

Accounting for Social Preferences

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Abstract. Biologists, social scientists, and philosophers debate whether people can be said to have social preferences. Two prominent views are Binmore's reciprocity account via social norms and the view, popular among behavioral economists, that cooperation is best explained via positing of social preferences. This paper explores several hurdles that a theory of social preferences must pass to avoid being either question begging or unexplanatory. Particularly, it explores Binmore's objection that social preferences are vacuous and circular. I argue that Binmore's criticism rests on an ambiguity in the formulation of social preference theory that is easily amended such that social preferences have genuine explanatory capability. Social preferences are shorthand for the proximate psychological mechanisms they characterize. Once this is clarified, the theory can be better evaluated.