



Introduction to Psychological Egoism

Tracy Kline

This selection is part of a larger article that appeared on the original Sophia Project in 2000.

Psychological egoism is a theory that holds that human beings always behave selfishly in everything that they do, and that it is impossible for them to behave otherwise. According to this theory, even when human beings appear to be acting out of altruistic—that is, selfless—motives, they are actually acting because of some advantage or benefit that they perceive for themselves. If you were to examine the supposedly altruistic acts of individuals carefully enough, according to the psychological egoist, you will inevitably uncover a selfish motive.

To illustrate the theory of psychological egoism more clearly, let's examine two actions that on the surface appear to be inspired by quite different motives. It is Thanksgiving Day in 2004. In the south side of Chicago there are two soup kitchens that will be serving dinner to the homeless. In one soup kitchen a politician who is running for high office has donned an apron and is carving turkey in front of cameras from two local television stations. In another soup kitchen a Sister of Mercy performs the same action out of her love for God's hungry children and with virtually no recognition. Most of us would probably argue that the politician is serving food to the homeless because of some advantage that he perceives for himself—most notably, a good photo-op that will help win greater support for his campaign. But what about the Sister of Mercy? We might be tempted to say that she is acting out of purely altruistic motives and that therefore her actions are much more laudable than the politicians'. But are they really? A psychological egoist would argue that in fact there is absolutely no difference between the actions of these two individuals: both are acting out of purely selfish motives. We know that the politician is engaged in a crass effort to convince his constituency that he is compassionate so that he will be re-elected, but what are the selfish motives of the Sister of Mercy? The psychological egoist might argue that she derives pleasure from the act, and that this is her motivation for acting, not concern for those in need. Or he might suggest that there is some hidden motivation that inspires her: a desire to feel that she is noble or heroic, or perhaps to earn her reward in the next life. In any case, the psychological egoist would reject the idea that she is acting altruistically, since she obviously is deriving certain benefits from the act.

Psychological Egoism is actually quite an ancient theory. An early form of it was described by Plato in his dialogue, *The Republic* (358a-360d), where Plato has Glaucon, one of the participants in the dialogue, formulate a very persuasive argument in support of psychological egoism. In the second book of this work, Glaucon tells the story about Gy-

ges, a shepherd, who came upon a magic ring in a fissure caused by an earthquake. Gyges quickly discovers that the ring he has found makes its wearer invisible, enabling him to go anywhere undetected. And what does Gyges do with this ring? Help the poor and suffering? Punish the wicked? Of course not! Putting the ring on his finger, he sneaks into the royal palace, violates the Queen, murders the king and seizes the throne for himself.

Glaucon goes on to ask us to imagine what would happen if there were two such rings—one given to a person of virtue and the other to a scoundrel. Would there be any difference in the way the two would behave? We would certainly expect the scoundrel to act horrendously in the absence of any social restraint. But would the virtuous man behave any better? Glaucon argues that, freed from the threat of punishment, the virtuous man would almost certainly behave just as badly as the scoundrel. At first he might be discrete in his use of the ring and try only to use it for good purposes, but after a while he would commit acts of injustice aimed at promoting his own selfish interest. Glaucon's argument in *The Republic* is that all human beings are naturally selfish and unjust. When we know that we can get away with something that is to our own advantage, we will do it, no matter how harmful it might be to others. The only reason, in fact, why most people behave decently is because of the threat of punishment. If we could somehow eliminate that threat there would be no limits to our selfishness.

Contemporary theories of psychological egoism are basically a new spin on this ancient idea. Examining human action, the advocates of this theory note that even apparently unselfish acts give the one performing them a sense of satisfaction, and that self-satisfaction produces a feeling of pleasure. They then go on to argue that the real object in performing "altruistic" actions is to have this feeling of pleasure, rather than to help others. This selfish motivation is as true for the student who gives up a night on the town to help her friend study for a calculus exam as it would be for Maximilian Kolbe, who sacrificed his life in a concentration camp for the sake of someone he barely knew. Neither can be said to be acting out of real concern for other human beings.

