



# Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions

*Robert H. Frank*

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## **Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions** Robert H. Frank

The idea rests on a simple paradox, namely, that in many situations the conscious pursuit of self-interest is incompatible with its attainment. We are all comfortable with the notion that someone who strives to be spontaneous can never succeed. So too, on brief reflection, will it become apparent that someone who always pursues self-interest is doomed to fail.

## **Passions Within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions Details**

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**Josh Curtis says**

It is rational to be predisposed to behave irrationally.

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**Jerrod says**

Passions Within Reason is a great early example of popular economics. Frank does a superb job of boiling down his insights into plain language (not an achievement to go unremarked). The main thesis is that while emotions may appear irrational (and possibly be a knock against rational choice theory), if averaged over many people, emotions can be seen as commitment mechanisms that allow for mutual cooperation within a population. So we have comments like "if character traits are discernible, in order to appear honest, it may be necessary to be honest" or "A person's reputation is meaningful on the assumption that, given impulse-control problems, people with genuine moral sentiments are better able than others to act in their own self-interest". Frank does a good job in putting forward his theory, but he tries to extend it too far, overinterprets some of the evidence, and doesn't give due weight to rational calculation of weighing costs and benefits of cheating.

The good:

- Only an economist could entitle a section heading "Love as a Solution to the Commitment Problem".
- The story of the elite of New York City hiring nannies from Mormon Utah to take advantage of ingrained honesty norms was quite entertaining.
- The theory is almost certainly true but its implications are more limited than Frank allows.

The not quite as good:

There is a lot to be said for this theory but as a book trying to explain why these emotions are (on net) rational, there are many premises in the argument that are missing. While Frank is cautious to note that it is the individual agent's fitness that matters in selection, he keeps harping on the benefit of trade that is facilitated by the commitments we can keep due to our emotions, and that is a story of societal gain, the invisible hand, etc. Objects of specific emotions differ across cultures but the emotions themselves exist across cultures (this might suggest that it is not emotions, per se, that aid in material gain but the norms that determine the object of emotions). This book would have benefited from the last 3 decades of research in cultural evolution and emergence of norms.

Instead of using the standard prisoner's dilemma, more explicit use of evolutionary game theory (i.e. population games) probably would have made the explication of the thesis a bit more succinct. He continually uses the prisoner dilemma experiments to suggest that individuals care about fairness. But why is it that rejections from Player 2 are considered motivated by fairness considerations rather than spite or envy? Also, this is where a deeper discussion of evolutionary game theory (or just the use of Bayesian equilibria) might be of more use. While it might not be "rational" for player 2 to reject, given Player 1's belief about the population of players, it is rational for Player 1 to offer something closer to 1/2 of the prize than 0 (not because player 1 is irrational and cares about fairness but because player 2 is drawn from a population in which costly spite is a trait). This is consistent with Frank's thesis, but adds a bit more nuance. These types of norms for equality don't always (or even often) lead to mutual gains. His discussion about the unreliability of

game theory to predict cooperation in public goods games fails to distinguish between discrete and continuous public goods. The interpretability of public goods games experiments depend on the exact set up, repetition, etc.

Given the replication crisis in social psychology, I wonder if Frank would put so much weight on the "priming" literature if he wrote the book today. Also, when discussing organ donation as being driven by emotion, Frank would benefit from later research that shows how effective monetary remuneration is in incentivizing donation. Note that Iran, the only country that pays its donors, is the only country without a waiting list for kidney transplants.

Towards the end, his reflections might have benefited from work on the provision of club goods (especially the role of costly sacrifice). Instead of interpreting the provision of housing, social functions, etc. by Japanese firms not as a way of increasing morale (which leads to less turnover), these provisions increase the cost of leaving one's job which leads workers to contribute more to the firm. I am less convinced by his reflections on the implications (though his section proposing more moral education in public schools is intriguing). The taxes and regulation as a solution to the commitment problem in the provision of public goods makes less sense than most public choice explanations of why we have taxes and regulations.

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## **Bob Nichols says**

In the widely accepted model of economic "man," we are thought to behave in such a way to promote our material self-interest. Acting consistently with this definition, Frank states, is rational; acting inconsistently is "inopportunist" and "irrational." But this model, he writes, is "a woefully inadequate description of the way people actually behave" and that is the central message of his book.

