



Intermediated Social Preferences: Altruism in an Algorithmic Era

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JEL Classification B51, C93, D63, D64, J15, K00

Introduction

The role of markets in moral behavior is poorly understood. Economists and philosophers usually study the boundary between markets and government, rather than the issue of what should and should not be on the market. It has been hypothesized that market interactions corrode moral values (Shleifer 2004; Radin 1987). In societal transition to market economies, human economic mentalities were changed, and people became more economically rational, behaving as neoclassical economic theory would predict (Polanyi 1944). Prior to the transition, people based their economies

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on reciprocity and redistribution and were not rational utility maximizers. This chapter investigates one mechanism of the great transformation—intermediation (Judge 2012)—by which market forces can shape morality. Other aspects of market interactions—commodification (market alienability) and competition—have been explored elsewhere (Chen 2016), so this chapter explores the role of intermediation and does so with an experiment.

Broadly speaking, the proponents of the *doux commerce* thesis (a theory popularized by eighteenth-century political philosophers) have proposed that markets, with its disruptive effect on geographical and tribal isolation, will actually have morally improving effects, increasing our care for and understanding of others. On the negative side, intermediation gives individuals the possibility to justify taking egoistic actions while maintaining a feeling of morality. People want to believe that they are moral—and may be motivated less about outcomes or actions and more about revealing themselves as moral beings. In experiments where individuals could choose to allocate either a pleasant or an unpleasant task to a partner and keep the other task, but had the opportunity to flip a coin to do the allocation, 90% of individuals who chose to flip the coin assigned the unpleasant task to the partner and felt more moral (Batson et al. 1997). In other experiments, individuals want to avoid revealing to themselves what are the payoffs to the other so they could avoid feeling moral disutility when choosing a selfish outcome (Dana et al. 2007). In vignette studies, moral judgment of a litigation scenario changes if the subject knew which side they would be assigned to (Babcock et al. 1995). These and other studies of self-serving interpretations on what is right or wrong lend possibility to intermediated moral decisions becoming less pro-social.

In general, measuring how market experiences affect moral values is difficult. Inferring causality from correlation is difficult since the causality can go in both directions. Organizations may foster dramatic changes in value orientations (Kohn 1986), but value orientations can also foster economic change (Katz and Goldin 2000; Eriksson and Villeval 2008). Pre-existing traits may drive selection into competitive environments. Such self-selection makes it difficult to ascertain causal link between market conditions and moral behavior (Fletcher and Nusbaum 2008; Ford and Richardson 1994; Detert et al. 2008; Dubinsky and Ingram 1984). Cross-sectionally, market integration was found to be positively associated with moral behavior in the analysis of economic games measuring social preferences (Henrich et al. 2001). In laboratory experiments with strategic settings, however, someone who chooses to intermediate moral responsibility is less likely to be punished by norm-enforcing third parties (Coffman 2011). This study investigates the

behavioral question: does intermediating moral responsibility change moral behavior even in the absence of third party punishment? If so, what aspect of intermediation matters? In particular, does algorithmic intermediation differ from social intermediation?

To study this question, I use a labor market intermediary (LMI), using a methodology similar to what the author has employed in other studies (Chen 2016; Chen and Yeh 2014; Chen and Horton 2016). An advantage of contextualizing is that natural field experiments mitigate potential Hawthorne effects relative to lab experiments (Orne 1962; Titchener 1967). Workers are recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. The LMI is designed to recruit a large number of workers in a short amount of time. Through an interface provided by the LMI, registered users perform tasks posted by buyers for money. The tasks are generally simple for humans to do yet difficult for computers. Common tasks include captioning photographs, extracting data from scanned documents, and transcribing audio clips. The LMI also allows a researcher to implement randomization although randomization is not inherent to the LMI. Although most buyers post tasks directly on the LMI website, they are also able to host tasks on an external site. I use this external hosting method; I post a single placeholder task containing a description of the work at the LMI and a link for workers to follow if they want to participate. The subjects are then randomized, via stratification in the order in which they arrived at the job, to one of several treatment conditions. Treatment is not revealed at this early stage. All workers see identical instructions.

