Why Do We Believe in Self-Interest?

International Conference
Thursday, June 13 – Saturday, June 15, 2013
Einstein Forum
Am Neuen Markt 7
14467 Potsdam
Germany
+49 331 271 78 0
http://www.einsteinforum.de
einsteinforum@einsteinforum.de
WHY DO WE BELIEVE IN SELF-INTEREST?

Why does the appeal to self-interest as an explanation for all human behavior remain ubiquitous despite considerable evidence that it is an inadequate lens through which to interpret the world? The appeal to self-interest as the ultimate form of explanation has seen attacks from many directions: within moral and political theory as well as in empirical research in psychology, primatology, economics, and neurobiology. Our aim in this conference is not to join in the chorus, though we agree with the refrain. Rather, we hope to contribute to the debate by understanding why these attacks remain necessary – in other words, why the self-interest model continues to dominate much of academic discourse as well as popular culture today.

For 19th-century readers and writers, it was self-evident that people were moved by all kinds of motives: the wish to behave according to certain ideals and moral codes as well as the wish to secure more narrowly defined forms of well-being. By the late 20th century, there was little reference to mixture: self-interest was the real force, and ipso facto explanatory. The assumption that the bottom line is the bottom line – whether you call it wealth or power – now governs political assumptions, poststructuralist theory, evolutionary psychology, and many interpersonal discussions.
19th-century abolitionists had no doubt that moral discourse was a prime motivating force; by the late 1960s, their texts seemed sentimental and overblown, and were largely replaced by appeals to self-interest and power. When discussing family relations, 19th-century educational manuals reveal a world in which personal happiness was secondary to conceptions of duties; similar material today is focused instead on personal fulfillment. Early 20th-century industrial psychologists worked hard to convince business people to direct their behavior according to particular notions of self-interest; in the 1990s a similar body of material was produced in Russia to accompany the transition from a socialist to a capitalist economy. What assumptions had to be learned, and unlearned, in order to carry out such transformations? These are just a few of the examples that will be discussed and analyzed during the conference by thinkers from the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics, literature, and cultural studies.

By exploring the ways in which consciousness of human motivation has changed since the 19th century, we hope to show that the self-interest model is itself a historically contingent product of particular cultural forces. Our ultimate aim is to undermine the tyranny of the model and hence to contribute to the validation of nonreductive moral discourse.
Breyten Breytenbach

A Cacophony of Selves and a Conflict of Interests

While many scholars touch on the theoretical underpinnings and the historical deployment of self-interest, I will try to track the many selves and interests of the marginal writer and painter in exile, in prison, and beyond up to the alienation that comes with liberation. As seen through the prism of my personal trajectory, self-interest is more one of cohesion, coherence, and integration than the tyranny of self-fulfillment.

Breyten Breytenbach is a distinguished South African poet, painter, novelist, playwright, essayist, and human rights activist. A committed opponent of apartheid, Breytenbach established the resistance group Okhela. In 1975 he was imprisoned for his political activities; he was not released until 1982, after serving two terms of solitary confinement. His most renowned nonfiction work is the four-volume cycle of his South African odyssey, A Season in Paradise (1973), The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist (1983), Return to Paradise (1991), and Dog Heart: A Memoir (1999). Known as one of the finest living poets of the Afrikaans language, Breyten Breytenbach has also written the English-language volumes The Iron Cow Must Sweat (1964), Footscript (1976), and Lady One (2002), a selection of love poems. Breytenbach continues to be a political activist, to which his peace and human rights work at the Gorée Institute in Dakar, Sengal testifies as much as his collection of essays Notes from the Middle World (2009). His paintings portray surreal human and animal figures, many of whom are shown in captivity. He has had solo exhibitions of his artwork in several cities around the world including Johannesburg, Cape Town, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Paris, Brussels, and Edinburgh as well as at the Einstein Forum, Potsdam. He has been honored with numerous literary and art awards, including the APB Prize, the CAN Award (five times), the Allan Paton Award for Literature, the Rapport Prize, the Hertzog Prize, the Jan Campert Award, and the Jacobus van Looy Prize for Literature and Art. Breyten Breytenbach has taught creative writing at the University of Natal, New York University, Princeton University, and the University of Cape Town.
Lorraine Daston

A Short History of How Self-Interest Became Rational

It is striking that even within the heartland of self-interest accounts of human conduct (e.g. in economics, rational choice theory, and those parts of biology dealing with the problem – the designation is telling – of altruism) there has been considerable evolution of just what self-interest means since the late 18th century. These shifts in definitions of self-interest parallel shifts in ideals of rationality, a concept ultimately co-opted lock, stock, and barrel by economists around 1950. In her talk, Lorraine Daston will address this history, with the aim of explaining how what starts as a descriptive term (this is empirically how people do behave) becomes a prescriptive one (this is how people should behave, at least if they aim to be rational).

