

# Every One of Your Actions Sets a Precedent

I wonder whether scientists like Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer had any inkling in their youth that their work in physics would one day be used to produce nuclear weapons.

Yet by cooperating with the government that produced these weapons, these men (even Einstein, more indirectly) created the forces that could destroy all life on earth. And they made it easier for more scientists to come to cooperate in the refinement of nuclear weapons and other terrible tools.

Most of us may not live (as they did) to see the long-range results of our actions turn into something quite as bad as atomic weapons. But I'm convinced of the idea that every action we take sets a precedent for how other humans behave. And every action we take brings us closer to or takes us further from our worst nightmares.

If we do a bad job in our work, other people will tend to a bad job in theirs. It doesn't take long until our world is full of shoddy work.

If we lie, other people will find it easier to lie (and harder to tell the truth). It won't be long before no one's word can be trusted in our world.

If we cooperate with tyranny, other people will find it easier to cooperate with tyranny. We shouldn't be surprised if tyranny takes over.

These changes are slow, but they spread pretty inexorably among people who aren't awake to the significance of their actions.

The macro problems of 50 or 100 years from now – the breakdown of families, climate change, erosion of individual freedom, what have you – will spring out of behavioral precedents we set now. So in case we needed another reminder to “do unto others” as we would have them do unto us, this is it.

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