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Contractualist Concerns Shape Moral Decisions and Moral Judgments

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Abstract

Understanding human morality is of major interest across the cognitive and behavioral sciences. Empirical approaches often focus on two theories from moral philosophy – consequentialism and deontology –, explaining moral cognition by appealing to either calculation of consequences, adherence to rules, or both. By contrast, a third influential philosophical tradition – contractualism – has received little empirical investigation. According to contractualism, ethics is a matter of forming, adhering to, and enforcing (hypothetical) agreements. Drawing upon virtual bargaining – a recent psychological proposal that models social interactions in contractualist terms – we investigate moral contractualism in five preregistered online experiments ($n = 3,636$). We find that characteristically contractualist concerns (e.g., agreement, consent, mutual interests) heavily shape incentivized decisions in a new experimental game designed to split apart contractualism from consequentialism and deontology. Moreover, they influence moral judgments in three distinct settings. Contractualist reasoning may play a central role in human morality.