

Eager for Fairness or for Revenge? Altruism and Emotion in Neuroeconomics

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Abstract

In order to understand the human capacity for altruism one requires a proper understanding of how people actually think and feel. This paper addresses the relevance that recent findings in neuroeconomics may have for the philosophical controversy between altruism and egoism, with particular emphasis on the importance of emotion in understanding altruistic motivation. After briefly contextualising and sketching the philosophical controversy, we survey the results of three interesting studies that provide stimulating clues for the debate. We focus our attention particularly on the 2004 study in neuroeconomics by Dominique de Quervain, Urs Fischbacher and colleagues, which contains an argument in favour of psychological egoism. On the basis of an emotional account of decision-making, we show that their analysis of the results – people seek fairness – may be questioned; we propose an alternative interpretation of the data – people seek revenge. Unfortunately, our ‘emotion-directed’ interpretation renders this study far less relevant for the debate over the possibility of psychological altruism than previously expected.

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