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Measuring the vigor of trolley problem lever pulling

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that most people find it morally acceptable to pull a switch-track lever that will sacrifice one life in order to save five lives. People, however, judge as less morally acceptable the decision to save five lives by pulling a lever that will open a trap-door to sacrifice an individual standing on it (Greene et al., 2009). We measured the force participants exert pulling a lever when considering the switch-track and trap-door trolley problem scenarios. We counterbalanced the presentation order of scenarios and only analyzed the movement force of participants who had decided to pull the lever in both scenarios. We observed in our preliminary results (n=29) more vigorous lever pulling during the more morally acceptable switch-track scenario relative to the less morally acceptable trap-door scenario.