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Review

Reluctant altruism: Underlying mechanisms and global variations

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Altruistic decisions are central to civic engagement and humanitarian efforts. However, altruistic behavior is often context-dependent rather than consistent—the same individuals who act generously in one situation may behave selfishly in another. Here, we review research on this phenomenon, which we label *reluctant altruism*. We outline its various forms, from willful ignorance to the strategic avoidance of morally challenging decisions. We examine three key psychological drivers of reluctant altruism: (i) cognitive inattentiveness, (ii) guilt and self-image concerns, and (iii) shame and social-image concerns. We also review cross-cultural findings, highlighting robust evidence for willful ignorance across nations. Taken together, this literature offers a cautiously optimistic outlook: by thoughtfully designing decision-making environments, we can encourage reluctant individuals to act altruistically.

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With increasing governmental financial cuts, various humanitarian programs are under stress. Organizations like Gavi—providing vaccines to poor communities to prevent the spread of deadly diseases—or USAID—supporting the livelihood of people in some of the world's most vulnerable regions—are struggling [1]. Charities and particularly citizens are stepping up to fill this gap. US Americans alone have donated $3740.40 billion to charity in 2023 [2]. Given the potential of citizen contributions to sustain critical funding for humanitarian aid, understanding when and why people act altruistically is essential.

Cain, Dana, and Newman highlighted that altruistic choices—personal sacrifices made for the benefit of others [3]—can take two forms [4]. While *giving* refers to the genuine desire to increase the wellbeing of others [5], *giving in* refers to altruistic behaviors that are driven by image concerns—the desire to view oneself [6–8] or be viewed by others [9–11] in a positive light. When people give only due to internal or external pressures, they may behave altruistically in some environments but selfishly in others. Such inconsistency in altruistic behavior, which we label *reluctant altruism*, hinders the stability and development of a truly engaged, civic society.

Reluctant altruism through the lens of willful ignorance

Why do consumers, while declaring great concern for the protection of rainforests, ignore information about how the products they purchase are sourced [12]? Why do people avoid learning how much their friends donated to a charity campaign [13*]? Why do people sometimes seek, rather than resolve, uncertainty about the consequences of their actions for others? Such *willful ignorance* is a behavioral strategy that exemplifies reluctant altruism and sheds light on its underlying motives.

Studying the phenomenon, Dana and colleagues [14] introduced a paradigm in which decision-makers choose between a selfish and an altruistic option, that determine their own and a recipient's payoffs. In the full information condition, participants are fully informed of the payoffs associated with each option. In the hidden information condition, the recipient's payoffs are initially hidden but can easily be revealed (Figure 1).

If all participants who make altruistic choices in the full information condition have the intention to *give*, the level of altruistic choices in the hidden information condition should not change. That is, a person who is motivated to *give* should (a) choose the altruistic option in the full information condition and (b) reveal the (hidden yet important) information about the recipient's payoffs in order to choose altruistically in the

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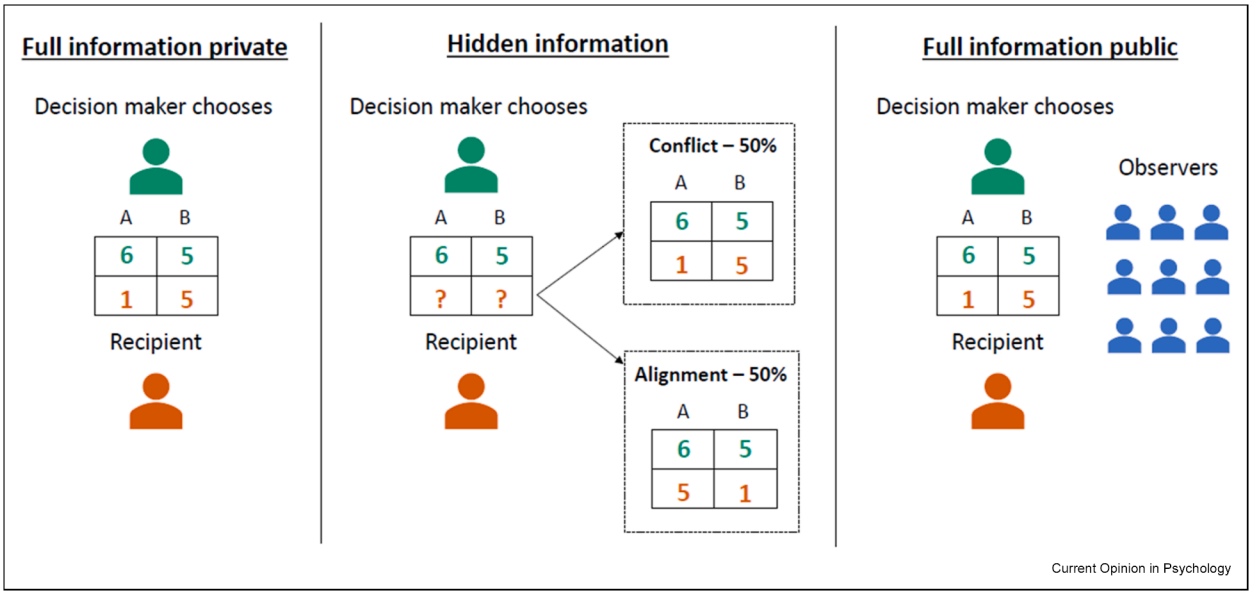
Figure 1



