Abstract

There has been considerable debate about the existence and nature of social preferences as seen in laboratory experiments. I discuss several lab studies that enrich our understanding of social preferences and help explain the gap between generosity in the lab and the field. Through the use of information asymmetries, these studies show that much giving is not consumption-based, but rather “reluctant” in that it is welfare-decreasing to the giver except in situations the giver would rather avoid. Among other conclusions, reluctant altruism suggests that prior studies may have systematically overstated how much pure generosity was observed.