The experimental approach eliminates omitted variable biases where certain types of individuals select into different market experiences. After workers complete data entry, I ask them to grade the work of another. I observe the accuracy of the workers' own data entry as well as their evaluations of the accuracy of their co-workers' data entry. Workers are asked to propose a split of a 50-cent bonus with the other worker. The split of a 50-cent bonus is a contextualized dictator game. I use this split to measure a workers' altruism (or moral behavior, conditional on the number of perceived errors of the co-worker). The hypothesis is that increasingly intermediating responsibility for moral decisions can lead to more selfish behavior, even if workers rate the data entry task equally well. This is likely to be true when intermediation is more asocial—maintaining or increasing isolation.

The results also relate a literature on whether altruism is deontological (Chen and Schonger 2016, 2017) or egoist (Becker 1976). Under a deontological view, altruistic behavior should not change with the circumstances. We can think of the thought experiment from Kant. In a classic vignette, a murderer asks you whether your friend is hiding in your house (Kant 1797). In the

categorical imperative, Kant would say, “You must not lie.” No matter what the consequences are, you must tell the truth. Under the egoist view, individuals are altruistic only because they get some benefit from being perceived as being altruistic. This would suggest that, as the circumstances of how an individual’s actions are perceived change, the agent’s altruism will change as well. Another related literature is the impact of algorithms and machine learning on judicial decision-making. A large collection of findings on the malleability of moral reasoning or decision-making by judges can be modeled as shifts in reference points about what is the just and fair decision.¹ In an era when algorithms may be used in lieu of legal actors (Amaranto et al. 2018), an open question is how this historical shift may impact judicial decisions.²

Methodology

The LMI can be used to implement anything from a natural field experiment to a laboratory experiment (Harrison and List 2004). Workers come to the marketplace naturally and are unaware they are in an experiment at the time of arrival, and this lack of awareness alleviates the Hawthorne effects. Even if people become aware of an experiment, they are unaware that other subjects receive different treatment conditions. The behavior of subjects in this labor market intermediary is comparable to the behavior of subjects in a laboratory and may be comparable to subjects in a real labor market (Barankay 2010). The experimental design is shown in Fig. 8.1.

I ask workers to transcribe paragraphs from a Dutch translation of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. This task is sufficiently tedious that no one is likely to do it “for fun,” and it is sufficiently simple that all market participants can do the task. The source text was machine-translated to prevent subjects from finding the text elsewhere on the Internet. Time and money are the

¹Malleability of moral reasoning by judges has been documented in US federal circuit judges (Ash et al. 2016; Chen 2017b; Chen et al. 2016d), federal district judges (Chen 2017a; Barry et al. 2016), immigration judges (Chen et al. 2016c), sentencing judges (Chen and Prescott 2016; Chen and Philippe 2017), military judges (Chen 2017e), and juvenile judges (Eren and Mocan 2016). Some of these findings can be attributed to snap judgments whether from analysis of the first three seconds of oral arguments (Chen et al. 2016a, 2017a) or from early predictability of judicial decisions based on race or nationality (Chen et al. 2017; Chen and Egel 2017).

²Outside the lab, the malleability of injunctive norms to formal institutions such as the law (Chen and Yeh 2016b, 2014; Chen et al. 2017b) or markets (Chen 2015b; Chen and Lind 2016; Chen 2016) is suggestive of the impact of broader historical shifts in human rights (Chen 2005), sexual harassment (Chen and Sethi 2016), and free speech (Chen 2015a). This chapter also shares the experimental approach to measure normative commitments (Chen et al. 2016b; Shaw et al. 2011).

