

A CRITIQUE OF THE CLAIMS AND ASSUMPTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Are all of my / your / our actions ‘**selfish**?’

- = Does one / do we all ultimately care only for self – and thus act only to benefit self?
- = Does only one’s own self have intrinsic value?
- = Do we care about others and thus act toward only with reference to our own self-benefit? = Do others only have instrumental value?
- Are all of our actions self-only serving or “selfish”?

“Yes!” = ‘**Psychological Egoism**’

OR, do I / You / We at least sometimes act ‘**unselfishly**?’

- = Do we / can one truly care for another person for their own sake and thus act to benefit other persons - not to benefit self, but simply because they would be benefited?
- = Can / Do others have intrinsic value to us?
- = Are at least some of our actions other-serving or “unselfish”?

“Yes” = ‘**Psychological Altruism**’

Why have many affirmed Psychological Egoism?

1. because we do often act in ‘self-interest’ to benefit self only.
And sometimes this is done with complete disregard and in opposition to / violation of the needs and rights of others. This selfishness is a common and powerful experience and motivation. (But is it the universal and only motivation?)
2. because the **theory of psychological egoism is simple**.
Simplicity is a value in an explanatory theory. All things being equal, the simpler of two theories is preferable (=‘Ockham’s Razor’) - But are all things equal? Does psychological egoism have sufficient, much less accurate explanatory power?
3. because **the theory connects with a cultural ‘cynicism’**
about professed good motives. We tend to be suspicious of those who claim to be acting unselfishly. Too often we have discovered such claims to be false and a covering for selfish behavior.
- [4. ? to excuse / justify personal selfishness: “I cannot help it – everyone is selfish!”?]
5. because of **confused thinking and bad arguments** that are commonly accepted as supporting the claim of psychological egoism. (see the following)

5.A “One always acts from ‘self-interest,’ which is the same as acting ‘selfishly’.”

In the literature and the discussions, it is common to **equate ‘self-interest’ with ‘selfishness.’**

However, there is a **subjective sense** of ‘self interest’ as well as the usual **objective sense** of ‘self-interest.’

- 1) **subjective sense** = I personally-subjectively possess / embrace one or more interests.
As these are **MY** interest(s), they are interest(s) **OF my self.**
But I may possess **interests in the well-being / benefit of others.**
I can have a ‘self-interest’ (subjective sense) to benefit another / others **for their own sake.** This is not selfishness.
- 2) **objective sense** = My own **self-benefit is the only object** of my interest, the only true object / interest that I possess.
I act to benefit my self only. My actions are solely **FOR my self.**
I do not act to benefit another / others. My own benefit-to-self is the goal of my action.

In the subjective sense, It is true that all of one’s action are done from ‘self interest.’
- so much depends upon what sort of person / self one is and what interests one possesses.

In the objective sense, it is not true that all of one’s actions are done for ‘self interest.’

5.B “One always acts with the object / goal of benefiting one’s self.”

This claim is not true.

One **might** act with **some** benefit to one’s self being the result of one’s action.
But there are two possibilities with regard to any such actions:

- 1) **The benefit to my self may be the goal** of my action.
I intended / my motive was to benefit myself only.
- 2) **The benefit to my self may be a by-product** of my action.
My intention / the goal of my actions was to benefit another.
(And perhaps I subsequently feel good about or receive some reward for doing an other-caring, other-benefiting action.
But this does not make the action selfish, as it was not the motive / intended goal of my action.

(What does the psychological egoist expect? That a truly unselfish action could never experience any positive personal repercussions / effects of her actions ? That in order to act unselfishly, one cannot / does not feel self-approval as a consequence of doing good / performing an unselfish act?)

But it may still be claimed that:

“One’s actions are **always** motivated by / always have **the goal** of benefit for one’s self,” therefore “Any benefit to others **is merely a ‘means-to-end’** for **benefiting self.**”

This claim is not justified,

for it seems to me that sometimes my motive / goal is to benefit another,
simply because they would be benefited.

But then the response of the psychological egoist is often:

5.C. “You are mistaken or self-deceived in thinking that your action had the goal of benefiting others - Your REAL motive / goal was to benefit your self.”

James Rachels calls this ‘**the method of re-interpreting motives.**’

(Note that it is not an argument, but an assertion / claim / strategy for defeating the altruist’s claim / argument.)

But this ‘method of re-interpreting motives’ is problematic:

1) What evidence warrants such a claim?

What evidence does the psychological egoist possess supporting their claim as to my “real / true” = “selfish” motive?

2) How could the psychological egoist have any such *evidence that overrides the evidence that I have* (first-hand, introspectively) *as to my real motives and goals*?