The Original Willful Ignorance Paradigm [14] and the Full Information Public Condition [15].
Note. The green numbers represent payoffs for the decision-maker, and the orange numbers represent the payoffs for an anonymous recipient. The two possible states of the world—conflict and alignment—have equal likelihoods of occurring in the hidden information condition. The state of conflict demonstrates a conflicting scenario, where option A maximizes the profits for self, at the expense of the recipient. The state of alignment on the right demonstrates a nonconflicting scenario, where option A maximizes the profits for both parties. Without getting additional information, decision makers only see the question marks that represent the recipient's payoffs. In the full information public condition, the decision maker's choice is publicized online under a pseudonym that can be observed by other participants.

hidden information condition. A person who *gives in*, however, will choose the altruistic option when given full information, but remain willfully ignorant to make the selfish choice when possible.

A recent meta-analysis (N = 6531) showed strong evidence of people giving in. Forty percent of participants across 22 studies willfully ignored information, and the level of altruistic choices dropped by 16 percentage points in the hidden compared to the full information condition [6**]. This finding provides a refined understanding of human altruism. Past research on altruism has extensively relied on self-reports [16,17], measures of social value orientation [18,19], or simple experiments [18,20–22]—all of which have one thing in common: they measure altruism in the full information setting. The significant impact of a minor uncertainty in the environment on altruistic choices suggests that much apparently altruistic behavior observed when people have full information is in fact reluctantly committed, that is, a result of *giving in*.

Underlying motives of reluctant altruism

Why do people engage in reluctant altruism, such that they behave altruistically in one setting but selfishly in another? Below, we discuss the empirical evidence for three possible mechanisms.

Cognitive inattentiveness

One stream of research suggests that people are simply inattentive to the demands of the situation, leading them to act in their self-interest without any ulterior motive. Exley and Kessler, for instance, found that participants avoid information about others' payoffs, even when their decision did not affect their own earnings [23]. Grossman showed that when participants had to request ignorance rather than information, the level of ignorance dropped substantially [24]. Vu and colleagues found that when there was a default setting, that is, either the selfish or the altruistic option would be chosen automatically for participants if they did not choose within a time limit, 25 percent of participants simply stuck to the default option [25*]. At first glance, these results suggest that lowering the effort to acquire information has a sizable impact on the level of ignorance, and many participants just choose the simplest course of action.

Guilt and self-image concern

Another stream of evidence, however, indicates that reluctant altruism in general and willful ignorance in particular is partly a strategic behavior. In this view, willful ignorance allows individuals to behave in self-serving ways, while avoiding guilt and preserving their self-image as an altruistic person. Meta-analytic results

of the willful ignorance paradigm showed that participants who actively sought information regarding the recipient's payoff gave more than those who were given full information by default [6**]. These people *give*: they acquired information and made a decision that benefited the recipient at a cost to themselves. The two key meta-analytic results—(i) people are less altruistic on average when they can avoid information but (ii) people who acquire information are more altruistic than those receiving information by default—suggest that information seeking is motivated by the desire to do right. By the same token, it also means choosing ignorance has value for people who need an excuse to be selfish. These results are consistent with the theoretical account that ignorance is driven by the desire to shield oneself from one's own judgment, and cognitive inattentiveness *alone* cannot be the only driver of willful ignorance.

