



Persuasion, psychology and public choice

Michael C. Munger

Duke University, Department of Political Science and Department of Economics, Durham, NC 27708, United States

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ABSTRACT

There has been a division of labor in the “behavioral sciences”. This is perhaps most striking in two of the largest behavioral disciplines, economics and psychology. Since 1990, a number of economists have crossed this boundary. But James Buchanan was one of the first economists to take the problem of moral intuitions and the origins of preferences seriously, and to treat them analytically.

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Persuasion is the use of reasons or arguments to affect the views of another person. There has been a division of labor in the “behavioral sciences” in addressing the problem of susceptibility to persuasion. This is perhaps most striking in two of the largest behavioral disciplines, economics and psychology. Economics’ central focus is on what people would think and do if their motivations were egoistic and if the level of information they had was extensive and accurate.¹ Economics, then, is primarily a science of choice and allocation. Empirical tests have largely been based on sample means, with deviations from predicted behavior being explained by idiosyncratic factors or isolated mistakes, while preserving the overall features of “rational choice”. For economists, persuasion is based on exposure to new information.

Psychology, particularly in its most directly comparable form – social or *political* psychology – has focused on how people think, or explain themselves, if their actions were based on attitudes and values. Psychology, then, is primarily a science of action and observation. Empirical tests have largely been based on controlled experiments, with observed differences attributable to treatment effects because of the statistical power of random initial division among treatment and control groups. For psychologists, persuasion is based on adoption of new attitudes, either displacing a contradictory attitude or somehow “explaining” how the new attitude is consistent.

James Buchanan has suggested that a third category of persuasion, connected to moral philosophy, be considered. This view of persuasion takes the form expanding or replacing deeply held moral beliefs in response to exposure to new moral arguments about right action and the good society. For decades, he was almost alone in this emphasis, among economists

E-mail address: mcmunger@gmail.com

¹ It is easy to find counterexamples, of course. Economists have also examined the problem of limited or asymmetric information, and more complex motivations. I am pointing to the central tendency, rather than the entire distribution of work.

at least. In the last two decades, a number of other economists have considered the importance of moral intuitions, beliefs, and “mental models”.²

In this essay, I will lay out some of the implications of the psychological viewpoint, including some important recent work in behavioral economics that has taken up both that viewpoint and the empirical testing tool (classical experiments) used by psychologists. Some challenges that this work poses for economics, and public choice, will then be outlined. But then I will turn back to the claim presented above, that James Buchanan consistently made claims about the importance of a different kind of persuasion, one that is more fundamental than the behavioral claims have assailed to date, and one that more scholars should now turn to study.

1. Persuasion

Some of the disagreement among economists, psychologists, and public choice theorists has to do with the domain-specific nature of their investigations. Economists focus largely on consumer choices, investments by entrepreneurs, and location and human capital acquisition decisions by workers. In these contexts, what is likely to cause someone to be “persuaded” is new information: I thought auto A got better mileage than auto B, but this new report shows that I was wrong.

Since the 1950s, political science has been strongly influenced by two new (to political science) approaches: Rational Choice Theory (RCT), derived from economics, but developed into a separate subdiscipline. (2) Psychological Behavioral Theory (PBT), derived from psychology, but with its own set of questions, explanations, and empirical regularities.

RCT has focused largely on institutions, interest groups, and elite behavior, though some attempts have been made to explain individual behavior, such as voting in mass elections. PBT, it is fair to say, has dominated political science work on mass behavior and communication. It is useful to examine the foundations of each of these briefly, before considering their contributions and conflicts.

2. Rational choice theory

RCT involves “the combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences used relentlessly and unflinchingly” (Becker, 1986: 110). The approach has been most useful in understanding the role of institutions, particularly market institutions, in analyzing the aggregate consequences of myriad individual human choices. But it has engendered a backlash in political science, in large measure because the work on empirical validation has in the minds of some at least (e.g., Green and Shapiro, 1994) lagged behind the development of theory.³

There are four assumptions that underpin most RCT. While not all rational models make all four assumptions, most theorists do invoke three or more of the assumptions either implicitly or explicitly.

1. Preferences are *complete*: All bundles of goods and outcomes (even outcomes that imply different futures), can be compared. In any pairwise comparison, the citizen either prefers one alternative or likes both equally. Notice that this latter result, or “indifference”, does not mean the citizen does not know; it means he or she is *sure* that the two alternatives are equally valued.
2. Preferences are internally consistent, or *transitive*: If one alternative A is preferred to B, and B is preferred to C, it must be true that A is preferred to C, even if we have no direct information on the comparison.
3. Preferences are constant over time, or *fixed*. Changes in observed choices result from acquisition of new information or changes in parameter values such as income, the price of the good being considered, or the prices of other goods.
4. Citizens choose among alternatives in such a way as to *maximize* their own satisfaction or utility, with no regard for the welfare of others. This can take three forms: (a) outright egoism, with no interdependence of preferences, (b) a lexicographic ordering, where self-interest comes first, and concern for others may enter as a secondary consideration as long as there is no reduction in utility for the chooser, or (c) a “self” interest where concern for others is part of the utility function directly.

Much of the criticism of rational choice theory has focused on the fourth assumption, that preferences are selfish. Most of these criticisms are beside the point, however, since it is obviously possible to define “self-interest” quite broadly, even altruistically.

What is important to recognize is that “self-interest” has is central for critiques of rational choice theories, but much less so for the theory itself. Many rational choice theorists in political science do not view self-interest to be a crucial assumption, and are perfectly willing to discard it. In any case, narrow self-interest in some theories, such as Olson’s (1965) “logic of

² The contributions since 1990 have been enormous, and varied. But some of the most important works at the turning point were Douglass North (North, 1990; Denzau and North, 1994) and Kuran (1995). Of course, psychologists had been working in this area for decades in many fruitful ways (see, e.g., Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Quattrone and Tversky, 1988). For reviews, see Hogarth and Reder (1987) and Rabin (1998).

³ The Public Choice elements of RCT in political science have been less susceptible to this criticism, because empirical testing is at the center of the Public Choice approach. See for example Crain and Tollison (1990).

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