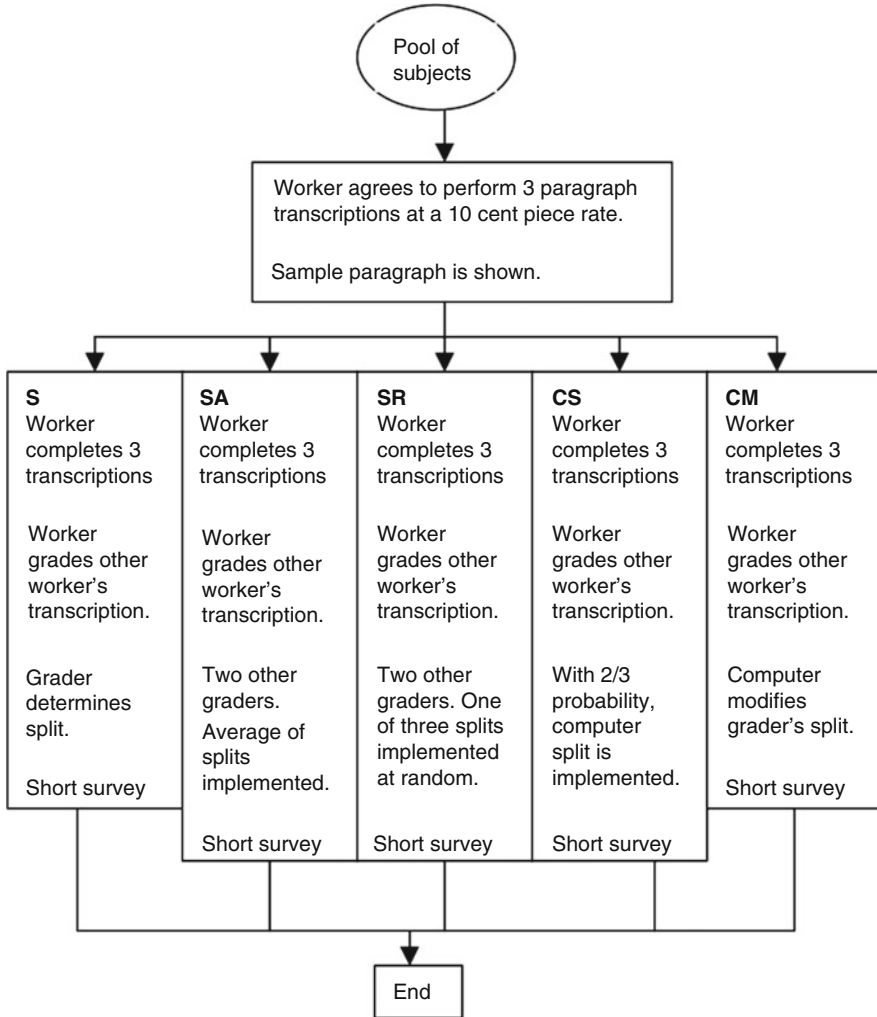


Fig. 8.1 Experimental design

most cited reasons for participation in Mechanical Turk.³ Because subjects are unaware of an on-going experiment, differential attrition may arise at the time

³<http://behind-the-enemy-lines.blogspot.com/2008/03/mechanical-turk-demographics.html>. Some workers do it out of need. A disabled former United States Army linguist became a Turk Worker for various reasons, and in nine months he made 4000 dollars (New York Times, March 25, 2007). Some drop out of college to pursue a full-time career with these disaggregated labor markets (Web Worker Daily, October 16, 2008, Interview with oDesk CEO). For more information about the motivation and demographics of Mechanical Turk workers, see, for example, Paolacci et al. (2010).

treatment is revealed (Reips 2001). I minimize attrition through a commitment mechanism. In all treatment conditions, workers face an identical “lock-in” task in order to minimize differential attrition before the treatment is revealed. This lock-in successfully reduces attrition (Chen 2016).

