forces (e.g., daily exercise, specific dietary choices) are emphasized, because these are the only points of leverage. This demonstrates that predictability is not an inherent quality of the event, but rather a function of the temporal perspective taken, with the past being highly predictable and the future being strategically unpredictable to maximize perceived control.

### Causal Forces in Retrospection (The Past)

Retrospective causal analysis is heavily characterized by the need for coherence, narrative structure, and simplifying complex realities. When events are complex or outcomes are significant, people often simplify the causal chain, selecting the most salient, stable, or emotionally resonant factors to form a concise explanation. This often means favoring structural or stable causes over transient ones, ensuring the narrative holds together. For example, explaining a long-term economic depression often relies on attributing causality to deep-seated policy failures or fundamental shifts in technology (stable, external causes), rather than a confluence of temporary political disagreements or chance market fluctuations (unstable, external causes). This preference for stable, structural explanations provides a sense of historical continuity and makes the past feel organized, even if it sacrifices accuracy regarding the chaotic, probabilistic nature of real-time events that actually occurred.

Furthermore, the evaluation of past events is often subject to memory distortion and motivated reasoning aimed specifically at self-preservation. Individuals frequently recall their own past actions as having been guided by strong, positive internal forces (e.g., high ethical standards, unwavering diligence) when the outcome was positive, or attribute failures to unavoidable external circumstances (e.g., systemic bias, unexpected illness). This **self-serving bias** is amplified by the fact that the past is fixed; since the outcome cannot be changed, the psychological task becomes one of interpretation and integration into the self-narrative. The causal forces selected are those that best justify the current self-concept and protect self-esteem from the potentially damaging implications of past errors or poor decisions, solidifying a heroic or victimized self-image depending on the situation.

The temporal distance of the past event also matters significantly due to the abstract nature of distant memory. Highly distant past events often allow for a more abstract, principle-based causal explanation--a process consistent with construal level theory. For instance, explaining the causes of World War I relies heavily on abstract concepts like **imperial rivalry** and **nationalism**. Conversely, explaining a recent failure at work involves concrete, proximal causes, such as the specific software error or the supervisor's immediate feedback. The further back in time one looks, the more the causal forces are perceived as deterministic and structural, diminishing the perceived role of individual, unstable actions and increasing the sense that the event was inevitable given the prevailing conditions.

## Causal Forces in Prospecction (The Future)

Prospective causal thinking is intrinsically tied to planning, forecasting, and the necessity of goal achievement, requiring an overwhelming emphasis on controllable variables. When predicting the outcome of an endeavor, the perceived magnitude of internal, controllable forces (e.g., preparation time, strategic resource allocation, sustained focus) is maximized. This focus is psychologically necessary because if the future were perceived as entirely determined by uncontrollable external forces (e.g., fate, immutable laws, overwhelming systemic constraints), there would be no rational motivation for effort, planning, or resource investment. This inherent bias towards controllability ensures that people remain active agents, investing energy and resources into goal pursuit and perceiving opportunities for intervention even in difficult situations.

However, the attribution of causality in the future is also characterized by a unique dualism concerning risk assessment. When considering personal risks, the optimism bias tends to minimize the potential impact of negative external forces (e.g., accidents, personal illness, market crashes), assuming that personal agency will be sufficient to mitigate them. Yet, when considering large-scale societal or global risks (e.g., climate change, political instability, pandemics), there is often an overestimation of the impact of overwhelming, uncontrollable external forces, leading to feelings of anxiety and helplessness regarding macro-level problems. This disparity suggests that individuals protect their personal domain of influence and control while simultaneously acknowledging the daunting, unavoidable power of forces operating outside their direct sphere of action, creating a cognitive buffer against existential threat.