Frank sees hard-core altruism – acting without material benefit for the self – as the most direct challenge to the economic man model, though there are other examples (love, sympathy) that also run counter to strictly self-interested behavior. Such other-regarding behavior, Frank states, cannot be explained by the kin selection and reciprocal altruism arguments put forward by evolutionary theorists. Clearly, Frank believes, more is at work than care for immediate kin or for the practical benefits that go along with reciprocal altruism. His task is to explain why one would act counter to one's self-interest (he calls this the "commitment" model). Drawing from evolutionary theory, Frank says we act substantially from passions that pre-dispose us to act in other-regarding ways. Importantly, Frank does not toss out the self-interest model. Rather, he argues that we act from these "non-rational" reasons as well.

I struggled in many places to follow the authors' various lines of thought and believe that clearer arguments have been made, or can be made, to support his central theme about other-regarding motivation. First, in discussing society's role in encouraging cooperative behavior, Frank argues that such behavior must not be premised on material reward, but rather "must be intrinsic to the act itself. Otherwise, a person will lack the necessary motivation to make self-sacrificing choices." Intrinsic motivation gets into a murky theoretical area as the obvious question is, why should one engage in "self-sacrificing" choices? In his discussion of our tribal nature, Darwin says that alone, the individual dies; being within a group, even if one's pure self-interest is submerged, the individual survives and this is why we have a full-suite of other-regarding social emotions (love, sympathy, cooperative disposition, etc.). Evolution might make cooperative behavior seem filled with intrinsic motivation but, still, it all boils down to the individual's self-interest: survival, well-being

and, ultimately, reproduction. And, importantly, with consciousness we can lift that motivation from its embedded status, and make it a proactive, golden rule-like principle: we restrict ourselves and respect others, because it's in our own interest to do so.

Second, economics has limited the term "rational" to material, economic gain. That's an overly constrained definition of this term. From an evolutionary perspective, it's rational to be other-regarding because this promotes the self's well-being, survival and reproduction. There's a direct coordination between these ends and means (i.e., being other-regarding) of behavior. To act this way is "rational," even if it's non-cognitive and motivated by "passions," not "reason." Perhaps this is what is meant by Frank's subtitle, "The strategic role of the emotions."\*

Third, Frank's model allows for both self-interest in the strict sense, and cooperative (self-interest in the broader, evolutionary survival, sense) behavior. These two poles of behavior not only reflect what we see in history and all around us, but they are also consistent with Darwinian variability. We are not one human nature, but rather two (self-regarding, and other-regarding) and everything in between.\*\* As to why both might have survived evolution's selection process, both poles of behavior promote survival. Looking out for one's self-interest by asserting one's power or manipulating and deceiving others has obvious survival advantage. But so too does cooperative behavior (Frank's "strength in numbers argument").

Since the book's publication (1988), Frank's theme has been increasingly referenced, approvingly, by others. The use of Darwinian theory to challenge the economic model of man is the special virtue of this book. Frank's thinking then was fresh. It's still fresh now.

\*I found the book's title and subtitle (and Frank's interchangeable use of passions, emotion and sentiments) confusing. The title might suggest that passions promote other-regarding behavior, whereas reason promotes economic, material gain. Or the title might suggest that reason ("rational" behavior) is infused with passions ("irrational" motivation). This is not clear. An argument could be made, of course, that all behavior is motivated by "passion" or "emotion." Otherwise, why would one care to promote one's self interest, both narrowly and broadly (being social and other-regarding) defined? In other words, passions provide the ends of behavior and reason tells us how to achieve such ends. Seen this way, it's reason, not the "passions," that performs the "strategic role."

\*\*Frank cites modelling evidence to suggest that there's a strong "ecological niche for both self-interested and cooperative behavior that is based on something other than material benefit."

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## Leonardo says

An axiom of economics is that people pursue their interests more or less rationally, and that's what makes markets work—Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of self-interest. But in the 1980s, a few economists began studying psychology and messing up the prevailing models. Leading the way was the Cornell economist Robert Frank, whose 1987 book *Passions Within Reason* analyzed some of the things people do that just don't fit into economic models of pure self-interest—such as tipping in restaurants when far from home, seeking costly revenge, and staying loyal to friends and spouses when better opportunities come along. Frank argued that these behaviors make sense only as products of moral emotions (such as love, shame, vengeance, or guilt), and these moral emotions make sense only as products of evolution. Evolution seems to have made us "strategically irrational" at times for our own good; for example, a person who gets angry when cheated,

and who will pursue vengeance regardless of the cost, earns a reputation that discourages wouldbe cheaters. A person who pursued vengeance only when the benefits outweighed the costs could be cheated with impunity in many situations.

