



Should A Self-Driving Car Kill The Baby Or The Grandma?

Different cultures give different answers, and there is obviously no rigid commonality between nations. When AI programs are created, however, they must start with a moral judgement as to how their programs will behave. □ TN Editor

The infamous “trolley problem” was put to millions of people in a global study, revealing how much ethics diverge across cultures.

In 2014 researchers at the MIT Media Lab designed an experiment called [Moral Machine](#). The idea was to create a game-like platform that would crowdsource people’s decisions on how self-driving cars should prioritize lives in different variations of the “[trolley problem](#).” In the process, the data generated would provide insight into the collective ethical priorities of different cultures.

The researchers never predicted the experiment’s viral reception. Four years after the platform went live, millions of people in 233 countries

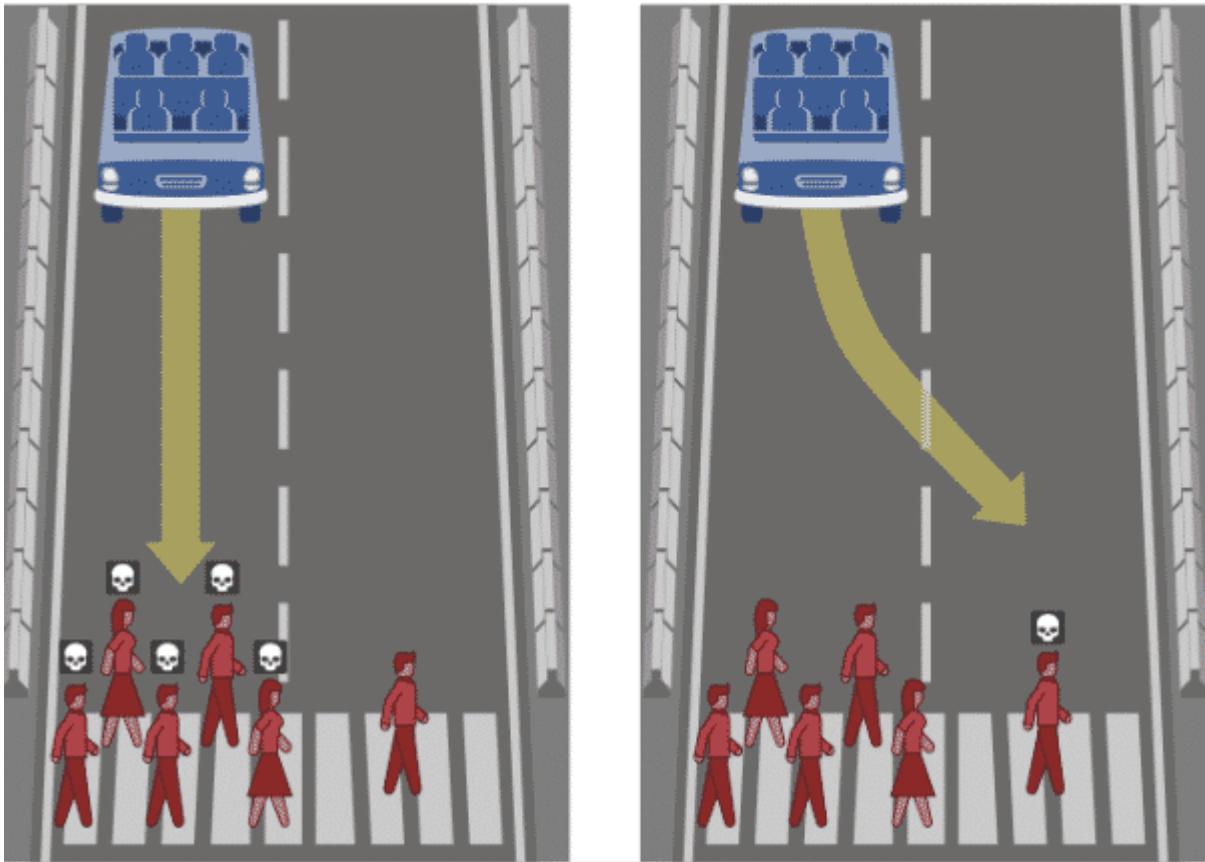
and territories have logged 40 million decisions, making it one of the largest studies ever done on global moral preferences.

A [new paper](#) published in *Nature* presents the analysis of that data and reveals how much cross-cultural ethics diverge on the basis of culture, economics, and geographic location.

The classic trolley problem goes like this: You see a runaway trolley speeding down the tracks, about to hit and kill five people. You have access to a lever that could switch the trolley to a different track, where a different person would meet an untimely demise. Should you pull the lever and end one life to spare five?

The Moral Machine took that idea to test nine different comparisons shown to polarize people: should a self-driving car prioritize humans over pets, passengers over pedestrians, more lives over fewer, women over men, young over old, fit over sickly, higher social status over lower, law-abiders over law-benders? And finally, should the car swerve (take action) or stay on course (inaction)?

What should the self-driving car do?



Rather than pose one-to-one comparisons, however, the experiment presented participants with various combinations, such as whether a self-driving car should continue straight ahead to kill three elderly pedestrians or swerve into a barricade to kill three youthful passengers.

The researchers found that countries' preferences differ widely, but they also correlate highly with culture and economics. For example, participants from collectivist cultures like China and Japan are less likely to spare the young over the old—perhaps, the researchers hypothesized, because of a greater emphasis on respecting the elderly.

Similarly, participants from poorer countries with weaker institutions are more tolerant of jaywalkers versus pedestrians who cross legally. And participants from countries with a high level of economic inequality show greater gaps between the treatment of individuals with high and low social status.

And, in what boils down to the essential question of the trolley problem, the researchers found that the sheer number of people in harm's way wasn't always the dominant factor in choosing which group should be spared. The results showed that participants from individualistic cultures, like the UK and US, placed a stronger emphasis on sparing more lives given all the other choices—perhaps, in the authors' views, because of the greater emphasis on the value of each individual.

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