Lorraine Daston was educated at Harvard and Cambridge University, and has taught history and history of science at several American and German universities, with visiting professorships in Vienna, Paris, and Oxford. Since 1995 she has been Director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, Honorary Professor at the Humboldt University Berlin, and occasional Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago. She has given the Isaiah Berlin Lectures at the University of Oxford (1999), the Tanner Lectures at Harvard University (2002), the West Lectures at Stanford University (2005), and the Humanitas Lecture at the University of Oxford (2013). Two of her books, Classical Probability in the Enlightenment (1988) and Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750 (with Katharine Park, 2001), have been awarded the Pfizer Prize of the History of Science Society for the best book in the field published in English in the previous three years. Recent books include Biographies of Scientific Objects (2000) and the acclaimed Objectivity (with Peter Galison, 2009). Her publications span a wide range of topics, from the history of probability and statistics to the history of wonders, from the history of female intelligence to the history of scientific objectivity. An enduring interest in the history of rationality runs through all of her work: how new forms of argument and proof emerge, develop, and interact with one another in specific cultural contexts.
Robert H. Frank

*The Strategic Role of Moral Emotions*

The dominant theoretical framework in economics and several other disciplines assumes that people are deeply selfish. Yet many people refrain from cheating even when there is no possibility of being detected and punished. Such restraint, which appears driven largely by moral emotions, can be indirectly advantageous because external observers can often make surprisingly accurate character assessments. In situations that require trust, for example, someone believed to be motivated by moral emotions can be an extremely valuable team member.

Is it in somebody’s self-interest to risk his life in order to prove his honor? This is a question that was asked many times starting in the late eighteenth century. Why did men put family life, professional success, and physical integrity second and engage in a potentially deadly mode of conflict management? If we rule out a deeply hidden death wish, what prompted them to behave contrary to what seemed to be their proper self-interest? And why did this seemingly irrational behavior persist right into the early twentieth century? Or, to put it the other way round, why did it stop then?

Ute Frevert is Director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, where she also heads the Centre for the History of Emotions. Between 2003 and 2007 she was Professor of German History at Yale University and previously taught history at the University of Konstanz, the University of Bielefeld, and the Free University Berlin. Her research interests cover the social and cultural history of modern times, gender history, political history, and the history of emotions. In 1998 she was awarded the Leibniz prize of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Her major works include Men of Honour: A Social and Cultural History of the Duel (1991); Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann: Geschlechterdifferenzen in der Moderne (1995); Eurovisionen: Ansichten guter Europäer im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert (2003); A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society (2004); Emotions in History – Lost and Found (2011); Gefühlspolitik: Friedrich II. als Herr über die Herzen? (2012); and, most recently, Vergängliche Gefühle (2013).
Coerced Self-Interest

Consider a model of human behavior that purports to be an accurate representation of reality. When actual behavior fails to live up to that representation, the model's proponents may alter their views – or react with scorn and engage in social engineering. The idea of Soviet Man was one such model; the idea of *homo oeconomicus* is another. In many formerly socialist countries, the ideal of a rational individual in pursuit of his or her self-interest has been imposed in ways that bear some similarity to earlier attempts at forging a socialist national collective. The results include forced autonomization, anomie, and a reversal of the public-private distinction that forces people to downplay their social ties when interacting in a formal setting.

