

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

### I. The Thesis of Psychological Egoism

- A. *Hobbes' Statement of Psychological Egoism*: "Of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself" (*Leviathan*, Ch. 14).
- B. *Our Definition of Psychological Egoism*: Whenever a person acts voluntarily, she always performs that action that she believes will maximize her own good and she performs it *because* she believes it will maximize her own good.
  - 1. One common confusion is to think that the psychological egoist is a selfish person. The psychological egoist is the person who accepts the thesis of psychological egoism. That is, it is someone who believes that all human motivation is selfish. If he is right about this, then not only he, but everyone, is equally selfish. If he is wrong, then he may well be no more selfish than anyone else. Don't confuse one who advocates a theory with one of whom the theory seems especially applicable.
- C. *Distinction between Psychological and Ethical Egoism*: Psychological egoism is a descriptive theory of human motivation. It holds that as a matter of psychological law, human beings act only from selfish motives. Ethical egoism is a normative theory holding that the morally right action is that action that maximizes the agent's own good. The two theories are logically independent. That is, one can consistently accept both, neither, or either one without the other.

### II. The Apparent Falsity of Psychological Egoism: Appeals to Apparent Altruism. Critics of psychological egoism begin by citing numerous cases in which the agent's motivation seems to be altruistic. The egoist is ready with replies.

#### A. Responses by the Psychological Egoist:

- 1. *The Appeal to Hidden Motives*: Psychological egoists frequently attempt to appeal to non-obvious selfish motives to explain apparently altruistically motivated actions. Thus, helping others may be motivated by the desire to curry favor with others for some future benefit, or to secure their respect and admiration. Even the sacrifice of one's life for the benefit of others could be motivated by the desire to secure one's place in heaven or to avoid hell. One sort of "hidden motive" deserves special mention:
  - a) *Avoidance of Guilt—Lincoln's Story*: It is sometimes argued that the hidden selfish motive is to avoid guilt or to secure self-esteem.
    - (1) There is a puzzle about this sort of defense of egoism: Why is it that egoists would feel guilt at having ignored the suffering of others or self-esteem at having relieved that suffering?

- (2) There are often more efficient ways to avoid feelings of guilt than to perform the apparently altruistic action. In those cases, the egoist cannot appeal to this sort of explanation.
2. *The Conceptual Argument (as a response to apparent altruism).* What we will call ‘the conceptual argument for psychological egoism’ can also be construed as a reply to the putative cases of altruism. The conceptual argument attempts to show that it follows from the very concept of *voluntary action* that the motivation must be selfish (see III.A. below). Construed as a response to the putative cases of altruistic motivation, it asserts that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the motivation in these cases is selfish.

### III. Arguments for Psychological Egoism

- A. *The Conceptual Argument (as a positive argument for Psychological Egoism).* The idea behind the conceptual argument is that it follows from the mere concept of a voluntary action that the motivation must be selfish. The following are supposed to be synonymous claims that make this explicit.
  1. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, he acts on one of *his* desires.
  2. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, he acts to satisfy one of *his* desires.
  3. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, he acts for the purpose of satisfying one of *his* desires.
  4. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, he aims at the satisfaction of one of *his* desires.
  5. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, the object of his action is the satisfaction of *his own* desire.
  6. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, the object of his action is *his own* satisfaction.
  7. Whenever a person acts voluntarily, his motivation is selfish.
- B. *The Biological Argument: Naïve Darwinism.* Many believe that the Darwinian conception of the survival of the fittest provides grounds for the acceptability of psychological egoism. The idea seems to be that altruism can never enhance reproductive fitness. The individual who is disposed to engage in genuine altruism is always at a disadvantage relative to the clever egoist. Of course, the clever egoist will often act so as to help others or, at least, to appear to do so. But if this is motivated by self interest, it is not an altruistic action.

### IV. The Refutation of Psychological Egoism

- A. *Response to Naïve Darwinism: Evolutionary Arguments for Altruism:* Darwin recognized that if his theory could not explain the occurrence of altruism in both the “brute beasts” and humans, his theory must be rejected. Recent work in evolutionary biology has identified two distinct ways in which behavior that harms the individual may enhance reproductive fitness (in the proper sense).
  1. *Kin Selection:* Individual sacrifice that benefits those with whom the individual is related can increase the likelihood that the individual’s genes will appear in the next generation. Even the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for one’s siblings and children or a sufficient number of other relatives could increase one’s “inclusive fitness”. (Inclusive fitness includes not only one’s own progeny but any in the future generations who share one’s genes, even if they are not descendants.)

- a) It is sometimes thought that this mechanism can only explain altruism toward relatives when, in fact, we observe apparently altruistic actions toward those with whom we are unrelated. Perhaps the most striking example is that of adoption of unrelated children.
  - (1) Since, during the vast span of human evolution, individual humans lived and interacted mostly with others with whom they were likely to have some significant degree of genetic relatedness, the actual mechanism producing kin selection may well be a general tendency to help others with whom one interacts.
- b) Psychological egoists sometimes complain that the sort of actions explained by kin selection, are not truly acts of altruism because they are motivated by the selfish interest of promoting one's genotype. There are several problems with this complaint.
  - (1) It is not plausible to conceive of an interest in promoting one's genotype as a selfish interest. While it could be an interest *of* the self, it is not an interest *in* the self. If an individual sacrifices her life for the purpose of ensuring that her genes are represented in future generations, she values this end more than her own well-being.
  - (2) It is wildly implausible to think that kin selection is effected by our having the desire to ensure that our genes are represented in future generations. (What did our Pleistocene ancestors know of genes? Were evolution to implant in us this desire, we wouldn't have known what to do with it until we understood modern genetics.) Just as reproduction can be ensured without anyone having the desire to reproduce (the desire for sexual intercourse is sufficient), so kin selection can be effected without anyone desiring to promote the occurrence of her genes in future generations.
- 2. *Reciprocal Altruism*: A willingness to incur a relatively small sacrifice for a larger benefit of others can be advantageous to the individual if it increase the likelihood that others will reciprocate. On this insight is based the theory of reciprocal altruism.
  - a) Psychological egoists charge that this is not true altruism. This is just egoism in its most effective guise.
    - (1) The reply by the P.E. confuses the individual's motives with (if we may anthropomorphize a bit) Mother Nature's motives. It may well be that the cause or our direct concern for the well-being of others is that it enhances our inclusive fitness-that Mother Nature makes us altruists because it increase our inclusive fitness. But what Mother Nature makes us is real altruists.
- B. *Response to the Conceptual Argument-the Distinction between the Ownership of a Desire and the Object of It*: The conceptual argument rests on a confusion, first pointed out by Joseph Butler in his *Fifteen Sermons on Human Nature*, between the ownership and the object of a desire. While all voluntary actions may well be motivated by the desires of the agent, this does not entail that all desires have as their object some benefit to the agent. To think otherwise, is to confuse the ownership of a desire with its object.

*C. Response to the Hidden Motives Argument--the Case of the Insane, Sadistic Psychosurgeon*