

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, March 11, 2013

Where: JMHH 240

When: 12:00 noon to 1:20 PM

Fiery Cushman

Assistant Professor

Brown University Department of Cognitive, Linguistic & Psychological Sciences

Two Functions of Morality

ABSTRACT: Sometimes people cause harm accidentally; other times they attempt to cause harm, but fail. How do ordinary people treat cases where intentions and outcomes are mismatched? While people's judgments of moral wrongness depend overwhelmingly on an assessment of intent, their judgments of deserved punishment exhibit substantial reliance on accidental outcomes as well. This pattern of behavior is present at an early age and consistent across both survey-based and behavioral economic paradigms. This raises a question about the function of our moral psychology: why do we judge moral wrongness and deserved punishment by different standards? Models of the evolution of social behavior emphasize a reciprocal relationship between punishment and prosociality. Punishment is worthwhile if it enforces prosociality; prosociality is worthwhile when enforced by punishment. This poses two functional challenges for an individual: determining what behaviors to punish in others, and determining which behaviors to perform oneself. I present evidence that these distinct functional demands cause us to punish accidents, while not regarding them as wrongful.