Mischa Gabowitsch is researcher at the Einstein Forum. Born in Moscow in 1977, he holds a B.A. from Oxford University and a Ph.D. in Contemporary History and Area Studies from the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. He was the first Albert Einstein Fellow at the Einstein Forum and, from 2007 to 2010, a Cotsen Postdoctoral Fellow and Lecturer in Sociology at Princeton University’s Society of Fellows in Liberal Arts. His doctoral dissertation (written in French) was entitled *The Specter of Fascism: Russian Nationalism and its Opponents, 1987–2007*. From 2002 to 2006, he edited a Moscow-based journal entitled *Neprikosnovenny zapas: Debates on Politics and Culture*. He was also the founding editor-in-chief of *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* and remains on its advisory board. He is the author of *Putin kaputt!? Russlands neue Protestkultur* (2013), the first scholarly monograph on the 2011 Russian protest movement, and the editor of a collection of articles in Russian titled *The Memory of the War 60 Years Later: Russia, Germany, Europe* (2005).
Konstanty Gebert

*Alternatives to Self-Interest: Fraternity vs. Solidarity?*

It is often assumed that self-interest is but the nobler avatar of greed, and enlightened self-interest, which allows for delaying and sharing gratification, is still not a sufficiently noble motivation. Even fraternity, which makes us support others because they are like us, is nothing better than the expression of Dawkin’s selfish gene in social and political life. But what of solidarity, which makes us support others who are not like us? Looking at some movement and individuals who make explicit reference to solidarity Konstanty Gebert will try to provide some answers.

**Konstanty Gebert** is an author, journalist, lecturer, and political activist based in Poland. In 1976 he graduated from the Department of Psychology at the University of Warsaw. He was a prominent figure in the democratic opposition in the 1970s and 1980s and cofounder of the unofficial Jewish Flying University (1979), the Polish Council of Christians and Jews (1980), and a trade union of the employees in academia, technology, and education that merged with *Solidarnosc* (1980). After the government imposed martial law he wrote and published articles for various underground publications under the pseudonym Dawid Warszawski. Gebert also served as a war correspondent in Bosnia, writing for *Gazeta Wyborcza*. His articles have appeared in a variety of national periodicals and foreign media. He has written numerous books, including a first-hand account of the Polish Round Table negotiations of 1989 as well as books on French policy toward Poland, on the Yugoslav wars, the wars of Israel, Torah commentary and postwar Polish Jewry. Konstanty Gebert is also the founder of *Midrasz*, the first Polish-language Jewish periodical in postcommunist Poland and he frequently appears on Polish television and radio. Konstanty Gebert has lectured in Poland, Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and the U.S.
Stephen Holmes

Self-Interest as Self-Delusion

Remarking that rational-choice theorists (he called them English psychologists) claimed that all human behavior was motivated by rational self-interest, Nietzsche asked what motivated them to make this claim. His answer was not rational self-interest, of course, but rather a desire to make all other human beings seem to be as insipid and colorless as they, the rational-choice theorists, knew themselves to be. The fundamental inadequacy of the rational self-interest postulate, which assumes that all human beings naturally maximize utility, can be exposed most “economically” by drawing attention to four empirical facts about the human mind: human desires are unstable and contradictory (we often want and do not want the same thing at the same time); human beliefs about the world are unstable and often mutually inconsistent; desires irrationally shape beliefs (wishful thinking, fearful thinking); and beliefs irrationally shape desires (we often cease desiring what we are taught to believe is unobtainable). Taken together, these four components of motivation explain human behavior more straightforwardly than convoluted fantasies about the prisoner’s dilemma or attempts to reconcile the self-destructiveness of observed behavior with the empirically implausible hypothesis that human beings are naturally oriented toward benefiting themselves.

**Eva Illouz**

*Making Self-Interest into an Emotion*

As a profession, psychologists have been seen as scientists of the mind, modern-day priests, and shapers of the languages of introspection and self-understanding. Yet this paper shows that psychologists have also been the promoters of rational forms of action. Psychologists who worked inside economic organizations in the 1930s not only scrutinized emotions with a new scientific vocabulary but also promoted the view that grievances between workers and management be formulated and negotiated according to “self-interest.” This paper examines how psychologists made emotions rational.