Surely I can be mistaken and self-deceived, but how does the psychological egoist justify their claim in any particular instance, much less for all instances? And could not the psychological egoist be the one who is mistaken / self-deceived?

3) The claim of the psychological egoist *has become* apriori and dogmatic. ’

The theory is *imposed* upon the evidence, *not based upon* the evidence. It is not *aposteriori* (based upon evidence) nor open to contradictory evidence.

- 4) And thus *the theory* of psychological egoism ***has become unfalsifiable***.
(Nothing is allowed to count against it. Everything is held to count its favor.) It has become technically vacuous. \
- The theory of psychological egoism is therefore no longer a predictive scientific theory.

5) Even if it were the case that all of my actions have the motive / goal of benefiting self only, ***this would still not by itself*** make such actions ‘selfish.’

****Acting to benefit one’s self only is a necessary condition for an action to be selfish, but is not a sufficient condition for an action to be selfish.***

For an action truly to be a selfish action, it must:

- (1) have the ***motive / goal of benefit of self-benefit only***.

AND

- (2) ***violate the rights / disregard basic needs*** of others.

- a. Suppose that after dinner at the Whittens’ last night, three pieces of chocolate cake were left over. My wife, my son, and I each laid claim to a piece of cake to have for dinner tonight. Now suppose I get home early, before the rest of my family, and decide to eat my piece of cake. I only eat my piece of cake. I eat my piece of cake for my own enjoyment / benefit and for no other reason. Is such an action selfish? Surely not!
- b. But suppose I get home early and eat my piece of cake. I do so for my benefit and enjoyment only. It tastes so good that I decide to eat a second piece and then the third, for my own benefit and enjoyment. I eat all three pieces of chocolate cake. When my wife and son later ask what happened to their pieces of cake, I tell them I ate all three pieces, despite our agreement. Is such an action selfish? Most definitely – but not merely because I ate them for my own enjoyment / benefit, but because I violated their rights / disregarded their needs by my actions.
- c. And suppose that my son invites his girlfriend to eat dinner with us. She really likes chocolate cake, and I give her my piece of cake. I do so out of care for her happiness. I do so to benefit her. Is that a selfish act? - Surely not! Is that an unselfish act? - Most definitely!

****A problem with the whole discussion of ‘selfishness’ (psychological egoism) vs. unselfishness (psychological altruism) is that *it has been assumed there are only two possibilities.***

Either

1. An action is **‘unselfish’** (purely self-disregarding and other- benefiting)

OR

2. It is **‘selfish’** action

This is a False Dichotomy.

A self-regarding, self-benefiting action (one that is therefore not ‘unselfish’) may or may not be ‘selfish’ ***depending upon whether it violates the rights / disregards the basic needs of others.***

An action that does so violate the rights / disregard the basic needs of others is clearly ‘selfish.’

But what about **an action:**

that **is self-regarding and self-benefiting (only).**

but

does **not violate the rights / disregard the needs of others**

What do we call such an action?

- It is neither ‘selfish’ nor is it ‘unselfish.’

3. Shall we call it **‘non-selfish’** action?

These are actions that are neither ‘selfish’ nor ‘unselfish’

Examples:

If I eat only one piece of cake, the piece that my family and I agreed was mine to eat, I am acting neither unselfishly nor selfishly in eating the cake.

If use my toothbrush to brush my teeth after I eat the cake, I am neither acting unselfishly nor am I acting selfishly.

Eating my piece of cake and brushing my teeth with my toothbrush are examples of non-selfish actions.

***Finally, *one's own benefit and that of another may become "fused"*

– in **Love**.
(in care / beneficence)

When I love someone, *their benefit becomes my benefit* – simply because
I care that they be benefited and they have in fact received benefit.

In acting with the intent / goal to benefit the loved-other, I also benefit myself.

I do not regard the benefit I receive as a *mere incidental by-product*
of my action. My benefit is *integrally and consciously* related to their
benefit.

What I do **is completely** for their benefit, but it does *not only* result
in their benefit.

What I do **is not solely** for their benefit, for it results in *my benefit*
as well *as a caring-loving person*. (My benefit is that they have been
benefited!)

No "self-sacrifice" is felt in the acting, thus the act is not unselfish
or altruistic.

When I *act in love* I act *as an 'expanded self'* from an
'expanded-self interest.'

My self and my self-benefit includes (vs. excludes) the loved-other
and their benefit.
(Self-benefit and other-benefit have become 'fused'.)

When I act in love:

I am *not* acting to benefit *the other person alone* – at my
expense.

I am *not* acting to benefit *myself alone* - at their expense.

When I act in love: –

I act to *benefit 'Us / We Together' - for our mutual and interrelated
benefit.*

we are "As One": in care – in action – in benefit.