

22. EGOISM (MAINLY PSYCHOLOGICAL)

Psychological Egoism is the thesis that we always act from selfish motives. It holds that all desires are egoistic desires, or else derived egoistic desires. It is a descriptive thesis (i.e. a thesis about how things are, not about how they ought to be). It must be distinguished from the normative claim that we ought only to have egoistic desires (Ethical Egoism).

Mr Lincoln once remarked to a fellow-passenger on an old time mud-coach that all men were prompted by selfishness in doing good. His fellow passenger was antagonizing this position when they were passing over a corduroy bridge that spanned a slough. As they crossed this bridge they espied an old razor-backed sow on the bank making a terrible noise because her pigs had got into the slough and were in danger of drowning. As the old coach began to climb the hill, Mr. Lincoln called out, "Driver can't you stop just a moment?" Then Mr. Lincoln jumped out, ran back and lifted the little pigs out of the mud and water and placed them on the bank. When he returned his companion remarked: "Now Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?" "Why, bless your soul Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see?"

Feinberg, 'Psychological Egoism'

One time, I remember, going into the Strand, a poor and infirm old man craved his alms. He beholding him with eyes of pity and compassion, put his hands in his pocket, and gave him 6d. Said a divine (that is Dr Jasper Mayne) that stood by— 'Would you have done this, if it had not been Christ's command?' 'Yes,' said he. 'Why?' said the other. 'Because,' said he, 'I was in pain to consider the miserable condition of the old man; and now my alms, giving him some relief, doth also ease me.'

John Aubrey, *Brief Lives* (late 17th Century) on Thomas Hobbes

Distinguish further the thesis that psychological egoism is a priori (or necessarily, or analytically) true, from the thesis that it is true a posteriori (or contingently, or synthetically).

A FIRST, AND VERY SIMPLE, A PRIORI ARGUMENT

Premise: Everything I do is motivated by my desire to do that thing
 Conclusion: Therefore everything I do has a selfish motivation.

There is a sense of 'desire' on which the premise here is false (we sometimes do things not because we want to, but because we feel we ought to). But there is also a wider sense of 'desire' in which it is more plausible: whenever we do something there is some concern that leads us to do it. We'll investigate just how plausible this is later. So for now we'll only concern ourselves with whether the argument is valid. (Terminology: an argument is valid iff the conclusion follows from the premises; it is sound iff it is valid and has true premises.) It requires a further premise along the lines of:

To be motivated by one's own desires is to be selfishly motivated.

BUTLER'S RESPONSE

If, because every particular affection is a man's own, and the pleasure arising from its gratification his own pleasure, or pleasure to himself, such particular affection must be called self-love; [then] according to this way of speaking, no creature whatever can possibly act but merely from self-love; and every action and every affection whatever is to be resolved up into this one principle. But then this is not the language of mankind: or if it were, we should want words to express the difference between the principle of an action, proceeding from cool consideration that it will be to my own advantage; and an action, suppose of revenge or of friendship, by which a man runs upon certain ruin, to do evil or good to another. It is manifest the principles of these actions are totally different, and so want different words to be distinguished by.

Bishop Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, (1726) Sermon XI

In short, distinguish:

Being motivated by one's own desires.

Being motivated by a desire for one's own satisfaction.

The contrast is between the origin or location of the desires, and their contents. If egoism were simply a thesis about the location of desire, it would be uninteresting. Moreover, by 'egoistic desire' we don't simply mean a desire that is owned by its owner; and to redefine the term so that it does mean that is just to make the thesis that all desires are egoistic into a trivial analytic truth. The interesting thesis is about the content of our desires. (Three further points to note here: (i) Butler's observation that actions like revenge are typically not egoistic; (ii) it is not even obvious that one will be motivated by all of one's own desires; (iii) there is a difference between satisfying a desire, and getting pleasure from the satisfaction of a desire (the ordinary term 'satisfied' is slippery here).)

WHAT IS THE RELEVANT CONTENT?