**Eva Illouz** has been President of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem since 2012. Before that she held the Chair of Sociology and Anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 2004, she delivered the Adorno Lectures in Germany and was a visiting Professor at Princeton University. In 2009 Eva Illouz was Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. She is the author of *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (2000), *The Culture of Capitalism* (in Hebrew, 2002), *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture* (2005), *Cold Intimacies: Emotions in Late Capitalism* (2007), as well as most recently, *Why Love Hurts* (2012). Earlier this year, she received the Anneliese Maier Research Award of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.
The concept of self-interest has always contained a fundamental ambiguity. It emerged in the 18th century, recasting avarice in the neutral language of utility, underwriting a benign if unheroic shopkeeper’s ethos. But it always had a wilder side, encompassing the frenzied speculation and extravagant consumption that were essential to the expansion of capitalism. By the early 20th century, thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic recognized that economic growth required periodic infusions of visceral vitality – what John Maynard Keynes, summarizing several decades of modernist vitalism in 1936, called “animal spirits.” 20th century advertising assimilated vitalism to its creed of insatiable consumption. Yet animal spirits could still remain detached from market discipline, could still promote reckless generosity and serious play. Indeed, the vitalist impulse would prove to be the wild card in the history of self-interest.

T.J. Jackson Lears

The Wild Card: Animal Spirits and the Ambiguities of Self-Interest

James Marentette

*Why’d you do it? Self-Interest and Criminal Law*

Until the early 20th century, criminal law was obsessed with self-interest. It was considered so obvious that an accused person would lie to save himself that he wasn’t even allowed to testify in his own defense. Deterrence was the overwhelming principle of sentencing. Motive was central to criminal investigations and many trials. The rules of evidence, principles of sentencing and investigative practices have all evolved away from that focus on self-interest, and this evolution is considered to have been progressive and enlightened. At the same time though, the criminal courtroom is still one of the few forums in which “I did it because it was good for ME” is a perilous and counterproductive position to take. And then there are the lawyers themselves.

**James Marentette** received his law degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1979 and was called to the bar of Ontario in 1981. He immediately started his own practice in Kitchener-Waterloo, concentrating on the defense of criminal cases. In 1999 he was certified as a specialist in criminal law by the Law Society of Upper Canada, the governing body of lawyers in Ontario. As criminal defense council, Marentette has successfully defended hundreds of clients, including young persons, charged with first and second degree murder, manslaughter, aggravated sexual assault, aggravated assault, assault causing bodily harm, possession, production and trafficking of controlled drugs, robbery, extortion, breaking and entering, theft, fraud, forgery, counterfeiting, perjury, breaching court orders, and almost every other offense in Canada’s Criminal Code.
Christian Scholz

Darwiportunism: Fairness between Darwinistic Companies and Opportunistic Employees

Does self-interest always lead to immoral behavior? If not, what are the alternatives? In approaching the question of self-interest, Christian Scholz proposes a blend of collective Darwinism and individual opportunism he calls Darwiportunism. The combination leads to four different psychological “contracts,” each based on a different theoretical and empirical foundation. Darwiportunism can help understand recent economic developments, both globally and within individual companies.

Christian Scholz studied at the University of Regensburg and at Harvard Business School. He is Professor of Business Administration at Saarland University and Director of its Europe Institute. Scholz is also Honorary Professor of Human Resource Management at the University of Vienna. His research interests include organizational behavior, strategic and international human resource management, changes in the work environment, virtual organizations, and media management. His publications include Human Capital Management (2006), Personalmanagement (2000), Handbuch Medienmanagement (2006) as well as numerous articles in scholarly journals.
Jonathan Shay

War Was the Brain’s Evolutionary Bum’s Rush

Initially, evolutionists struggled to explain altruistic behavior. Mathematical modeling in the 1930s convinced many that the problem goes away if altruism increased the probability that the altruist’s genes were favored in the next generation, even if the altruist perished. Thus the famous quip, “I’ll give my life for two brothers or eight first cousins.” Military self-sacrifice runs through history and across cultures. It is has been regarded as a problem because sacrifice for near kinsmen is negligible, mostly to the benefit of utterly unrelated comrades. Homer’s Iliad paints pictures of self-sacrificial courage on behalf of nonkin. It also formulates Agamemnon's Rule on the genocide of the defeated. Simple mathematical modeling shows how genes supporting military altruism and language could rapidly become entrenched in the population of Homo sapiens by wars among Upper Paleolithic societies averaging no more than 150 souls. Human brain anatomy shows evidence of extreme selective pressure favoring size and complexity. Biologically, world peace has already been achieved. During the Neolithic Era, large societies emerged. No cheers here for war; on the contrary. No biology stands in the way of ending human war.

