

Psychological Egoism

by David Johnson

Psychological egoism is the view that the true underlying motive for every voluntary action is to serve the agent's own perceived best interests. This would not necessarily mean that everyone always acts selfishly, however, at least not openly, because acting selfishly runs the risk of provoking the ire of those around you, and could make it difficult to make and keep friends. But as Glaucon and Adeimantus, from Plato's *Republic*, point out, one does not necessarily have to be just in order to receive the benefits of having the reputation for justice. So also here. Sometimes all that may be needed is the appearance of being concerned with the interests of others. The psychological egoist argues that they are just appearances. People do sometimes act to benefit others but only if they believe that doing so serves their own interests most effectively. The focus is always their own interests, any other consideration is only of secondary importance to them.

There are times, though, when people make sacrifices for the benefit of others that would seem to run counter to their personal interests. Consider the example of a woman who found out that she had cancer while pregnant and chose not to receive chemo therapy for fear that it would harm the unborn baby. This would seem to be the very definition of a selfless act, but perhaps she only did it because she was worried about the possible social stigma that would be attached to her if it became known that she had chosen her life and well-being over that of the baby. There could also have been some social benefits, such as having people like me talk about how selfless she is. The psychological egoist would say that it is the benefits that she received (and/or avoiding the harms) that truly motivated her, not benefitting the fetus for its own sake. She may not have even been aware of all of this herself, but she received more pleasure from seemingly sacrificing her own interests to benefit the baby than she would have by the opposite course of action, and that is why she did it.

But imagine a soldier who jumps on a grenade to protect a group of fellow soldiers who are complete strangers to him. What could he possibly be getting out of that? He is dead right after he does it, he is not around to reap any of the potential benefits. Yet even here the psychological egoist believes that he is motivated by self-interest. Perhaps he wanted to win the Medal of Honor and always be remembered as a hero. Or, maybe he did it to avoid the guilt that he would have felt later if he had not acted.

Many examples could be given. Even something small like giving a couple of dollars to a homeless person might seem to be counter to one's personal interests, but the psychological

egoist would explain it by saying that the giver has decided that losing the money is worth it to them to avoid the awkwardness or feelings of guilt that come from not giving; or, maybe they would feel good about themselves for choosing to help. Either way, it would be just like any other purchase. You buy movie tickets or food in exchange for money because you want them more than you want to keep the money, and it would be the same thing here. Essentially one is paying a few dollars to avoid feelings of guilt, and/or to feel good.

Even if the good feeling that one gets from charity work is the only reward, psychological egoists maintain that this is still a benefit to the agent, and must be the underlying reason for the action. However, here I would beg to differ. To me it seems a bit absurd to think that someone's sole motivation for charity is that 'good feeling' because often what is given up, such as money or time, is quite substantial. If all that charity workers were motivated by was to feel good themselves there would be less costly ways of doing it. And it would not really be enough pleasure, in terms of quantity, to motivate one to do altruistic acts. I have yet to meet a person who strongly defends psychological egoism and yet also does a lot of charity work themselves just so that they can have that feeling. Apparently it must not be that good, or they would want to get in on the action too. Unless of course this feeling is unlike other forms of pleasure, such as bodily sensations, and could not be obtained in any other way. But if that is so (and I actually do believe that it is) then we might wonder why. What would make that 'good feeling' different from other kinds of good feelings?

An altruistic person may indeed feel good when they are able to help others, but obtaining that feeling is not their motivation. If it was, then ironically they probably would not get it. Imagine someone volunteering to help out at a soup kitchen and then constantly checking and rechecking their watch, wondering how long it was going to take for the 'good feeling' to arrive. If you were to seek it out that way you probably would not get it because you would be so focused on yourself that you would not be able to lose yourself in service to others. One cannot really get into the spirit of charity that way. If happiness comes from engaging in an activity then directly aiming at happiness is probably not the best way to get it - instead, focusing on the activity would be the best way. When I do a work of art I feel a sense of great satisfaction when it goes well. But my motivation is not to experience the feeling that comes from doing good work, it is to do good work. It would be odd to say that all I was really after was the feeling itself.