Studies departing from the willful ignorance paradigm provide further evidence of self-image concerns driving reluctant altruism. Consider the case of people recycling their cans and bottles to get their deposit back. Some may convince themselves that beyond the monetary benefits, they recycle to protect the environment. Yet, in a study where the recycling machine offered the opportunity to donate the deposit to charities, recycling behaviors declined [26]. The potential donation request led people to avoid recycling altogether, suggesting they did not want to face the dilemma of whether to give up their money when asked by a recycling machine—an insentient object. In another experiment, Vu and colleagues found that selfish defaults serve to alleviate the guilt associated with donating less—much like the uncertainty provided in the willful ignorance paradigm does. Interestingly, people with a prosocial value orientation were the most likely to let the default settings dictate their choice. That is, for the same set of choices, they change their choice from altruistic to selfish depending on the default setting, suggesting their prosocial tendencies are context-dependent [25*]. In another experiment, researchers found people to willfully ignore instances of unfairness to avoid the responsibility of altruistic punishment. When forced to observe unfairness, however, those who typically avoid witnessing such instances were inclined to apply punishment [27*].

Shame and social reputation

Can shame or the fear of damaging one's social reputation drive reluctant altruism? Whereas guilt tracks how an individual behaves in relation to their own moral compass in private settings [28,29], shame tracks social devaluation in others' eyes in public settings [30–33]. A meta-analysis of 117 studies (N = 788,164) suggests that others' judgments indeed have a small but positive effect on altruistic behaviors [34]. People donated more to charity when they knew their donation would be visible to a peer compared to when it was kept private [35]. But the presence of others not only increases altruistic behaviors; it also increases the motivation to avoid situations where one is pressured to act altruistically in front of others. A field experiment found that shoppers avoided a shopping mall's entrance where they could see fundraisers asking for donations [21]. When given the option, people requested solicitors to "do not disturb" them with fundraising requests [11]. When participants had to split $10 with a recipient in a dictator game and could choose to exit the game for $9, 40 % exited—taking $9 instead of the full $10 just to prevent the recipient from knowing the game existed. When the recipient could receive money (if any) but were unaware they were a part of the dictator game, however, virtually no dictators exited [36]. In sum, these studies illustrate that the presence of others and their ability to pass judgment can lead people to give in.

Global variation in guilt-driven vs. shame-driven reluctant altruism

Recent studies have examined the robustness of guilt-driven altruism in anonymous settings and shame-driven altruism in public settings across different cultural contexts. In a cross-national decision-making experiment, Molho and colleagues implemented the willful ignorance paradigm and further assessed the importance of guilt over shame at the individual and country levels [15**]. This within-subjects experiment was the first to demonstrate the inconsistency in altruistic behaviors across different settings among a diverse sample of 7978 individuals from 20 countries. Results revealed that willful ignorance is globally prevalent, with an average altruism gap of 20 percentage points between the full and hidden information conditions. Further, the authors found that the more guilt-prone (over shame-prone) the participants were, the more likely they were to choose altruistically in all conditions. Interestingly, guilt-prone individuals also demonstrated larger altruism gaps between the full and hidden information conditions, suggesting that while they were generally more altruistic, their giving was also more context-dependent and reluctantly altruistic. The researchers did not find country-level differences in the relative importance of guilt versus shame to moderate altruistic behavior across conditions.

Turning to shame-driven altruism, an experiment in 42 nations by Romano and colleagues [37] found people to cooperate more when their decision was publicized among other participants in the study, compared to when it was kept private. Molho and colleagues used a similar full information public condition in their 20-nation experiment, where donation decisions were publicized online and were accessible by all. However, publicizing participants' decisions had a negligible

effect on donations in their study [15**]. These contrasting findings further illustrate the context-dependent nature of shame-driven altruism, and suggest that a fruitful direction for future research is to clarify the conditions under which observability influences (reluctantly) altruistic behavior.

