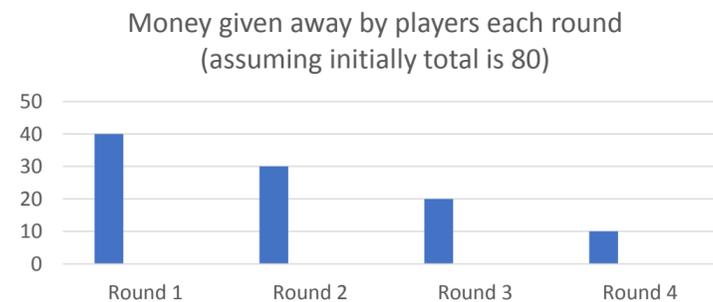


The Divide. Altruistic vs Selfish Behaviour

What is altruism and how is it being investigated?

Altruism refers to selfless acts that reflect a greater concern for the well being and success of others rather than oneself. In a TED talk by Psychology researcher Abigail Marsh, she discussed how her own life experiences had led her to investigate why some people were more altruistic than others. Initially having conducted research about the brains of psychopaths, she found out that the brains of altruists were the complete opposite of them. This meant that they had better recognition for the fear of others, they had a hyperreactive Amygdala (involved with emotions in the brain), and their Amygdala was larger than average.

In a more economical approach investigating altruism, behavioural economists ask people to play games with real money at stake. In the game, people are given money, and are asked to decide how much to keep and how much to give to other people. The results of this were that initially people gave away half of their money, which was an altruistic choice. However, as more and more rounds of the game were repeated, people gave away less of their money. From this we are able to conclude how instinctively, when placed in a scenario, people will try and act as altruistic as possible. However, as time passes, their true feelings are unveiled as they'd prefer to save more rather than give away.



Although this investigation is a good way of understanding the true intentions of people in society, we cannot ignore the flaws that it possesses. This is due to the fact that there are variables such as the fact that people are only doing what they think is morally correct, rather than what they actually want to do, which skews the potential conclusions we can make from this investigation.

History of Altruism and Selfishness

If behavioural economists had intentions of learning about how choices had changed over time, they'd begin by looking at the industrial revolution. This was a time period where the economic idea of 'kaizen' – the idea of continuously improving – ruled over the thoughts of many. Though some had their own self interests in mind, the selfless thoughts owned by the majority was definitely the engine for changes in society. One example is a pioneer named Thomas Newcomen. He certainly didn't invent the atmospheric steam machine for his own benefit but for the benefit of people in society, who were troubled with the high costs of using the power of horses in order to pump water out of mines.

As time has passed, society has transitioned from a greater altruistic stance to a selfish one. Firm's incentive of profits is skewing the need to prioritise and consider external factors such as the environment and society. Although CSR reports are more common amongst firms, long term plans of greater environmental action doesn't make up for the issues of today. Tightening regulations and laws are an example of how this has become an alarming issue.



The inherent Selfishness we all possess

Selfishness refers to a concern for one's welfare or advantage at the expense or without the thought of others. From a talk by Roy Erkens, he interestingly discusses the different systems of selfishness, and interestingly enough how they're all inherent to us. Firstly, direct reciprocity is actually a selfish act where person A helps person B, and in exchange person B does something for person A. In society today, direct reciprocity is evident in a vast range of areas. For example, when we help someone with school work, we expect help in return when the moment occurs. In the work place, if we do a favour for someone, we expect one back. This isn't something that we do purposely, but it is an inherent characteristic we all unknowingly possess, and use to our own advantage.

Indirect Reciprocity is when we do something for someone, then gain an advantage not from the same person but by someone else – like karmic actions. Reputation can be defined as the beliefs or opinions held about someone. Both of these would lead someone to be selfish, as they will have intentions that are of their own benefit rather than other's. For example, people may only give to charity so that they can impress the partner they're with, rather than with the intentions of helping those in need.

The story of nudges

Altruism and Selfishness are only two of many factors that impact the choices that individuals make and the way that they think. Nudges, Game Theory and even simply personal life experiences impact a person's decision making. To examine one in further detail, Nudges are a behavioural concept that proposes positive reinforcement and indirect suggestions as a way to influence the behaviour and decision making of groups and individuals. Nudges can be seen everywhere in society, from displaying promotion of special offers to images of 5-star ratings for hotels or restaurants. Nudges in their true form are very discreet but impactful in their message. So this leads me to question, are our choices really our own? Can people really be blamed for being selfish or altruistic, or should it be the people with the power to influence?