The payment for each paragraph is 10 cents. They are told there are three paragraphs, all of which must be completed to be paid. A paragraph takes about 100 seconds to enter so the offered payment of 10 cents per paragraph is equivalent to \$86.40 per day. The current US federal minimum base wage for tipped waiters is \$17.20 per day, and the federal minimum wage in the United States is \$58/day. In India, it depends on the type of work done, although the “floor” for data entry positions appears to be about \$6.38/day.⁴ An example paragraph is displayed on the first page of the external hosting site so workers are aware of the high payment before beginning work.

Paragraph Sample: De jaarlijkse arbeid van elk volk is het fonds die oorspronkelijk levert hij met alle benodigdheden en conveniencies van het leven die het jaarlijks verbruikt, en die altijd bestaan, hetzij in de onmiddellijke produceren van die arbeid, of in wat wordt gekocht met die van andere landen. Volgens dus, als deze producten, of wat is gekocht met het, draagt een grotere of kleinere verhouding tot het aantal van degenen die zijn om te consumeren, het volk zal beter of slechter geleverd met alle de benodigdheden en conveniencies waarvoor zij gelegenheid. Maar dit deel moet in elk volk worden geregeld door twee verschillende.

Each treatment group had different specifications about how the split would be implemented, increasingly distancing the subject from his action by making the proposed split less clear to an outside party.

After a lock-in task of three paragraphs, subjects are then asked to grade the task of another worker. They compare a scanned text with another worker’s answer and enter the number of errors found and the general assessment of worker quality (very low/low/fair/high/very high). The task comes from data entry experiments involving summaries of court decisions (Chen and Yeh 2016a,b). Treatment is revealed at the next stage. They are told they and the

⁴Payscale, Salary Snapshot for Data Entry Operator Jobs, http://www.payscale.com/research/IN/Job=Data_Entry_Operator/Salary?, accessed June 17, 2011.

worker whose work they just graded will receive a bonus and that they need to share a ω cent bonus with the worker. The treatment groups are:

G1 Split (Control): Workers are told that their split of the bonus will be implemented.

G2 Peer Average Split: Workers are told that two others are also grading the same work. The average of the three workers' proposed splits will be implemented.

G3 Peer Random Split: Workers are told that two others are also grading the same work. One of the three workers' proposed splits will be chosen at random to be implemented.

G4 Computer Random Split: Workers are told that, with $2/3$ probability, a computer algorithm designed to optimize among data entries will implement its proposed split instead of the worker's split.

G5 Computer Modification: Workers are told that a computer algorithm designed to optimize among data entries will modify their proposed splits of the bonus.

G2 and G3 provide a human component to intermediation, while G4 and G5 provide non-human intermediation. When workers prospectively think about peers, they become more pro-social (Shaw et al. 2011). Thinking about one's peers may be a mediating factor for the effects of intermediation on moral behaviors. G3 is closest to G4 except the randomly chosen split is among peers or with a computer. Note that this treatment differs from standard diffusion of responsibility settings (volunteer dilemma) since it is not the case that any of the graders can ensure a fair outcome (Dana et al. 2007; Darley and Latané 1968). G5 differs from G4 in that a computer will definitely as opposed to possibly deviate from the proposed split. It serves to some extent as a control for G4 in the event that simply reminding individuals about computer algorithms may have a priming effect separate from intermediation. The computer's split in both G4 and G5 is a uniform random number. The exact wordings of the instructions are provided in Appendix.

Experimental Results

Demographic characteristics are balanced across treatment groups, consistent with the randomization of workers across treatment. Table 8.1 displays summary statistics by treatment interaction. Males comprise 36% of the sample. A total of 36% and 35% are from the United States and India, respectively. A total of 25% are Christian, 28% are Hindu, and 16% are atheist. The average age is 30. The average religious attendance is between once a year and once a