1st attempt: an egoistic desire is a desire for one's own pleasure

So psychological egoism becomes the thesis that every desire is a desire for one's own pleasure, or is derived from such a desire. This is the doctrine of psychological hedonism. It has had some support from people such as Hobbes, Bentham, Mill. But it's pretty implausible, certainly as an a priori claim. What should we take pleasure to be? If we just take it to be the satisfaction of our desires, then we seem to be in an ungrounded loop when we say that our only basic desire is the satisfaction of our desires. (Compare: 'The only thing I know is that I know something'; 'The only true sentence is this one'; or consider a group of altruists all of whose only desire is that the others get what they want.) Alternatively we might take pleasure to be a certain sensation (this is what Hobbes and Bentham meant by it). Then we could make sense of the idea that that was all we wanted. But why should we think it is true, either a priori or a posteriori? Don't we often want things (food, fame ...) directly, and not just as ways of getting ourselves pleasurable sensation? Mightn't we even want things knowing that they won't give us pleasure. For instance, can't I want to go to sleep, or be drugged unconscious? Yet successfully attaining these ends exactly precludes me from having a pleasurable sensation. And in general: (i) trying to get pleasure very often doesn't get it (the paradox of hedonism); (ii) pleasure is not always a separate state from the activity that one finds pleasurable:

playing chess for pleasure \neq playing chess and simultaneously having pleasurable sensations (indeed, these might get in the way).

Note that there is a weaker point here, which we shouldn't confuse. The weaker point rests on the idea that if I do what I want, I will get pleasure from it. Perhaps that is typically true. (Though surely not always: consider the cases mentioned above, or even the two year old who expresses a desire for a bowl of hot chilli pickle.) But it is beside the point. The psychological hedonist is saying that all desires are desires for pleasure, not that the satisfaction of desires brings pleasure. With every desire that is satisfied I get a little older, but that doesn't make it a desire to get older.

2nd attempt: an egoistic desire is an I-desire

First step: reformulate all desires as attitudes to propositions. e.g. 'I want an apple' becomes 'I want that I have an apple'; 'I want to see the Matterhorn' becomes 'I want that I see the Matterhorn'. Then the suggestion is that egoistic desires are those that begin 'I want that I ...'. Call these I-desires (the term is from Bernard Williams). Suppose that I want to send money to the starving. Is this an egoistic desire? It depends whether the fundamental state is: 'I desire that I send money to the starving' (in which case it is); or whether it is simply: 'I desire that the starving are sent some money' (in which case it isn't).

Let's return to Lincoln. What is the content of his desire? Feinberg thinks he must really desire the well-being of the pigs; it is incoherent to think otherwise. But that doesn't seem right. Feinberg says that he is not indifferent to them, and of course that is right, since he is moved by their plight. But it could be that he desires to help them simply because their suffering causes him to feel uncomfortable (there is a brute causal connection) and the only way he has to relieve this discomfort is to help them. Then he would, at bottom be moved by an I-desire ('I desire that I no longer feel uncomfortable'), and the desire would be egoistic. Here is a test to see whether the desire is basically an I-desire. Suppose that he could simply have taken a pill that quietened the worry, and so stopped him being uncomfortable; and taking the pill would have been easier than helping the pigs. Would he have taken the pill and left the pigs to their fate? If so, the desire is indeed an I-desire. There is nothing incoherent about this. The point is not that it is impossible that there is a non-I-desire here. It is rather that we cannot know a priori that there is an I-desire at work; and, knowing what Lincoln was like, it is implausible that he would have taken the pill and left the pigs to their fate. We can apply similar tests generally. Whenever it is suggested that an apparently altruistic motivation is really egoistic, since it is under-pinned by an I-desire, imagine a way in which the I-desire could be satisfied without the apparently altruistic desire being satisfied. Would the agent be happy with this? If they would, then it is indeed an egoistic desire. if not, it isn't. (The same goes for malevolent desires.)

Empirical work on this: Batson: empathy is important, but it doesn't seem to work just by making people uncomfortable, so that they move to get rid of their own discomfort. Given a choice between helping, and removing oneself so that one doesn't feel the discomfort any more, the empathetic prefer to help. Could this be because they think they will feel guilty? Probably not; they still prefer to help even if they think that they will forget the whole thing.

PROBLEMS WITH THE I-DESIRE CRITERION

- (i) some desires might be agent-relative without being egoistic (I want my child to do well).
- (ii) some deontological moral motivations might be agent-relative (I want that I don't tell lies).

Perhaps the best way is to characterize egoistic desires negatively: they are those that involve insufficient attention to the needs of others. (By this criterion Robinson Crusoe couldn't have been an egoist.) Perhaps there is no good analysis; a common problem in philosophy.

A POSTERIORI ARGUMENTS FOR EGOISM

- (1) arguments from unconscious motives; Freud etc.
- (2) an arguments from evolutionary biology.

UNCONSCIOUS MOTIVES

Even for Freud it is unclear that the unconscious motives are really egoistic. Contemporary psychology recognizes plenty of unconscious motives. But they are not obviously egoistic. In fact most are too domain specific for notions of egoism and altruism to have much application. Moreover, the more we insist on the importance of unconscious motives, the more skeptical we should be that we can tell by introspection that they are not altruistic.