Furthermore, if the ultimate goal for acts of service was merely the 'good feeling' that one gets from doing them, then the agent would be willing to do whatever he needed to do in order to have that feeling. If he got the exact same feeling from torturing people instead of helping them that is what he would do. An egoist would place self-interest above all other priorities. If

hundreds of thousands of people had to die to increase the egoist's pleasure by even a tiny bit he would make the trade because his own interests are all that matter to him. But I do not think that anyone who gets that 'good feeling' from service would be willing to sacrifice the well-being of those that they are trying to help in order to get it, which shows that contrary to the egoist, they do care about the interests of others, which is the reason that they got the good feeling from doing service in the first place.

I believe that this 'good feeling' is in fact a byproduct of altruistic actions, not the primary motivation for doing them. In a way, the psychological egoist is confusing cause with effect: they think that the cause of the person's behavior is the 'good feeling', but really this is one of the effects. The cause for the altruistic act is that person A genuinely cares about the welfare of person B, and/or humanity in general, and therefore wishes to advance person B's interests. Person A feels good when they are able to do this because they care about the welfare of person B. The feeling comes only if person A genuinely cares about the other person's well-being.

This feeling differs from other kinds of pleasure and should not be lumped in with them. Suppose there was a man who saw a woman struggling to carry some heavy items into her apartment. If his reason for helping her was to obtain praise and recognition, or money, or sex, then those would clearly be egoistic motivations. It would be morally blameworthy if he deceived her about what he really wanted while outwardly pretending to care about her interests. But if a 'good feeling' was the only benefit that he received, he would not be attempting to use or deceive her in order to obtain it, as with the other rewards. In fact, his primary motivation would not have been the feeling at all, it would have simply been to help her. With the other motivations the focus is upon himself, and what he wants, but in this case, his focus would be on her and her needs.

It is duplicitous to make it appear as though you are motivated by something other than what you really are just so that you can trick the other person into giving you what you really want. Immanuel Kant would describe it as using someone as a mere means, and indeed you are: you are using them to obtain some good for yourself while trying to make it appear as though your motivation is to benefit them. The fact that you must deceive them about your true intent shows that you are using (and seeing) them as a mere means to fulfilling your desires.

There is usually thought to be a distinction between psychological and ethical egoism because the former is merely a descriptive theory of human nature whereas ethical egoism goes further in saying that not only is psychological egoism a fact, but also that there is nothing morally wrong with always pursuing one's own interests. The implication of psychological egoism, though, is

that everyone would be an ethical egoist as well, for if we always do what gives us the most pleasure, and for the sake of obtaining that pleasure, then at bottom we all would behave as ethical egoists. The difference would simply be in what it is that gives us pleasure and how we obtain it. The ethical egoist would openly pursue their own interests with no apologies, but many would find that hiding their true motives would advance their interests better than being open about it, and would therefore be more crafty and subtle about their egoism. They would only be pretending to care about the interests of others because that happens to be what serves their own interests best. It is egoism through subterfuge. There would not in reality be any true Kantians, as no one would ever act solely for the sake of duty, but rather only for the pleasure or personal benefit that they got from doing their duty. There would be no true utilitarians, as nobody would really want to maximize the total net utility for all, that would just be for show. Secretly, we would all just want to maximize utility for ourselves by any means necessary (including pretending to care about maximizing utility for all). Behind the facade, everybody would just be using others and pretending to care about them as a type of game theory strategy in order to get what they really wanted. Perhaps some of us might even trick ourselves into thinking that we cared about others, and not even be fully aware of our true motives, but really, we would all be ethical egoists, although for most, not openly, because being a closet egoist is what would usually serve our interests the best.

When people say 'I'm happy for you' the psychological egoist would have to think that they are lying; the truth would be 'I'm happy for me'. If you and I were friends and you won an award, it would apparently not matter to me that you received a benefit, I would only care about it in relation to how it affected me, because no one would ever really care about others except instrumentally. But then, that begs the question, if psychological egoism is true why is it that people do seem to empathize and commiserate with others even when their own interests are not directly affected by the event? Suppose that a mother is deeply saddened by the news that her daughter's relationship with her boyfriend has ended, and her daughter is very sad because of it. If the mother's life is not directly affected by the news (in other words the daughter is not moving back home, etc.) why would the mother's mood be affected? Psychological egoism cannot adequately account for that. She would have no reason to put on an act if no one else is there. On the other hand, if those feelings were genuine, and were not in some way based upon the mother's self-interest, it shows that some of our thoughts and feelings come from other considerations; and, if that is the case, it is likely that some actions would as well.