Table 8.1 Summary statistics by treatment group

	Control	Peer average split	Peer random split	Computer random split	Computer modification	Overall
Bonus split	20.9 (8.8)	21.6 (10.3)	22.4 (7.9)	17.8 (9.7)	22.2 (10.8)	20.9 (9.6)
Male	0.5 (0.5)	0.5 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)
Age	29.0 (9.2)	28.9 (9.3)	31.1 (11.8)	30.6 (9.9)	30.4 (9.7)	30.0 (10.0)
American	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.5 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)
Indian	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.5 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)
Christian	0.3 (0.4)	0.3 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.3 (0.5)	0.3 (0.4)	0.3 (0.5)
Hindu	0.3 (0.5)	0.3 (0.4)	0.4 (0.5)	0.4 (0.5)	0.3 (0.5)	0.3 (0.5)
Atheist	0.3 (0.4)	0.3 (0.4)	0.2 (0.4)	0.1 (0.3)	0.2 (0.4)	0.2 (0.4)
Religiousness	2.4 (1.4)	2.6 (1.5)	2.5 (1.3)	2.8 (1.4)	2.6 (1.4)	2.6 (1.4)
Respect for Parents	4.5 (1.0)	4.7 (0.8)	4.8 (0.6)	4.9 (0.3)	4.8 (0.8)	4.8 (0.7)
Respect for Supervisor	4.2 (1.1)	4.3 (0.9)	4.4 (0.8)	4.3 (1.0)	4.1 (1.0)	4.3 (1.0)
Respect for Police	4.0 (1.1)	4.2 (1.1)	4.3 (0.9)	4.3 (0.9)	4.2 (1.1)	4.2 (1.0)
Grades	4.2 (0.8)	4.2 (0.7)	4.1 (0.8)	4.0 (0.8)	4.0 (0.7)	4.1 (0.8)
Errors found	2.7 (12.2)	1.7 (2.9)	1.5 (1.0)	1.5 (1.0)	1.9 (1.5)	1.8 (5.5)
Own errors	55.9 (114.8)	54.8 (145.4)	42.3 (78.9)	60.9 (128.8)	38.1 (107.0)	50.5 (116.8)
Observations	67	79	76	88	76	386

month. The average respect for parents and authority is between “a little” and “a lot.” After work has been completed, according to the original expiration date listed on the LMI, bonuses are calculated and workers are notified of their earnings.

The empirical specification examines the effect of treatment on donation:

$$Donation_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1^t Treatment_{it} + \beta_2 X_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (8.1)$$

