

How the logic of bargaining shapes moral judgments about resource divisions

Xavier Roberts-Gaal

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Arthur Le Pargneux

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Fiery Cushman

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract

For recent contractualist accounts of moral cognition, moral judgments should coincide with what rational agents would agree to in a negotiation, accounting for their relative bargaining positions. But past research documents widespread egalitarian moral intuitions; impartiality may also require abstracting away from power asymmetries. How can these perspectives be reconciled? We suggest a key difference lies in whether the logic of bargaining drives the interaction, turning existing asymmetries into bargaining power differences. In Study 1, two parties engage in a take-it-or-leave-it negotiation. In Study 2, they can trade with a third party. In both cases, third-party moral judgments about the morally best split of a fixed amount overwhelmingly favor the advantaged party. They can be precisely predicted using classic models from bargaining theory. By contrast, moral intuitions are completely reversed—reflecting redistributive or egalitarian concerns—in a donation setting where the logic of bargaining does not apply.