You have probably also heard this saying. 'If you love something set it free. If it comes back it's yours. If not, it was never meant to be.' Suppose that you did let someone that you loved go, knowing that they probably would not come back to you. Why? If all that you cared about was

your own interests then I am not sure why it would matter to you whether the other person in the relationship was happy as long as you were. Maybe it would make you unhappy to know that the other person is unhappy, but if that is the case then obviously you must care about the other person's interests as well as your own, which is the opposite of egoism. You would be sacrificing your own perceived best interests (since you want to stay in the relationship and believe that is what would be best for you) so that the person you love can pursue their perceived best interests. Either egoistic behavior must be much broader and more complex than previously supposed, or it would not be correct to classify an act like this as egoism.

Aristotle speaks of three kinds of friendship (between 'equals'), one based upon pleasure, another on utility, and the highest is based upon mutual goodness. If one is loved because of the pleasure that they provide, such as making others laugh, only the person's attribute of wittiness is loved; similarly, if one is loved for utility they are only cared about in so far as they provide some benefit. The friendship is dissolved if either party does not continue to show the same qualities that made them useful or pleasant to the other to begin with. Aristotle says that such attributes are 'accidental', meaning non-essential, so they can and do change with time and according to the circumstances. Thus, relationships based only upon these qualities tend to be impermanent and rather superficial. Psychological egoists would never get beyond these first two, and in fact, they would argue that no one else ever does either. Aristotle acknowledges that this third form, the one based upon goodness, is rare. This is for two reasons: 1) unlike the other forms of friendship, here both parties must be morally good people; in fact, Aristotle says that between friends of this type, there is no need for justice, or really that this kind of friendship is justice in its fullest sense, presumably because both parties are trustworthy and will each give the other his due, and 2) it takes a long time to build this level of trust; people can be friendly towards one another right from the beginning, but this level of friendship requires several years to build. The relationship will last as long as they both remain good. They are friends in an unqualified sense, not merely instrumentally. The key characteristic of this 'perfect' kind of friendship is that each person desires the good of their friend for the friend's sake; he or she loves the other person for who they are, not for some incidental quality that they possess, which is why it would be impossible if indeed we are all psychological egoists. (See 1156a7-1157b5.)

But aren't there people out there who do have this highest form of friendship with someone? I think I might know a few who do. Christianity asks us to treat everybody that way. (The parable of the Good Samaritan was given in response to the question: Who is my neighbor?) 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' and 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' means that you should not put your interests and desires ahead of the interests and desires of others.

Let's suppose that someone did follow the edict to 'love thy neighbor as thyself' in its fullest possible sense. In that case they would no longer see a distinction between their own interests and the interests of the other person. Altruism and egoism would become fused into one. A man serving his neighbor's interests would also be serving his own because he cares about the welfare of his neighbor as much as his own welfare. His neighbor's interests are his interests. He therefore feels good when something good happens to his neighbor, and bad when his neighbor suffers some misfortune, just as he would if the same thing had happened to him. His own happiness would be inextricably linked to his neighbor's. In some ways this is risky because the more people that your happiness is tied to the greater the likelihood of suffering and misfortune. But I suppose opportunities for joy would increase as well. It is a broadening of self. The other person would be thought of as an extension of you.

The psychological egoist will say: 'Everyone always does what they most want to do, for if it was not what they most wanted to do, they would do something else'. Which seems obviously true, but it does not necessarily prove that all actions are egoistically motivated. If what a person most wanted to do was to advance her neighbor's interests without even thinking about how she would personally benefit, that is not egoism. If she did love her neighbor as herself then benefiting her neighbor would make her happy, but her own happiness was not the motive for acting.

A broadening of scope and a de-emphasis of self is also an important aspect of Hinduism. One is taught to stop seeing things only from one's own limited individual perspective and instead see it from a more universal perspective. If you understood this then you would not be too disappointed if you did not get a job that you had applied for because you would realize that even if it did not work out for you, it is a great opportunity for someone else. Seeing things in this way would give a person more tranquility I think.

