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How do People Universalize? Comparing Resource-Rational Models of Moral Reasoning

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Abstract

To decide whether it is permissible to break a rule, people often universalize, asking, “What if everyone felt at liberty to do the same?” (Levine et al., 2020). This suggests that people can imagine a world in which an established rule is ignored and reason about its consequences. Consider a queue. When someone cuts in line instead of waiting their turn, observers may evaluate their behavior by imagining a world where people stop respecting the queue entirely. Fully representing such a world is extremely complex: each person plans while anticipating others’ moves, knowing that others are doing the same. How do people solve this problem? We compare resource-rational models of universalization against people’s judgments. Building on Kwon et al. (2023), we simulate worlds in which line-cutting has been universalized, varying how agents plan (from fast-and-flat heuristics to more exhaustive search) and how they represent others (level-k reasoning).