

III Egoism I: A Priori Issues

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?"

From 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).

Brief Terminological Diversion

- (i) a sentence is *a priori* true if and only if (iff) it can be known independently of experience (contrast: *a posteriori*: can only be known by experience).
- (ii) a sentence is *necessarily* true iff it couldn't be false, i.e. it is true in every possible world (contrast: *contingent*: false in some possible worlds, true in others)
- (iii) a sentence is *analytically* true iff it is true in virtue of its meaning (contrast: *synthetic*: neither true nor false in virtue of its meaning)

Note: these aren't obviously the same. So, for instance, 'Bachelors are unmarried' is analytic, *a priori* and necessary. Statements of arithmetic like ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' are *a priori* and necessary; but it's not obvious that they are analytic. (It's not obvious that it's part of the meaning of ' $2 + 2$ ' that it is equal to 4.) Finally consider a sentence like 'Goldbach's conjecture is true'. Goldbach's conjecture is the conjecture that every even number is the sum of two primes. No one has ever found a counter-example; but no one has ever given a proof. Perhaps the conjecture is true but there is no proof. Then 'Goldbach's conjecture is true' will be necessary; but not *a priori* (since we cannot know that it is true, since we can give no proof of it) and not analytic (otherwise we could give a proof just by paying careful attention to the meanings of the words). Sometimes it is said that if egoism is *a priori* true, it would be trivial and uninteresting; but that is too quick. At most that would follow if it were analytic (though even that is controversial).

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. Here we’ll only concern ourselves with whether the argument is valid. 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 ordinarily 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. (Two further points to note here: (i) Butler’s observation that actions like revenge are typically not egoistic; (ii) 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 (intrinsic v instrumental). 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 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; generous people are typically happier than selfish; q.v. Mauss *et al.* 'Can seeking happiness make people happy?' *Emotion*); (ii) pleasure is not always a separate state from the activity that one finds pleasurable: playing chess for pleasure is not the same as playing chess and simultaneously having pleasurable sensations (indeed, these might get in the way). Cf. Csíkszentmihályi and the idea of 'flow'.

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 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.)

Problems with the I-desire criterion

The problems with the I-desire criterion for egoistic acts:

- (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.