

Sentimental and Monetary Value in Moral Dilemmas

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Abstract: We investigated the effects of "personalness" in moral decision-making by examining judgments about moral dilemmas involving damage to owned property that varied in terms of their sentimental (i.e. personal) importance or monetary value. Participants responded to trolley-style dilemmas where an agent could save five objects from destruction by sacrificing a sixth object, either as a means or as a side-effect. In Experiment 1 ($N = 315$), participant's judgments of acceptability depended on the means/side-effect distinction for sentimentally important objects. However, this difference did not occur for objects without sentimental value. In Experiment 2 ($N = 361$), acceptability depended on the means/side-effect distinction for items regardless of their monetary value. These findings suggest that ownership violations are processed similarly to acts causing harm to human victims, and that this effect depends on the sentimental, but not the monetary, value of the objects.