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Article

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Reply to Rati Mekvabishvili's 'On the Importance of Altruism, Prosocial Behavior and Christian Love in Behavioral Economics research'

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Getting involved as a referee for a paper on altruism is an activity that has an inherently reflexive dimension: Why should I bother to accept the task, given that fulfilling it will consume my time and mental energy, for no financial gain, and probably also for no gain in academic standing and no reciprocal benefits? As an atheist, I did not find myself being driven by religious principles when I accepted the task. But as a long-standing behavioural economist and a past editor of the *Journal of Economic Psychology*, I can make sense of my decision to take on the task as follows:

I know what it is like to be a journal editor trying to find a referee for a paper, especially in order to get a timely report to the author, and as an author of journal articles I know what it is like to be kept waiting for inordinate periods of time to receive feedback. In other words, I sympathises with the plight of the editor and the author and that feeling of sympathy made me feel that I should agree to take on the task; it seems somehow wrong to me not to help if I can and am qualified to do so. In this sense, my altruism is consistent with the views that Adam Smith expresses in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith's ([1759] 1976) contribution is not considered in the paper, and it deserves to be, as an early contribution to behavioural economics, one that contrasts sharply with the views regarding the role of selfishness in the working of the capitalist system for which Smith is better known.

As an author myself, I am aware that the refereeing process will break down if authors generally behave selfishly by concentrating their efforts on writing works for submission while declining to accept refereeing tasks due to the latter chewing up time that could have been used in writing further works. To a degree, the refereeing system guards against such selfish behaviour via the possibility that those who consistently refuse to referee work in their areas of expertise will be punished by journal editors giving them desk rejections if they attempt to submit papers for review despite having never been willing to serve as referees. But to the extent that there are multiple journals that are both good targets for a paper and have similar standing, that potential punishment mechanism is somewhat limited. As a late-career author, with no plans to write papers that I would submit to this journal, such considerations also do not apply to me. However, one reason for accepting the refereeing task is that, given how much I have been writing and am likely to continue to write, I feel a duty to keep contributing to the refereeing process to a degree that is consistent with the burden that I impose on the academic publications system as an author. In psychological terms, this comes down to my self construct – I don't see myself as the kind of person who freeloads in this sort of situation – and to the feeling of guilt that I immediately start to experience at the very thought of doing something that conflicts with my self-construct. This view of guilt in relation to the prospective dislodgement of one's self is to be found in Kelly's (1955) *Psychology of Personal Constructs* (defined on p. 502 as "the awareness of dislodgement of self

from one's core role structures." I don't know whether others have used the emotion of guilt as something that kicks in to drive altruistic and prosocial behaviour, but I think it deserves consideration (and we may note how advertisers play on this, as with 'guilty mother'-style ads for, say, dietary supplements that a caring mother should give to her children).

Guilt and sympathy aside, I also found it difficult not to accept the invitation to referee this paper due to experiencing the urge to ensure that the paper does not proceed to the acceptance stage if it presents an unduly narrow view of behavioural economics and where altruism and prosocial behaviour figure within the behavioural literature. At present, it has this shortcoming because it seems to have bought into the fiction promoted by Thaler (2015 – my copy, by the way, shows no sign of the co-author listed in the paper under review) that behavioural economics dates from around 1980 and his early contributions. The urge that I have to set the record straight here may partly reflect the operating rules of scholarship that I have absorbed by operating in academia for over four decades (consistent with Hodgson's 'hidden persuaders' view of the assimilation of rules in cultural settings) but it may also reflect what Csibra and Gergely (2011) refer to as the human tendency toward 'natural pedagogy' in a much more general sense: whether on a genetic basis or via social norms passed down the generations, humans have an urge to share knowledge with those who seem to be in need of it to avoid wasting their time and other resources, and this knowledge-sharing tendency and being brought up to respect the wisdom of elders, has fitness-conferring evolutionary consequences for social groups (and note here, contrary to the penultimate paragraph of section 4 of the paper under review, that the selection of altruistic behavioural tendencies works via its impact on the fitness and survival of carriers of those tendencies, i.e., people within a group, or a group of people competing against other groups, via the behaviour that it generates).

Given that in modern market processes much of altruistic behaviour pertains to the reviewing and recommending of products and potential solutions to problems, this urge to share knowledge with others warrants consideration in the paper. It may function in tandem with sympathy and guilt: for example, if there is a callout on a suburb's social media for assistance in learning how to shop for gluten-free food by the mother of a newly diagnosed sufferer of Coeliac disease, an experienced Coeliac sufferer may have great trouble holding back from volunteering, mindful of her own experience when she was diagnosed. This 'difficulty in holding back' aspect of altruistic choices based on such foundations is, I think, problematic to frame in terms of a 'rational cost-benefit' calculation: one does it because the genetic and socially programmed rules of one's operating system dictate that we do it, without there being any side glances to other ways of spending our time, unless other more basic, higher-priority rules kick in to over-rule operating in an altruistic way (cf. Maslow, 1970, 1971).

From the above standpoint, I do not think that there is any need to make Christian love a central part of a paper on the economics of altruism. Quite apart from the issue of what is supposedly going on among those of other religious persuasions or among agnostics and atheists, we simply don't need to bring religion into the economic analysis if we start trying to understand altruism in terms of the more general framework of the operating rules (genetically inherited, socially acquired and personally constructed) by which people run their lives: a religion is simply a particular set of 'do' and 'don't' operating rules. Hence, I think the author would be wise, in a revised version of the paper, to remove most of what is said in relation to Christian love

and present the prosocial and altruistic aspects of religious modes of thought as cases of outsourced elements that those of faith have chosen to take into their operating systems or have acquired via the Hodgson-style ‘hidden persuader’ mechanisms of social life.

Finally, as far as work by behavioural economists who operate in a pre-Thaler way or whose thinking predates 1980, I think that in addition to following up the ideas above and seeing what can be gleaned from the pioneering book by Collard (1978), the author particularly needs to consider the role of altruism in the thinking of the first behavioural scholar to receive a Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, namely, Herbert Simon, the 1978 winner. Unlike the modern behavioural economists, Simon’s focus was on problem solving in organizations and a key concern there was with the challenge of getting workers to contribute to the organization’s activities in ways that go beyond what they need to do to keep their jobs or believe they need to do to ensure good enough promotion prospects. (The distinction that Williamson, 1975, 1985 draws between ‘perfunctory cooperation’ and ‘consummate cooperation’ may be useful here.) Simon’s concerns arise because job contracts are vaguely specified and, to make matters worse, those in leadership roles are granted their authority by those that they manage giving them respect, rather than this authority coming from their formal role in the organization. A docile, altruistic workforce is a great asset to an organization, though not one whose members are so docile as to hold back from being whistle-blowers when questionable things are being done (corruption) or when they think they can see a better way of doing things (challenging the boss, rather than being a ‘yes man/woman’). So Simon’s limited writing on altruism (I list below the ones that I am aware of, plus his key work on organizations) relates to an important context that the paper needs to consider – a context not unrelated to the ‘shall I agree to be a referee?’ question with which I started this report, for academic job contracts are very vague, and though academic managers are increasingly more explicit in telling their staff about what they will need to deliver if they are to get tenure or promotion, refereeing track records are not part of those kinds of deliverables (even though academics may attempt to use them as indications of the extent to which they are being taken seriously).

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