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What if everybody did that?: Universalization as a mechanism of moral decision-making

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Abstract

We describe a cognitive mechanism of moral judgment, universalization, that has received little attention up to now. Under universalization, an action's moral permissibility is determined by calculating what the outcome would be if all people who are similarly situated to the actor also acted in that way. This mechanism is particularly well-suited to capture our moral judgments of free-rider cases, where one person doing the action increases utility but many people doing it decreases utility. Universalization fits into an agreement-based (contractualist) theory of moral cognition, and explains properties of our moral judgments that an outcome-based or rule-based approach cannot. We show patterns of universalization reasoning in young children as well as adults.