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Altruism as a self-control problem*

Abstract

Social preferences fluctuate with situational emotions like anger and compassion. This creates a potential self-control problem, where a self in 'cold' state may seek commitment to influence the altruistic actions of a self in the 'emotional' state. We experimentally investigate such self-control problems by studying avoidance behavior as a commit device. In our experiment, subjects face a charitable giving task and have to choose beforehand whether to watch one of several videos, which differ in their emotional content. We study the choice of video as a commitment device to affect giving, and develop a novel method to measure sophistication behind commitment choices. We find evidence that the selection of emotional content is partially driven by sophisticated emotional self-regulation.

* joint work with Cristina Figueroa, Jantsje Mol, and Ivan Soraperra