

Empathy or Utility: Children's Reasoning for Moral Consideration of AI

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Abstract

Do children believe AI deserves to be treated morally as humans, and if so, why? In this study, eighty children aged four to eight were randomly assigned to interact with a human or AI partner in a naturalistic storytelling activity, after which their moral considerations and rationale were elicited. The results indicated that although children believed they should treat both AI and humans morally, the motives behind their beliefs differed. Children's moral considerations for humans were driven by empathy for others' needs and feelings, whereas their considerations for AI were motivated by the desire to preserve its functional utility. These motives were corroborated by children's denial of AI's capacity to have feelings or basic physical needs. This study contributes to the literature on children's moral development by demonstrating that while their moral reasoning extends to non-human entities, their justifications reflect a distinct, domain-specific understanding rather than an anthropocentric confusion.