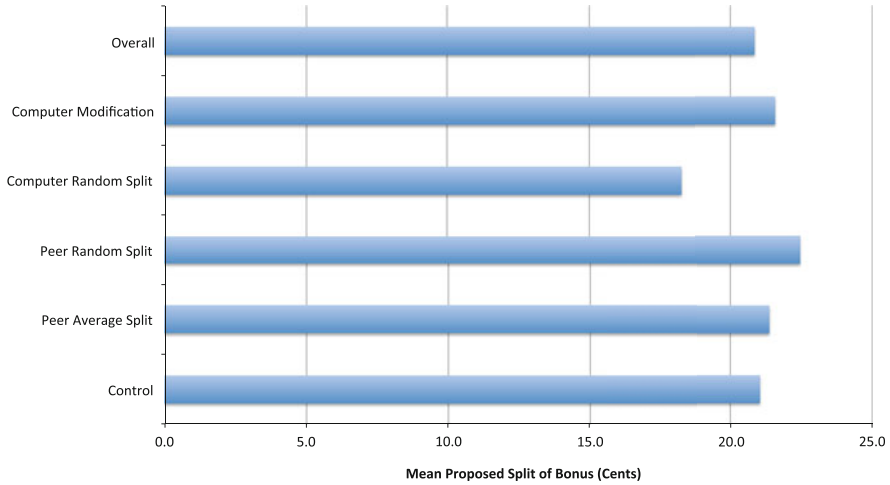


Fig. 8.2 Proposed split by groups

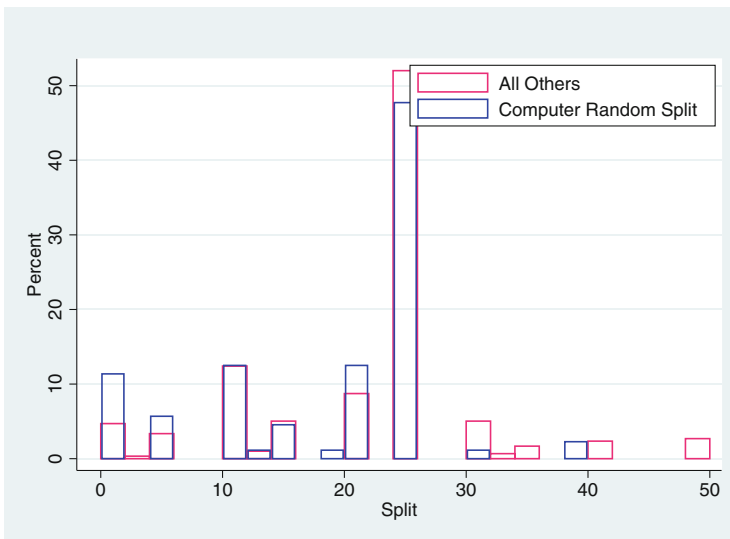


Fig. 8.3 Distribution of bonus splits

$Treatment_{it}$ represents the treatment group for individual i in treatment t and X_{it} represents individual demographic characteristics. Figure 8.2 displays the raw data means of each treatment condition. Individuals assigned to Computer Random Split condition donated the least. Figure 8.3 plots the distribution of the raw data, comparing the distribution of donations in the

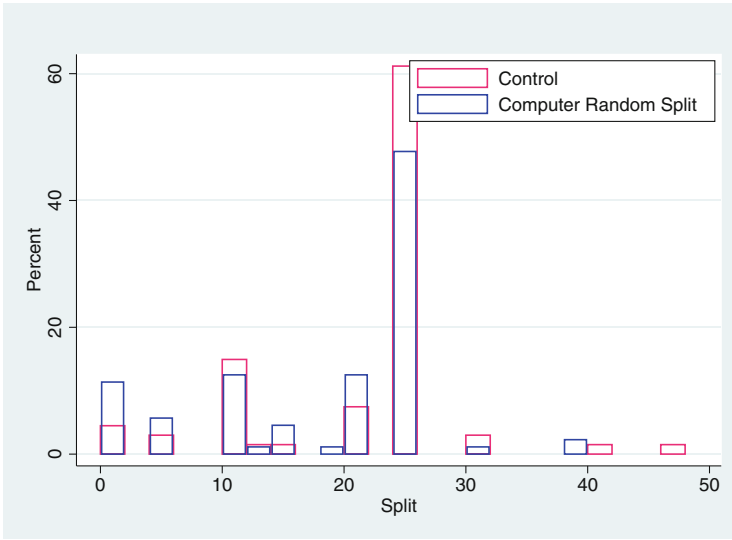


Fig. 8.4 Distribution of bonus splits

Table 8.2 Altruism by treatment group

	Bonus split			
	Full sample		Male	Female
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Peer average split	0.34 (0.21)	0.89 (0.55)	-0.58 (-0.21)	0.067 (0.33)
Peer random split	1.42 (0.87)	1.35 (0.84)	-1.56 (-0.55)	3.02 (0.15)
Computer random split	-2.81* (-1.77)	-2.65* (-1.64)	-5.94** (-2.10)	-0.87 (-0.45)
Computer modification	0.53 (0.33)	1.91 (1.17)	-0.15 (-0.05)	1.74 (0.88)
Controls	N	Y	Y	Y
Observations	386	356	154	202

Notes: t statistics in parentheses. Control is the omitted category

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$

Computer Random Split condition with the distribution of donations in all other treatment conditions. Figure 8.4 plots the distributions only comparing the Control (G1) and Computer Random Split (G4) conditions.

