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Choosing between the Emotional Dog and the Rational Pal: A Moral Dilemma with a Tail

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Abstract:

Neuroscientific studies indicate moral cognition involves a cognitive struggle between two systems in the brain: the emotional "hot" system and the rational "cold" system. Past research has shown that when presented with personal dilemmas, individuals showed greater brain activity in the hot system areas. However, when further probed about their decisions, moral dumbfounding often occurs. Family selection may help explain moral judgments. Oftentimes, people consider their pets as part of their family. Based on the past research on moral decision-making, the current study presented a novel approach to exploring moral decision-making by forcing participants to choose to save the life between biological family and psychological-kin. Participants ($n = 573$) were given moral dilemmas and forced to decide whether to save humans or pets from imminent death. The level of relationship between the human shifted six times (foreign tourist, hometown stranger, distant cousin, best friend, grandparent, and sibling), while relationship to the pet had two levels (your pet, someone else's pet). Willingness to save a pet over a human consistently decreased as level of relationship between the participant and the human in the scenario increased. Participants were also more likely to save their own pet over a human life than someone else's pet over a human life. The results suggest that pets are often viewed as psychological-kin. Females were found to be more likely to save their pets over non-immediate family members than males (all $ps < 0.05$), suggesting that males and females may differ in the structure of their moral reasoning.

Keywords: [EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY](#); [GENDER DIFFERENCES](#); [KIN SELECTION](#); [MORAL REASONING](#)

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