The Happiness Hypothesis Pág.98

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### **Sarah says**

At the time this came out it was virtually the only one of its kind- a book by a modern economist that considered in more than perfunctory way the predominantly non-monetary values by which people live -and which give that life meaning. I haven't read much beyond short articles by him since, and my impression is that he's still stuck in pretty conventional thinking about economics, but well-deserved kudos for thinking about these things at a time when almost no one was.

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### **Syon Bhanot says**

Tremendous book

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### **Dmitry Kuriakov says**

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### **Heather Browning says**

Even though I had to read this for an essay, I found I enjoyed it. Frank's account of emotions as evolved mechanisms for motivating human co-operating makes sense, and his style is simple and readable. Rather than just skipping to the sections relevant to my assignment, I found I read the whole thing through.

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### **Marvin says**

The rationalist model of human behavior states that we do everything due to self interest. Even altruistic behavior exist due to the perception we have that they will serve our self-interests in some way, direct or indirect. This line of reasoning have permeated almost every science including biology, psychology, sociology and economics.

Economist Robert H. Franks questions this idea. How do you explain the person who returns a lost wallet

with money intact or someone who gives anonymously to charity? What about the person who risks his life to save a total stranger? Frank suggests a commitment model saying "that the moving force behind moral behavior lies not in rational analysis but in the emotions." He uses research from many different disciplines to make his case. The suggestion that emotion throughout human evolution had a decisive role in developing our values and being the glue that cements our civilization is certainly a provocative one. Frank's mainly concentrates on how the commitment model works in economics but the ramification goes far beyond economics. A immensely thought-provoking book.

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### **Olga Tsvetkova says**

Excellent book on the deep meaning of emotions and how they serve man on the scale of evolution.

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### **Francisco Andrés says**

Interesting departure of the rational agent paradigm. Because of its Darwinian approach, it gives insights into the source of (some of) our irrationalities in a way that most behavioral economics fails to appreciate.

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### **Tristan says**

This is an excellent book. It's Robert H Frank's attempt to amend the self-interest model of economics by showing how emotions lead us to act in ways that might initially seem irrational, but often make (material & psychological) sense in social contexts. (It was published in 1988, and much of what he writes about has since become trendy).

As he says of seemingly altruistic acts – such as donating bone marrow or giving money to charity – “Traditional attempts to rationalize such behaviors have fallen short. Kin selection is clearly important, and yet many beneficiaries are completely unrelated to their benefactors. Reciprocal altruism and tit-for-tat are also important, but cannot explain cooperation in [various prisoner's dilemmas circumstances]”.

He shows how emotions influence behaviour – often leading to noble behaviour discounted by traditional economists – while still keeping a mind to material incentives.

To distil Frank's message, “Being motivated by emotion is often an advantage. There are many problems that purely self-interested persons simply cannot solve. They cannot make themselves attractive for ventures that require trust. They cannot threaten credibly to walk away from unfair transactions that will increase their wealth. Nor can they deter aggressors when retaliation would be prohibitively costly. Nor can they make credible commitments in intimate personal relationships.”

The themes covered in this book are similar to those covered at the start of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*. However, I find Robert H Frank's exposition much clearer than Parfit's. I'm surprised that it only has 88 ratings - Frank is brilliant and should have a wider audience.

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## Mizrob A. says

Really fascinating book examining the roles of emotions in human decision making (or economic models). First, Robert H. Frank's writing is extremely lucid, now to the review of the theme.

Rationalists, people who think that human behavior is governed by self-interest model, can't adequately explain our cooperative behavior that has no personal benefit to us (like, anonymous donation, risking your life to rescue a stranger from burning building, returning lost wallet to a stranger). Frank's underlying argument is that emotions help to solve commitment problems. And he builds his case from around many disciplines: ecology, evolution, game theory, behavioral science, physiology (I wasn't impressed by this chapter, the evidence is too shaky), neuroscience and psychology.

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## Matt says

A great book on the role of emotions in human behavior. Here are my reading notes.

### # Introduction

Emotions serve as a commitment device. They could be inborn or culturally-acquired but it's important that the people having them be noticeably different (on average).

Character influences behavior, of course, but behavior also influences character. (p18)

> The opportunist's goal is to appear honest while availing himself of every opportunity for personal gain. He wants to seem like a good guy to the people who count, but at the same time to refrain from tipping in distant cities. If character traits are discernible, however, this may not be possible. In order to appear honest, it may be necessary, or at least very helpful, to be honest. (p18)

We have to be careful when we talk about altruistic behavior. Tit-for-tat for example, is not genuinely altruistic behavior. It's reciprocal altruism.

