

# Selective attention can bias moral learning from consequences

## Introduction

- People pursue maximization strategies in investment and purchasing decisions, but fall short of a maximization mindset in their charitable giving (Baron & Szymanska, 2011).
- Recent experiments have shown that people can learn how to acquire better decision strategies to guide their morality (Maier et al., 2023).

## Method

We employed an experimental paradigm across 6 pre-registered studies (N=8,726; Prolific) using the following redacted social dilemma:

You are the CEO of a company endowed with an unexpected additional profit of \$100,000. You could:

1. Invest the extra profit into a pension fund for all employees, including the CEO,
2. Donate the money to the Malaria Consortium: a highly effective and transparent charity.

... Or a combination of both.

We then randomized our participants into one of three manipulations, such as:

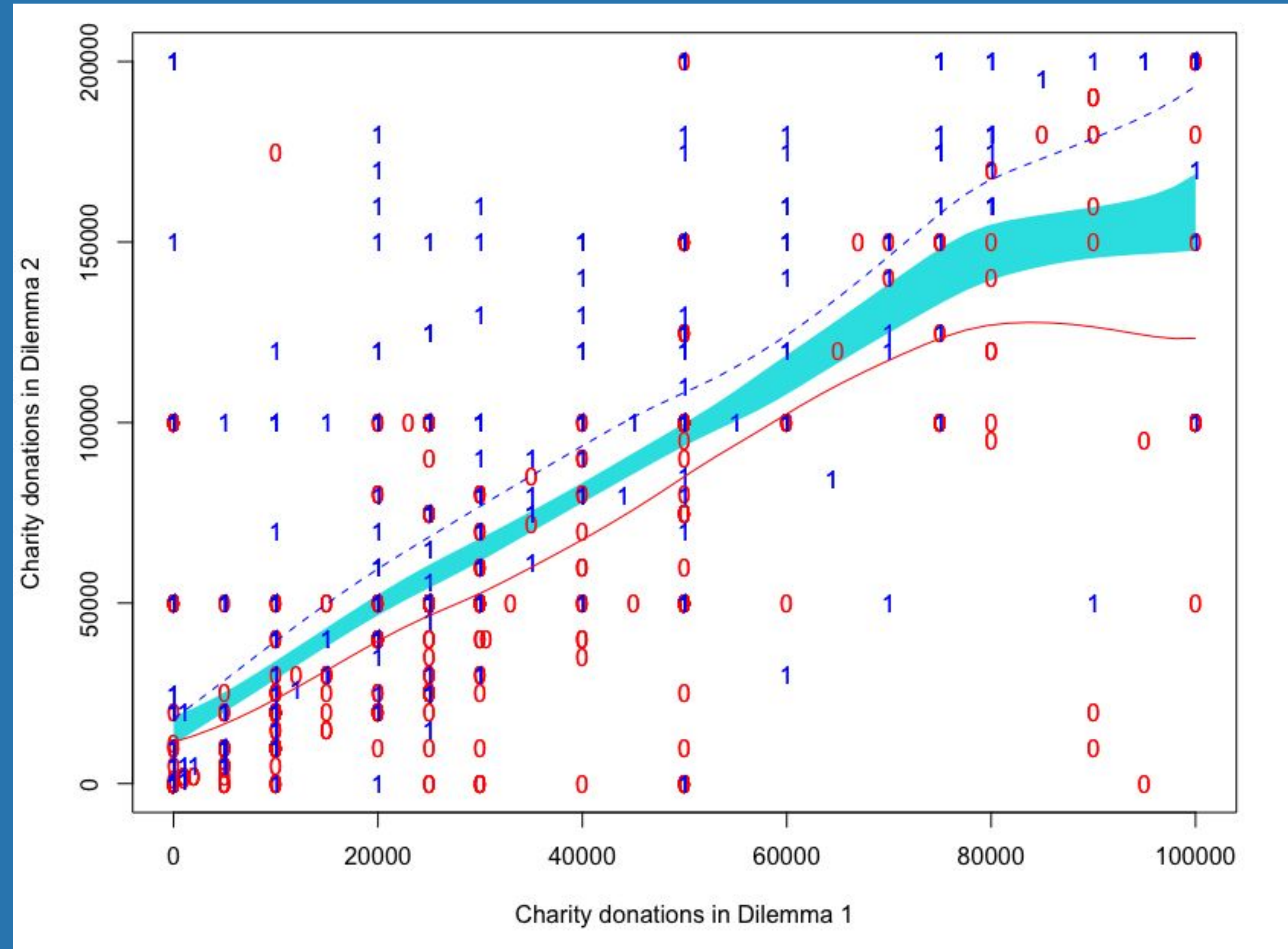
**Outcome-only:** "You and your employees get an additional \$500 per month for a year, adjusted for inflation when you retire. And you, in the name of the company, donated \$50,000 to the highly effective charity."

**Attention-to-Ingroup:** "As a result, you and your employees are able to live somewhat more comfortably in your first year of retirement but not as comfortably as you could have if you had invested all of the profit into the premium pension fund."

**Attention-to-Outgroup:** "As a result, you saved the lives of 10 children from malaria. However, this also means that the charity would have saved 10 more children if you had donated all of the extra profit. Nevertheless, the Malaria Consortium saved more lives than they would have if you did not donate anything."

We then presented them an identical version of the social dilemma with a double endowment of \$200,000.

# Donations increased after shifting attention from an ingroup to a distant and impoverished outgroup beneficiary.



Nonparametric regression curves for donation amounts in the attention-to-ingroup (=0) and attention-to-outgroup (=1) conditions. The shaded area represents the reference band for equality of the two groups ( $p < .001$ ).

## Results

Variable	\$Mdn [IQR]	\$M (\$SD)
<b>Outcome</b>		
Charity in D1	25,000 [10,000-50,000]	29,571.61 (25,355.16)
Pension fund in D1	75,000 [50,000-90,000]	70,428.39 (25,355.16)
Charity in D2	50,000 [20,000-100,000]	60,585.29 (48,649.48)
Pension fund in D2	150,000 [100,000-180,000]	139,414.7 (48,649.48)
<b>Ingroup</b>		
Charity in D1	25,000 [10,000-50,000]	30,048.73 (26,036.6)
Pension fund in D1	75,000 [50,000-90,000]	69,951.27 (26,036.6)
Charity in D2	50,000 [10,000-100,000]	53,454.06 (46,514.33)
Pension fund in D2	150,000 [100,000-190,000]	146,545.9 (46,514.33)
<b>Outgroup</b>		
Charity in D1	25,000 [5,000-50,000]	28,708.37 (25,444.63)
Pension fund in D1	75,000 [50,000-95,000]	71,291.63 (25,444.63)
Charity in D2	70,000 [20,000-100,000]	72,243.93 (55,440.25)
Pension fund in D2	130,000 [100,000-180,000]	127,756.1 (55,440.25)

## Discussion

- Our findings suggest that making people pay attention to the consequences of their past decisions can help them acquire better decision strategies.
- Given the perennial need for resources in poorer countries, and the lower cost of saving lives, we are optimistic that prompting people to reflect on the impacts of their past decisions on distant and impoverished outgroups can help attenuate some of that need.



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