

# EXPERIMENTS IN ECONOMICS AND PHILOSOPHY

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Not so long ago, many economists and philosophers felt that their disciplines had no use for experimental methods. An experimental study was, by its nature, ‘not economics’ or ‘not philosophy’ – psychology maybe. Opinion has changed dramatically. This issue of *Economics and Philosophy* represents a collection of recent contributions to experimental research that explicitly deal with empirical findings or methodological questions in the intersection of the two disciplines. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first such collection dedicated to addressing these common interests.

The Editors of this special issue, James Konow and Eric Schwitzgebel, have selected six papers from the 2011 conference in San Sebastián, Spain on *Experiments in Economics, Experiments in Philosophy* organized by Cristina Bicchieri, Jason Dana and María Jiménez-Buedo. The authors include established as well as rising scholars in economics and philosophy, whose contributions span a wide range of topics and methods found in the experimental work of the two disciplines.

Nadelhoffer, Heshmati, Kaplan and Nichols speak to a descriptive literature that suggests that, although people endorse consequentialist rationales for punishment, they largely punish out of retributive motives. Addressing a fundamental confound in that literature – seemingly retributive punishments that have the consequentialist benefit of communicating to the wrongdoer – they conducted three experiments in which subjects could punish a target by lowering the target’s payoffs without the target knowing about the punishment. They find that even absent any apparent consequentialist motives, people are often willing to inflict costly punishments on others.

Brañas-Garza, Bucheli, Espinosa and García offer experimental data supporting the claim that in any particular instance people are systematically motivated to act morally or immorally as a result of self-regulation

toward the goal of landing on a utility-maximizing level of moral self-worth. Participants played a sequence of 16 dictator games involving a different, randomly chosen partner for each game token under different frames. They found systematic regulation toward an apparent target level of generosity, with a memory of exactly one game back.

Recent economics experiments reveal behaviour consistent with a desire both to comply with moral norms as well as to avoid, under certain conditions, compliance with those same norms. Bicchieri and Chavez investigate the latter and distinguish *norm manipulation*, i.e. self-interested selection of a norm among the various ones available, from *norm evasion*, i.e. the deliberate violation of a norm. Using incentivized decisions and belief elicitation, they find motivational differences between these two types of norm avoidance. Norm manipulation is associated with a self-serving bias in attitude: subjects appear to believe both that their selection of a norm is fair and that others would also believe it is fair. In contrast, in norm evasion agents recognize their behavior as unfair. Motivational and epistemic issues appear, therefore, to interact when moral norms are activated in bargaining.

Philosophers usually seek to undertake moral reflection from an *impartial* perspective and have, to that end, advanced various normative concepts of impartiality. By contrast, most experimental economic research into moral preferences has employed decision-makers with known stakes who can, therefore, typically be expected to be *partial*. Nevertheless, there has been rapid growth recently of economics experiments that explore impartial moral decision-making. The study of Aguiar, Becker and Miller connects these two literatures. They consider distributive preferences under three approaches to impartiality (the *veil of ignorance*, *detached observer* and *involved spectator*). They find that detached observers propose the most equal allocations, that risk preferences partially explain the less egalitarian redistributions behind a veil, and that involved spectators exhibit bias toward similarly situated stakeholders. Thus, the choice of impartiality concept might substantially affect one's moral reasoning and judgement about what is a just distribution of goods.

Gold, Pulford and Colman present a series of inventive variations on the classic 'trolley problem' exercises in experimental philosophy, in an attempt to bring experimental philosophers and economists closer. Their aim is to test the domain generalizability of the 'trolley problem' findings: in the face of a dilemma between inaction and harming someone to prevent harm to many, a majority of subjects think that it is morally permissible to harm someone as long as the resulting harm is a side-effect of, rather than the means to, preventing harm to others. The vast majority of the evidence regarding the 'trolley problem' involves matters of life and death, so the paper's contribution is to systematically vary the dilemma in ways that involve harms other than death, such as bodily, psychological or

economic damage. By showing that the standard ‘trolley problem’ results about life-and-death outcomes extend to moral intuitions about other harms, the article opens up the possibility of discussing related dilemmas using the methodological precepts of experimental economics.

Nagatsu offers a programmatic essay arguing that we should apply the techniques of experimental philosophy to study the concepts not only of ordinary folk but also of *professional economists*. Adapting themes from recent work by Karola Stotz and Paul Griffiths in experimental philosophy of biology, Nagatsu argues that experimental-philosophy style survey studies of professional economists’ concepts can systematically reveal variation in those concepts. Clarifying these differences might help reduce cross-talk and merely verbal disagreement among economists. Furthermore and less obviously: experimental philosophers can explore the *ecology* of economists’ concepts, seeking to discover factors that influence economists’ conceptual choices. For example, economists’ differing conceptions of ‘preference’ might be partly driven by subdiscipline-specific desires to highlight internal psychological causes of behaviour vs. external causes of behaviour or vice versa. Revealing such influences on concept choice might greatly improve our understanding of the social and conceptual structure of economic theory.

The Special Editors and Conference Organizers are pleased with the collection of papers represented here and hope that this issue will help stimulate further scholarship on experiments in economics and philosophy.

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