Some theories posit emotions as mediating: as heuristics that allow us to make decisions faster or better. This could potentially explain emotions like fear but it's not sufficient. As the main example, Robert H Frank cites that the winning strategy to solve the prisoner's dilemma is tit-for-tat. It's a very simple strategy that does not seem to necessitate emotions as helpers.

Altruism is a bit of a paradox: it's unclear how it developed by natural selection.

As a good example of where emotions can hinder us (where a self-sacrifice is impossible to explain culturally) is the instinct to seek vengeance. It's a natural instinct that most cultures try to curtail.

So we have a problem. We don't have a good theory of emotions or altruism. The goal of the book is to offer a partial explanation of non-self-serving behavior.

The author sets out commitment problems as problems that can be solved by emotions. Four examples of commitment problems:



- Cheating: how to select partners that will select not to cheat even if self-interest would dictate cheating. How to not appear as a cheater.
- Deterrence: how to appear as someone who would seek retaliation, even if once the deed is done it would be counter to self-interest to pursue vengeance.
- Bargaining: how to appear as someone who would refuse an unfair bargain, even if self-interest would still accept it.
- Marriage: an old-fashioned example on the same model as cheating. How to find a partner that would be willing to commit long-term even if a better potential partner comes along. How to look like that kind of faithful partner.

### # Setting Up A Theory of Moral Sentiments

- Actions are caused by emotions and feelings.
- Rational deliberation is an input into the reward mechanism.
- Emotions can over-power deliberation and vice versa.

Moral sentiments tend to have a social function:

> Moral sentiments could not emerge under the commitment model, however, if there were not substantial economies of scale in social interaction.

There are lots of examples of decisions (e.g. cheating) being made non-rationally. Once we allow for that, it allows for a link between reputation and character. In other words, dishonest people will cheat even though there is a chance they might get caught. When they do get caught, their reputation will be tarnished. There is a link between reputation (a thief!) and character (dishonest).

### # The Matching Law

The matching law discusses the idea that the attractiveness of a reward is inversely proportional to its delay.

There is nothing all that irrational about preferring rewards that will come faster as opposed to rewards that are far away in the future. But a reversal of preferences as demonstrated in the matching law is irrational.

Emotions can be seen as a way to bring future rewards in the present moment:

> Being predisposed to feel anger when wronged helps solve this impulse-control problem. As with feelings of guilt, anger helps shift the relevant future payoffs into the current moment.

Some expressions, like those that accompany anger or fear, are very hard to re-create consciously. This makes it harder to fake some emotions.

### # Moral Development

The author cites Kagan and his theory that morality develops out of simple emotions:

- anxiety
- empathy
- responsibility
- fatigue
- uncertainty

Perhaps these emotions are enough to bring about feelings of guilt and shame.

It looks like behaviorist reinforcement cannot be the only source of moral standards. As other sources of morality, Frank cites an innate sense of empathy, and an innate desire to duplicate the actions of authoritative figures.

When an adult goes to a child, picks up a toy, and performs a series of hard-to-imitate sequences, the child is likely to cry. The sequences are hard to imitate and the child is frustrated.

#### # Fairness

Frank uses the following rough definition of fairness:

> A fair transaction is one in which the surplus is divided (approximately) equally. The transaction becomes increasingly unfair as the division increasingly deviates from equality. (p165)

Frank mentions that his definition of fairness is not complete but that it is simple and useful. It also yields the following prediction, when taken with the commitment model: people will sometimes reject transactions when the surplus is far from being divided equally.

Frank's treatment of fairness is very different from other economists' who consider fairness as irrational or unimportant.

Follows a big section on love that seems to me old-fashioned.

#### # Conclusions

Frank closes with the following four conclusions:

- People often do not behave as predicted by the self-interest model.
- The reason for irrational behavior is not always that people miscalculate.
- Emotion is often an important motive for irrational behavior.
- Being motivated by emotions is often an advantage.

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### **Jim Rossi says**

I read this book as an undergrad at Rutgers, courtesy of another fine author, Prof. Lionel Tiger, and have been grappling with these ideas ever since. Humans DO often act rationally, but our cerebral functions evolved relatively recently and rely on our sub-cortical structures and function. The brain overlaps in structure and function on levels. Rational thought and emotional decisions too overlap. Any theory which fails to account for this evolutionary fact is significantly incomplete. Robert Trivers' work on reciprocal altruism fundamental... Damasio's "Descartes' Error" fascinating as well... Jaak Panksepp's work on brain evolution... he argues that emotions evolved to help match decisions to the correct environment. It can be as simple as fight-flight, or as complex - and social - as guilt to reinforce trust in social situations. Great book.

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