The situational and personal nature of altruism: concluding remarks

Overall, the research we reviewed here suggests that reluctant altruism represents a fundamental aspect of human social behavior and is shaped both by internal psychological mechanisms and external social factors. The evidence points to reluctant altruism being guilt-driven. While guilt motivates people to behave altruistically [28,38–40], providing individuals with the opportunity to alleviate the anticipated guilt associated with selfish decisions drastically reduces the level of altruistic decisions.[1] Shame and social reputation, on the other hand, have a smaller impact on altruism especially when the presence of others is not clearly salient and the potential judgment remains abstract [34]. Recent evidence indeed shows that personal norms (constructed of one's personal moral values) are more predictive of altruistic behaviors in both private and public settings, while social norms (constructed of societal standards) are only predictive of altruistic behaviors in public settings [42*].

The consistent pattern of willful ignorance across cultures points to the possibility of a distinct individual type—reluctant altruists—whose altruistic behaviors vary across different situations. More research is needed to validate the existence of this type, for example, by testing how people's choices in an experiment correlate with their behavior in real-world settings. The null effect of the importance of guilt at the country-level in moderating altruistic behavior is also intriguing. Future research should investigate the socio-ecological, cultural, and institutional factors that may underlie variations in guilt-driven, reluctant altruism. Kin-based institutions [43], cultural logics of dignity, face, or honor [44], and cultural tightness versus looseness [45] can shape a culture's moral system and influence the extent to which guilt shapes altruistic behavior within a society.

While human altruism is not absolute, there is an optimistic outlook: the reviewed research shows that human altruism can be nurtured and supported—not by expecting perfection—but by shaping contexts where altruistic actions become the intuitive choice. The reviewed evidence sheds light on the many possibilities we can seize to design environments that encourage altruistic behaviors for the betterment of all, such as how to design effective charitable appeals [13*,46] and public policy interventions [25*]. Strategies such as increasing transparency of impact, increasing the observability of behaviors (especially among relevant audiences), and reducing the costs of altruistic choices through mechanisms like defaults and subsidies can encourage altruistic behavior. By acknowledging the sensitive situational and personal nature of human altruism, we can develop structural solutions that empower individuals to act more generously and foster stronger, more compassionate societies.

[1] Grossman & Van der Weele provided proof that even when self-chosen ignorance slightly reduces the agent's positive self-image, it is still the preferred strategy as people can claim to themselves that they could have acted virtuously have they had full information [41].

Credit author statement

1 Linh Vu: Conceptualization; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing; Visualization
2 Catherine Molho: Conceptualization; Writing – Review & Editing

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

6. This paper presents the first meta-analysis on willful ignorance, providing empirical evidence that willful ignorance is at least partially driven by self-image concerns and that seemingly altruistic behavior may not reflect a true concern for others.

13. This field experiment demonstrates that seeing how much a peer has donated to charity has a positive effect on giving which promotes charity giving among potential donors. Nonetheless, many donors choose to avoid such information, reducing the giving rate by 3.7%–4.7%, which translates to a reduction of 7.7% in the total donation amount.

15. This paper is the first to implement the willful ignorance paradigm within-subjects on a culturally diverse sample from 20 different nations and provides empirical evidence that willful ignorance is prevalent worldwide. It further shows that guilt-prone individuals are generally more altruistic, but their altruistic behaviors were also more context-dependent and reluctantly performed.

25. This empirical study demonstrates that defaults are a good tool to promote altruistic behaviours, even when controlling for participants' social preferences. It further shows that people with a prosocial value orientation are the most likely to let the default settings dictate their choice, indicating that their prosocial tendency is context-dependent.

27. This empirical study cleanly disentangles two groups of people: (1) those who do not want to observe unfairness and (2) those who avoid observing unfairness to escape the responsibility of administering third-party punishment. Results from this study suggest that the level of third-party punishment found in previous studies is possibly elevated due to the lack of opportunities for people avoid witnessing unfairness.

42. This empirical study demonstrates that personal norms are distinct from social norms, and they are highly predictive of altruistic behaviors across various games and settings, even when controlling for the effects of social norms.