Jonathan Shay is a clinical psychiatrist whose treatment of combat trauma suffered by Vietnam veterans combined with his interpretations of the ancient accounts of battle described in Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey has contributed to the understanding of warfare’s effects on individuals. He received a B.A. (1963) from Harvard University and a M.D. (1971) and Ph.D. (1972) from the University of Pennsylvania. Since 1987, he has been a staff psychiatrist at the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, Massachusetts. In 2001, Shay served as Visiting Scholar-at-Large at the U.S. Naval War College. From 2004 to 2005, he was Chair of Ethics, Leadership, and Personnel Policy in the Office of the U.S. Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. Shay received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2007, and from 2008 to 2009 he was the General Omar Bradley Chair of Strategic Leadership at the United States Army War College. Selected publications include Action Theory and Ego Psychology: A Model of the Personality (1963), Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character (1995), and Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming (2002).
Homo homini lupus – man is wolf to man – is an old Roman proverb popularized by Thomas Hobbes. Even though it permeates large parts of law, economics, and political science, the proverb fails to do justice to our species’ social nature as well as to wolves, which are among the most gregarious and cooperative animals. For the past quarter century, this cynical view has also been promoted by biologists even though Darwin himself saw things differently. His view that the moral sense is inborn is supported by modern psychology and neuroscience. In this lecture Frans de Waal argues that empathy comes naturally to a great variety of animals, including humans. In his work with monkeys, apes, and elephants, de Waal has found many cases of one individual coming to another’s aid in a fight, putting an arm around a previous victim of attack, or other emotional responses to the distress of others. Using examples from animal social behavior – bonding and alliances, expressions of consolation, conflict resolution, a sense of fairness – he questions the assumption that humans are inherently selfish. Understanding empathy’s survival value in evolution can help build a more just society based on a more accurate view of human nature. Religion may add to a moral society, but as an addition and way to enforce good behavior rather than as its source.

The biologist and ethologist Frans de Waal is recognized worldwide for his work on the social intelligence of primates. Originally from the Netherlands, de Waal studied at the Universities of Nijmegen, Groningen, and Utrecht before moving to the United States, where he is now the C.H. Candler Professor in the Psychology Department at Emory University. He is also Director of the Living Links Center for the Study of Ape and Human Evolution, in Atlanta, Georgia. Frans de Waal is known for his popular books such as Chimpanzee Politics (1982), Bonobo: The Forgotten Ape (1997), Our Inner Ape (2005), The Age of Empathy (2009), and his latest, The Bonobo and the Atheist (2013). His interests include animal cooperation as well as the evolution of morality and justice. He has been elected to the United States National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday, June 13</th>
<th>Friday, June 14</th>
<th>Saturday, June 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 19.00: Susan Neiman | 10.00: Lorraine Daston 
*A Short History of How Self-Interest Became Rational* | 10.00: Mischa Gabowitsch 
*Coerced Self-Interest*
| 19.15: Frans de Waal 
*The Bonobo and the Atheist: Morality, Religion, and Prosocial Primates* | 11.00: Stephen Holmes 
*Self-Interest as Self-Delusion* | 11.00: Jonathan Shay 
*War Was the Brain’s Evolutionary Bum’s Rush*
| 12.30: Ute Frevert 
*The Moral Economy of Dueling* | 12.30: Ute Frevert 
*The Moral Economy of Dueling* | 12.30: James Marentette 
*Why’d you do it? Self-Interest and Criminal Law*
| Break | Break | Break |
| 15.00: Konstanty Gebert 
*Alternatives to Self-Interest: Fraternity vs. Solidarity?* | 15.00: Konstanty Gebert 
*Alternatives to Self-Interest: Fraternity vs. Solidarity?* | 15.00: T.J. Jackson Lears 
*The Wild Card: Animal Spirits and the Ambiguities of Self-Interest*
| 16.00: Christian Scholz 
*Darwiportunism: Fairness between Darwinistic Companies and Opportunistic Employees* | 16.00: Christian Scholz 
*Darwiportunism: Fairness between Darwinistic Companies and Opportunistic Employees* | 17.30: Breyten Breytenbach 
*A Cacophony of Selves and a Conflict of Interests*
| 17.30: Robert H. Frank 
*The Strategic Role of Moral Emotions* | 17.30: Robert H. Frank 
*The Strategic Role of Moral Emotions* | 

Venue: Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin
Venue: Einstein Forum, Potsdam
Venue: Einstein Forum, Potsdam