Mirroring retrospective analysis, the temporal proximity of the future event dictates the type of causal force emphasized. Short-term future predictions focus on immediate, unstable, and highly specific causal factors. For example, predicting the outcome of tomorrow's exam focuses on immediate effort (studying tonight) and transient factors (getting enough sleep). Long-term future predictions, conversely, often rely on stable, internal traits (e.g., "I will succeed because I am intelligent and persistent") or stable external conditions (e.g., "The economy will grow because of sustained technological advancement"). The shift from concrete, actionable causes to abstract,

stable causes confirms that cognitive distance encourages higher-level, more abstract causal reasoning, whether looking backward or forward.

## Psychological Consequences of Temporal Causal Beliefs

The systematic differences in temporal causal attribution have profound psychological consequences, impacting motivation, emotional response, and mental health trajectories. A belief that past successes were due to stable, internal traits (e.g., talent) fosters strong **self-efficacy** and confidence, while attributing failures to unstable, external forces protects the ego from enduring damage. This pattern of attribution is highly adaptive for maintaining a positive self-image and promoting persistence in the face of temporary setbacks. Conversely, a consistently pessimistic attribution style, where successes are external and failures are internal and stable ("I failed because I am inherently incompetent"), is a recognized risk factor for learned helplessness, chronic depression, and avoidance behavior, as it negates the perceived utility of future effort.

Furthermore, temporal causal beliefs critically influence our ability to learn from experience and adapt behavior. If past failures are consistently attributed to uncontrollable external forces (e.g., "It was just bad luck"), the individual fails to identify necessary changes in effort, strategy, or skill acquisition, severely hindering adaptive learning. Conversely, if future success is anticipated solely based on sheer luck (unstable, external), motivation for diligent preparation may wane, leading to underperformance. Effective psychological functioning requires a balanced system where controllable internal factors are weighted heavily enough in both the past (for accountability and learning) and the future (for motivation), while stable external forces are recognized only where appropriate to avoid undue personal blame and stress.

Ultimately, the reliance on deterministic causal forces when viewing the past provides a deep sense of order and meaning, allowing individuals to construct coherent narratives about their lives and history. This narrative function is crucial for psychological integration and identity formation. Meanwhile, the emphasis on agency and malleability when viewing the future offers necessary hope and encourages proactive goal setting. The dynamic tension between these two requirements--the need for a determined, ordered past and a controllable, open future--is a fundamental driver of temporal causal asymmetries, ensuring that the human mind optimizes its causal explanations for both cognitive comfort and effective proactive engagement with the world.

## Cross-Cultural Variations in Causal Perception

While the basic temporal asymmetry between fixed past and malleable future appears to be a universal cognitive tendency, the specific types of causal forces emphasized within these frames are subject to significant cultural variation. Western, individualistic cultures tend to prioritize **internal agency** and personal intentionality as the dominant causal forces in both time frames.

Success, whether past or future, is often attributed primarily to individual talent, singular effort, and personal choice. Failures are more frequently debated between external circumstances and lack of effort, but the focus remains resolutely on the individual's role in initiating or controlling the outcome, reflecting a deeply ingrained belief in autonomy and self-determination.

In contrast, East Asian and other collectivist cultures often place a greater emphasis on **external, relational, and contextual forces**. Causality is viewed as distributed among the social network, the immediate environment, and historical context, reflecting a holistic worldview. For example, success may be attributed to the support of the family, the favorable political climate, or the collective effort of the group, rather than solely the brilliance or effort of a single individual. This cultural difference affects how temporal beliefs are formed; while the past remains fixed and the future remains open, collectivist societies are more likely to attribute both past outcomes and future potential to stable, systemic, and external relational forces, mitigating the extreme self-serving bias often observed in individualistic contexts and promoting group harmony.

These cultural differences highlight that causal belief systems are not merely universal cognitive shortcuts but deeply embedded social constructions shaped by normative values regarding responsibility and independence. The specific forces deemed acceptable or salient for explaining an outcome--whether they be fate, karma, societal structure, or individual ambition--are learned within a cultural context. Consequently, the psychological consequences of temporal attributions, such as the likelihood of experiencing self-blame versus collective responsibility, are also culturally mediated, demonstrating the interwoven nature of psychology, time, and social environment in shaping our understanding of cause and effect across the temporal landscape.