There are other cultural examples as well. In Mahayana Buddhism a bodhisattva is a person who is able to reach nirvana but delays doing so in order to save suffering beings. This is Buddhism's ultimate sacrifice. They will wait to enter into that blessed state 'until the grass itself be enlightened.' It would of course take many cycles of rebirth for this to happen, and perhaps the process would never be finished if new souls (jivas) are constantly forming. But the bodhisattva will wait to reach nirvana themselves so that they may assist others along the path, just as the Buddha himself did. They do it not for some personal benefit, as none could compare with

nirvana, but because it is in a bodhisattva's nature to help others; having a compassionate disposition is why they are a bodhisattva.¹

Of course a skeptic would argue that no one is ever really as selfless as these examples illustrate, no matter what they might claim. Since the egoist is only motivated by self-interest, he naturally assumes that everyone else must be as well. The only way he can make sense of altruistic actions at all is to say that the person doing them must be getting some kind of personal benefit out of it because that is the only reason that he himself would have. But generalizations about the motives of others based upon our own thoughts and feelings has limitations. Good people are sometimes a bit naive because they assume that everybody is wired like they are, and since they would never hurt anyone, they assume that other people are the same way. Most thieves assume that everybody else is, or would be a thief too, if they could get away with it, but of course they are wrong. Psychologically, there are a lot of similarities between people, but there are some significant differences too. So even if you personally do not value the interests of others as much as your own, you should not just assume that everyone else is so constituted. The fact that people do act so differently in how they treat others indicates that perhaps they have different motivations.

Sometimes people will try to use the theory of evolution to support psychological egoism. But we have to remember that humans, at least for the most part, are social animals. Bees and ants, who are also social animals, have been known to sacrifice themselves to defend the group. Do we suppose that the underlying motive for this behavior is that the ant wants to be remembered as a hero by their fellow ants, or because they would feel guilty if they did not? I doubt that an ant would even be capable of thoughts like that. It is likely that this behavior is based upon instinct.

You see, for social animals altruism could have evolved right along with egoism. Egoism would help to ensure one's survival and propagation within the group, but altruism assists the survival of the group as a whole. A group's survival is benefited most if all or nearly all group members sincerely buy in. We have all seen times in sports when a less talented team beats a team that has players who are more talented individually but do not work together as well as a unit. If one group of early hominids had members who genuinely cared about the interests of others in their

¹ There is also a story about a Hindu yogi who saw a scorpion fall into the water while he sat meditating along the bank of the Ganges river. He scooped it out, only to have it bite him. The scorpion fell into the river again, and once more the yogi rescued it, only to be bitten again. The sequence repeated itself twice more, and a bystander finally asked the yogi, 'Why do you keep rescuing that scorpion when its only gratitude is to bite you?' The yogi replied: 'It is in the nature of scorpions to bite. It is the nature of yogis to help others when they can'. (Source: *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith.)

group, even to the point of sacrificing their own lives for them, if necessary, it seems likely that they would outcompete a group that was less unified, and would survive and propagate in greater numbers, passing on their empathetic dispositions to future generations. Thus, human behavior would have evolved to serve the group's interests as well as the individual's, which means that altruism is a genetic trait.

Selfless acts, such as risking your life to save another person, are often praised by society, which means that to some extent it is also probably conditioned behavior.² But we ought to consider why the community values it. The group's survival would be best served if each of its members (or at least most of them) had utilitarian inclinations rather than egoistic ones. In fact, the community sometimes demands that the individual put the community first, or she will lose her good standing and may even be punished.

In economics you see some car salesmen succeed by using low pressure sales tactics and being exceptionally honest, while others are successful with dishonesty and using high pressure sales tactics. If the latter is more effective (and apparently it is, judging by how many more car salesmen use that approach) then it will 'reproduce' faster, as those salesmen continue to have success and expand, taking over more market share, and their competitors adapt to what is working. But it is not the case that other strategies entirely die off. Some are still successful using those methods, even if their numbers are smaller. In other words, that approach is still floating around in the 'gene pool' so to speak, and will crop up here and there from time to time.

