

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

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 by de Quervain, Fischbacher et al., 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.

One can distinguish several of debates over altruism depending on what sort of altruism we are looking at. One important debate, over ‘behavioural altruism’, is about showing that ordinary people often fail to behave as the classical economic model would predict. Classical economists’ way of conceiving human beings as rationally self-interested and aiming to maximize profits has recently been powerfully challenged by the experimental economics research field. In a large number of studies, it could be shown that ordinary people violate this paradigm; they are ready to contribute to other’s welfare and to the common good at their own expenses even under circumstances where monetary incentive is at stake (Fehr & Fischbacher 2004). It is worth mentioning that in the context of this socio-economical debate, a behaviour is considered as altruist if it benefits other individuals at some cost for the agent and if the cost can not be compensated in the future. A paradigmatic study case of behavioural altruism is called ‘altruistic punishment’. It consists in a disposition to punish unfair agents even if it is costly and provides neither present nor future material rewards (Fehr & Fischbacher 2005, Fehr & Fischbacher 2003). Experimental economists’ research has immensely improved our understanding of human’s social behaviour and has major impacts on economics and more generally on social sciences.

Now, the behavioural versions of altruism shall not be confused with a psychological or philosophical version of the term. The former focuses strictly on a cost-benefit analysis of behaviours’ outcomes. In contrast, common ‘everyday’ use of the term does not refer to outcomes but to subjective motivations of the agents. This leads us to the philosophical debate over altruism on which this paper focuses.

The traditional debate over the possibility of ‘psychological altruism’ centres on the nature of primary motives. The notion of motive is a broad category that includes different things, such as desires, intentions, or judgments. The *primary* motives – in contrast with the *instrumental* ones – are usually conceived as the starting points of causal chains that lead towards actions. They also are the driving force that last until actions have come about. If a primary motive is directed towards the needs and well-being of other individuals, it earns the label ‘altruistic’. If a primary motive aims at some personal benefit for oneself it is considered ‘self-interested’. ‘Psychological altruism’ is the view according to which at least some actions are motivated by altruistic primary motives. On the contrary, ‘psychological egoism’ denies the possibility of primary altruistic motives. According to this latter view, human actions are always motivated by the expectation of some personal benefit, usually conceived of in terms of pleasure and avoidance of pain.

In this paper, we will survey the results of three interesting studies in experimental economics and neuroeconomics that provide stimulating clues for the philosophical debate over altruism: Fehr and Gächter (2002); de Quervain, Fischbacher et al. (2004); Sanfey, Rilling et al. (2003). These three articles investigate the motivational systems underlying ‘altruistic punishment’ – here understood in the behavioural sense – and there is hope that they provide relevant data for the debate over psychological altruism. Our attention especially focuses on the 2004 study 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 – might be questioned and propose an alternative interpretation of the data – people seek revenge. Unfortunately, our ‘emotion-directed’ interpretation renders the studies discussed in this paper far less relevant for the debate over the possibility of psychological altruism than previously expected.

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