Department of Economics – Neuroeconomics Seminar

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Fiery Cushman
Harvard University

How we know what not to think

A striking feature of the real world is that there is too much to think about. This feature is remarkably understudied in laboratory contexts, where the study of decision-making is typically limited to small "choice sets" defined by an experimenter. In such cases an individual may devote considerable attention to each item in the choice set. But in everyday life we are often not presented with defined choice sets; rather, we must construct a viable set of alternatives to consider. I will present several recent and ongoing research projects that each aim to understand how humans spontaneously decide what actions to consider—in other words, how we construct choice sets. A common theme among these studies is a key role for cached value representations. Additionally, I will present some evidence that moral norms play a surprisingly and uniquely large role in constraining choice sets and, more broadly, in modal cognition. This suggests a new avenue for understanding the specific manner in which morality influences human behavior.