Contrary to what one might expect, I actually think that altruism would be the more dominant trait because of its usefulness to group survival. But egoistic tendencies are obviously present as well. Psychopaths, for example, are incapable of empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of another) because their brains do not function the same way as other people. We often associate psychopaths with serial killers, but that is only one manifestation of it. Scientists estimate that about one percent of the population are psychopaths, and many others display some psychopathic tendencies, including many prison inmates. In fact, some scientists say that there are four times as many psychopaths working on Wall Street as in other walks of life, which is not actually all that surprising judging by Wall Street's ethics. Why would such tendencies be in the gene pool? Well, unfortunately we are the offspring of rapists and murderers and warmongers

² This could be why the soldier mentioned earlier would feel guilt if he had not jumped on that grenade to save others. Although, I wonder if perhaps the explanation that he acted in order to avoid feeling guilty is wrong altogether. It may simply be an instinctual impulse. He would have less than a second to decide what to do in that particular scenario. It might only be later, long after the fact, that he would begin to feel guilty for not acting, or wish that he could have been regarded as a hero.

(and let's not forget war profiteers), who for hundreds of thousands of generations have been raiding and raping and enslaving their neighbors, passing on their genes to future generations in the process.³

However, being a psychopath could also sometimes be detrimental to an individual's survival and the propagation of their genes within the group. It may be more tolerated and even useful if the aggression is directed outwardly, but if there are no current wars going on other members of society would not be pleased to have such behavior directed at them. It is even labeled 'antisocial'. Now it is true that sometimes leaders that have those tendencies have been able to exercise large influence through violence and intimidation, but it does not always last, and those that are less powerful usually end up dead or in prison. I think civilizations in the ancient world would have disliked and punished such individuals as deviants in much the same way that we often do in modern society. Nobody likes being used or having their rights violated. From the perspective of the rest of society, egoistic behavior is very bad, which is probably why some of the more intelligent egoists try their best to hide their true motivations from others. Even if the behavior does not rise to the level of being criminal, there has to be reciprocity in order to keep working with someone. If you did not believe that they would be there for you when you needed them why would you help them when they need it? If a group finds out that someone is only out for themselves it does not seem like that would be tolerated for very long. I for one would not trust an egoist at all, and would not want to have much to do with them if I could avoid it. I would definitely rather have all of my business dealings with Kantians, and I would guess that just about everybody else would too, as long as they themselves were honest.

All of this helps to explain why there is such a radical disparity in human dispositions. You see everything from war hawks who want to dominate and control everything in the world, to pacifists who wouldn't use violence even to defend themselves or others from the Nazis. Altruistic tendencies are what makes a society possible. But there is also competition within the group, and between groups, which means that from an evolutionary standpoint, egoistic tendencies could also be beneficial in some cases. Most of us would probably have some combination of both. This makes human behavior very complex and at times difficult to predict.

³ There is even a specific gene that has been identified - the so-called 'warrior gene' - although I really hate that name for it. There are many noble and good warriors who only want to protect and defend, and only take life or use violence when they must in order to keep others safe. Many of them have a lot of empathy towards others. In fact, that is what motivates them to fight so hard to defend others. Surely a better name could be found. Maybe something like 'demon gene' would be more appropriate.

Some people, such as psychopaths, would definitely be psychological egoists. But the fact that people have differing levels of empathy shows that they are wired differently. Perhaps there are others on the opposite end of the spectrum from psychopaths who empathize to such an extent that they see little to no distinction between themselves and their own interests and that of others. Perhaps Jesus and the Buddha would be among them.

It also must be admitted that many people do like to trumpet their own good works. They recognize the value that society places upon such actions, and it is obvious that their real motivation for doing them is to benefit themselves. No doubt a great deal of charity work is done with this intent. That seems to be especially true of celebrities, and many big corporations, who basically use it for public relations and advertising. I do not regard these actions very highly because they are not sincere. Whether one is a Christian or not, it would be nice if everyone followed Christ's teaching on the subject from the Sermon on the Mount: 'Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them . . . when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth'.

Despite the frauds, I do think that some people are genuine. Lying would not be effective unless most people told the truth, and I do not think that fake charity would even work unless some were sincere. One should not assume that everyone in the world has ulterior motives and is only pretending to care about other people's interests. I myself tend to be a bit cynical, but that takes it too far. One also should not assume that others are self-deluded, and that they themselves do not even know what their own motivations are. How would you know what their motivations are better than they do?

2018