Table 8.2 reports ordinary least squares regressions. I also conduct a Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, a non-parametric analog to the independent samples t-test, which can be used when the dependent variable is not normally distributed, but at least ordinal.

The Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test reveals that the Computer Random Split condition is statistically significantly different at the 1% level. Similar and statistically significant results obtain when I compare only Control with the Computer Random Split condition in the regression and in the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test. In a linear regression, the Computer Random Split condition is also a statistically significant determinant of the proposed split, at the 10% level. Workers in this group contribute about 2.8 cents less than the control group. Column 1 displays the results without demographic controls. Column 2 adds controls, which results in the loss of some observations due to non-response on some demographic questions, but the effect remains quantitatively similar. Column 2 also controls for the perceived error of the recipient.

In results available on request, I find a number of patterns in the data that are consistent with previous findings: workers deemed as providing higher quality work are given higher bonuses (Eckel and Grossman 1996; Ruffle 1998) and men are less generous than women (Andreoni and Vesterlund 2001; Eckel and Grossman 2008). These partial correlations, however, disappear when the complete set of demographic controls is included.

Notably, among male subjects, the treatment effect is accentuated. Men donate 5.9 cents less than the control group when assigned the Computer Random Split condition. The effect is statistically significant at the 5% level. When examining only Americans or only Indians, subjects assigned to the Computer Random Split condition donated the least.

Workers randomly assigned to peer treatment conditions (G2 and G3) display no effect of intermediation on donations, which is consistent with online workers becoming more pro-social when prospectively thinking about peers (Shaw et al. 2011). No effect is found for direct computer modification (G5).

The great transformation of human mentalities into an economically rational cost-benefit perspective has been attributed to the societal transition to market economies (Polanyi 1944). This experiment has found that when asocial decision-intermediation eroded indirect reciprocity norms and generosity toward others. In an algorithmic era, as interactions become more asocially intermediated, decisions may become less social and other-regarding. This might suggest that market interactions corrode moral values only the interactions are asocial.

Conclusion

While economists primarily focus on efficiency, philosophers worry about how markets leave their mark on social norms. Two oft-stated concerns are whether people become corrupted or degraded when an aspect of the human experience is commodified and whether market competition makes people immoral. Economists and psychologists have begun to approach the issue: documenting repugnance of certain market transactions, negotiating around taboo tradeoffs, and questioning why some normative arrangements are repugnant. However, little empirical and no experimental research has been conducted on the issue of market inalienability nor on the issue of market intermediation despite the potential role for intermediation in explaining the financial crisis (Judge 2012). This chapter takes a first step in investigating the causal effect of intermediation on moral behavior, which may have implications for behaviors in other domains, be they religion, law, or ethics.

Appendix Section 1: Placeholder Task at Amazon Mechanical Turk

Transcribe Text

Instructions:

- After you have read the instructions, go to this site to begin work: [Please Right Click Here](#) (to open job in a new window).
- Copy text exactly as it appears in the scanned image.

Payment:

- You will receive 10-cent reward for completing the first paragraph. You can earn much more in bonus.
- When you complete the survey at the end, you will receive a completion code in order to receive payment.

You MUST keep this window open in order to enter the completion code. Bonuses will be paid after the HIT expires or after the work has been completed.

Enter completion code here:

Appendix Section 2: First Page at External Host

Introduction

Task:

You will be presented with three (3) text paragraphs. Please enter the paragraphs word for word in the text box below each paragraph, ignoring hyphenation. For example, if a word is split over two lines, that is, “cup-cake,” type “cupcake.” Once you have transcribed as many paragraphs as you would like, hit “next,” leaving the text boxes blank—you will eventually get to the last questions.

Payment:

You must complete at least three paragraphs to have your work accepted. A sample paragraph is shown below. Note: Once you click “Next” you will not be able to navigate to previous pages.