EVOLUTIONARY ARGUMENTS

There is an argument for thinking that altruists must do worse compared to egoists, and so must in time be eliminated from the population. Assume that egoism and altruism are inherited. (Disregard mutation). We can accept that groups containing more altruists will do better than groups containing fewer, and so will benefit at the cost of those groups. Nonetheless there is an argument that the egoists will do better than the altruists within those groups, and so in time will squeeze them out:

Suppose that altruism benefits the whole population, at a cost to those who practice it. Accept for the sake of argument that the benefit benefits the whole population: indeed even for the altruists themselves it outweighs the cost to them. Still, the net benefit to the egoists will be greater, (since they are paying no costs), and that gives them comparative advantage. Comparative, not absolute, advantage is what matters in a competitive situation. So the egoists will win out in the long-run.

A possible response: Simpson's Paradox. An example based on a real case in the University of California:

Imagine that 90 women and 10 men apply to a department with a 30% acceptance rate. This department does not discriminate and therefore accepts 27 women and 3 men. Another department, with a 60% acceptance rate, receives applications from 10 women and 90 men. This department doesn't discriminate either and therefore accepts 6 women and 54 men.

Considering both departments together, 100 men and 100 women applied, but only 33 women were accepted, compared with 57 men.

Sober and Wilson *Unto Others*

In each subgroup there is no discrimination against women; but in the total group women do less well. (Discussion question: does this constitute de facto discrimination against women?) Could something analogous happen in the competition between egoists and altruists: could it be that in each subgroup egoists do better, but in the total group the proportion of altruists remains stable? For example:

Imagine that a population of 200, equally divided among altruists and egoists, is split into two equal sized groups, the tough group and the soft group. The tough group contains 90 egoists and 10 altruists. As a result of the tough conditions, at the end of the breeding cycle the group has declined so that it only has 90 members, 85 egoists and 5 altruists (the egoists have done comparatively better). The soft group starts with 10 egoists and 90 altruists. As a result of the soft conditions, at the end of the cycle it has grown to contain 110 members, 15 egoists and 95 altruists (the egoists have again done comparatively better). The population still contains 100 altruists and 100 egoists.

Conditions for getting Simpson's paradox effects along these lines:

- (i) there must be isolated groups for breeding;
- (ii) the groups must vary in their proportion of altruists;
- (iii) those with more altruists must have more offspring;
- (iv) the breeding groups must come together again to form a pool from which new breeding groups form; the initial proportions in the breeding groups must be roughly the same in each cycle.

How realistic are these conditions? The most obviously problematic is the last. But perhaps this is not so strange. Imagine people choosing who they want to associate with: everyone wants to associate with altruists, and avoid egoists, and they are fairly good at recognizing each other but not perfect. There is some experimental work that suggests that in some non-human populations Simpson's effects emerge (e.g. Wade's work on tribolium beetles); but it doesn't seem very common.

EMPIRICAL WORK

The prisoners' dilemma. What happens when you iterate? Axelrod's experiment, and the strength of tit-for-tat. Two kinds of reputation effect: that you will cooperate if the other does; that you will not cooperate if the other doesn't. So this can be explained as a form of reciprocal altruism: short-term sacrifice for long-term benefit. The limits to this: doesn't work with large numbers. The typical decline of trust in iterated public goods games. Something more is needed. Strong reciprocity: a readiness to reward altruism and punish egoism in others; and to do this moreover even when there is no long-term benefit to be gained. Prisoners' dilemmas, and their multi-person equivalents, give no real possibility of reward or punishment; one can only withdraw cooperation in general. But other games have different structures, and so are more like real world interactions. Punishment: the ultimatum game. Reward: the trust game. Third party punishment (recall Butler). These tendencies

are stronger when there is a reputation effect. But there is good evidence that people will reward and punish even when this is absent: for instance in single-shot anonymous games. Neurological evidence that we get pleasure from cooperating (Rilling); and that the desire to punish may be driven by emotional factors.

Should an evolutionary explanation be given of this? If so, perhaps it could be explained by Simpson style effects. But it is not obvious that an evolutionary explanation is needed since it seems to be learned behavior. And there is evidence that this is so: it differs across different societies; it is more prevalent in older individuals, or those who have played more games. Of course people need to be of the type that enables them to learn evolutionary behaviour. But maybe that is not something that needs to be explained directly by the benefits conferred on the whole population by altruism. What is really needed is some tendency to conformity. And there might be many reasons why that is selected for.

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