While psychological egoism is seductive in that it offers a simple and seemingly persuasive account of human action, it has been rejected on a number of different counts. First of all, philosophers have argued that a theory that is not able to be disproven no matter how many arguments are raised against it is a meaningless theory. For example, let's imagine that a student that I advise comes to me, arguing that his English instructor, Dr. Jones, is out to get him. When I respond that Dr. Jones appears to always treat him with courtesy and kindness, the student replies that the Dr. Jones is just trying to get him off guard so that he can deliver a really devastating *coup de grâce* later on. When I also go on to point out that the student has gotten "A"s in three previous classes that he has taken with Dr. Jones, he argues that this just proves how terribly devious Dr. Jones actually is. No matter how many counter examples I offer him to demonstrate that his belief about Dr. Jones is wrong, he will inevitably interpret these examples to fit his "theory" about Dr. Jones's malevolence.¹ The psychological egoist does something similar: no matter how many counter-arguments one might give him of seemingly altruistic acts, he will inevitably interpret them in such a way that they can fit into his theory that all human beings act out of selfish motives. Since the theory can never be subject to refutation, it must be recognized as a bad theory.

Another problem with psychological egoism is that the theory fails to recognize the complexity of human motivations. If one takes the time to look carefully at the gamut of

human activity, it is apparent that human beings actually act from a wide range of different, and sometimes even conflicting, motivations. Most acts are rarely so simple that they are performed out of one sole motivation. Take the example of the teenage boy who goes out of his way to help an elderly woman cross a busy street. He may be acting out of a “selfish” motivation to feel good about himself or have others think of him in a heroic light. But he may also be acting out of guilt, because the old lady reminds him of his dead grandmother; or he may simply be acting out of compassion for someone in need. It may very well be the case, however, that all three motivations are inspiring him at the same time.

Second, it often happens that a person can perform the exact same act at different times for quite different reason. On my way to work on Monday, for example, I might pass a homeless woman asking for a handout, and give her \$5.00 because I feel compassion for her. Then on the way home from work on Friday, I might see the same woman, and again give her \$5.00. This time, though, my act is motivated purely out of a selfish desire not to be confronted by her humanity before the relaxing weekend that I have planned for myself. Finally, we have seen that the exact same act—serving Thanksgiving dinner—can be performed by two different people with very different motivations: the politician seeking self-promotion and the Sister of Mercy seeking to minister to individuals in need. The problem with psychological egoism is that it represents a shallow approach to understanding the complexity of human motivations. In reducing all motivation to selfishness, the psychological egoist turns all human actions to something banal and trite. And human actions, as we are all well aware, are anything but banal and trite.

A final objection that can be raised against psychological egoism lies in the distinction between the causes and the effects of our actions. The psychological egoist, as we have seen, rejects the possibility of altruism because he looks at an apparently altruistic act and observes that one has received benefits from performing the act (i.e., feeling of pleasure). But just because someone receives benefits from an act doesn’t mean that they necessarily performed the act for the sake of those benefits. The benefits, in other words, may very well be an effect rather than a cause of the good acts. Thus a woman who stays up all night caring for her sick child, depriving herself of comfort and sleep, naturally feels pleasure at the thought that she is acting the way a good mother should. While the psychological egoist would say that the feelings of pleasure that she receives from caring for her child are the cause of her actions, doesn’t it make just as much sense to say that they are rather bi-products—or effects—of her selfless act? According to this view the goal of an altruistic person is not to attain pleasure, but simply to help someone in need. When we succeed in our goal, the result is pleasure. And there is absolutely nothing at all selfish about that.

NOTES

1. This example has been adapted from R.M. Hare’s parable of the murderous dons. See *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Ed. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

© SophiaOmni 2000. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes, and personal use. If you reduplicate the document, be sure to include the copyright. No permission is granted for commercial use.

For more information contact us at info@sophiaomni.org.