De jaarlijkse arbeid van elk volk is het fonds die oorspronkelijk levert hij met alle benodigdheden en conveniencies van het leven die het jaarlijks verbruikt, en die altijd bestaan, hetzij in de onmiddellijke produceren van die arbeid, of in wat wordt gekocht met die van andere landen. Volgens dus, als deze producten, of wat is gekocht met het, draagt een grotere of kleinere verhouding tot het aantal van degenen die zijn om te consumeren, het volk zal beter of slechter geleverd met alle de benodigdheden en conveniencies waarvoor zij gelegenheid. Maar dit deel moet in elk volk worden geregeld door twee verschillende

Appendix Section 3: Sixth Page at External Host—Task to Check

Below is the transcription work of another Mechanical Turk Worker. Please compare the scanned text and their answer and assess their work.

Consistently since *Kihlberg* the Supreme Court has upheld as conclusive on both parties decisions made under finality clauses of government contracts by applying to such contracts the same principles as are applied to contracts between private persons. Decisions under finality clauses of government contracts have been upheld, regardless of whether the decision was on a simple question of fact, such as the mileage between two points, or a decision calling for the application of expert knowledge and experience, such as an appraisal or accounting determination, or a complicated mixed question of law and facts, such as the interpretations of contract specifications. Before any appeal boards were ever established, the Supreme Court upheld decisions under finality clauses regardless of whether made on-the-spot by the government officer directly involved in the dispute without any right of appeal or made by a higher level review or appellate authority. The conclusive effect of such decisions did not turn on the independence, impartiality or disinterestedness of the government officer who made the decision, the opportunity of the contractor to present evidence in support of his position, or what evidence the officer making the decision had to support his decision.

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How many errors did you find?

How would you rate the quality of the other worker's work?

Very low

Low

Fair

High

Very high

Appendix Section 4a: Seventh Page at External Host—Sharing Bonus (Split—Treatment Group 1 (Control))

You and the worker whose work you have just graded will receive a bonus. You will determine how the bonus is divided.

How much of a 50-cent bonus would you like to share with the other worker?

Appendix Section 4b: Seventh Page at External Host—Sharing Bonus (Peer Average Split—Treatment Group 2)

You and the worker whose work you have just graded will receive a bonus. For accuracy, two other people have also graded the worker's assignment. Each grader will propose how to share a 50-cent bonus with the worker. We will average your evaluations and distribute the bonus accordingly.

How much of a 50-cent bonus would you like to share with the other worker?

Appendix Section 4c: Seventh Page at External Host—Sharing Bonus (Peer Random Split—Treatment Group 3)

You and the worker whose work you have just graded will receive a bonus. For accuracy, two other people have also graded the worker's assignment. Each grader will propose how to share a 50-cent bonus with the worker. One of your proposed splits will be chosen at random to be implemented.

How much of a 50-cent bonus would you like to share with the other worker?

Appendix Section 4d: Seventh Page at External Host—Sharing Bonus (Computer Random Split—Treatment Group 4)

You and the worker whose work you have just graded will receive a bonus. You will propose a split of the 50-cent bonus. Your work helps us validate a new computer grading program that is still rough. There is a $2/3$ probability that the program's proposed split will be implemented instead of your proposal.

How much of a 50-cent bonus would you like to share with the other worker?

Appendix Section 4e: Seventh Page at External Host—Sharing Bonus (Computer Modification—Treatment Group 5)

You and the worker whose work you have just graded will receive a bonus. You will propose a split of the 50-cent bonus. Your work helps us validate a new computer grading program that is still rough. The program will modify your proposed split, which will then be implemented.

How much of a 50-cent bonus would you like to share with the other worker?

Appendix Section 5: Seventeenth Page at External Host—Demographic Survey

What is your gender?

What is your age?

What country do you live in?

How much do you respect:

Your parents, the police, your boss/supervisor at work?

Not at all

Not much

Some

A little

A lot

What is your religion?

How often do you attend religious services? (answers may be approximate)

- Never
- Once a year
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Multiple times a week

Please click on this link to get your completion code (it will open as a new window):

Enter the code below AND on the Mechanical Turk website.

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