

Psychological Egoism



A Popular Mistake

Self-interest and Virtue

- ❖ The virtues are lost in self-interest as rivers are lost in the sea. —Franklin D. Roosevelt

Two Kinds of Egoism

- ❖ Psychological Egoism (PE):
 - ❖ Everyone always, in every instance, acts from a motive of self-interest.
- ❖ Ethical Egoism (EE):
 - ❖ Everyone always, in every instance, should act from a motive of self-interest.

PE Refined

- ❖ Plainly people sometimes do things not in their own self-interest:
 - ❖ People make mistakes.
 - ❖ People are confused.
 - ❖ People sometimes simply do foolish things that they later regret—and rightly believe not to have been in their own interest.
- ❖ So, slightly amended PE:
 - ❖ Everyone always, in every instance, acts from a motive of perceived self-interest.
 - ❖ Everyone, that is, always acts in a way they understand to be in their own self-interest.

PE Characterised

- ❖ PE is evidently a descriptive, empirical claim:
 - ❖ It purports, that is, to describe how people in fact act.
 - ❖ It should, then, in principle, be in some way or other falsifiable.
 - ❖ It is, moreover, a *synthetic* claim.
 - ❖ It is thus understood not to be a trivial claim, or a claim which is simply stipulated.
 - ❖ It is a substantive claim about human psychology and human motivation in particular.

Analytic vs. Synthetic

- ❖ The Character of this Distinction
 - ❖ This is a syntactic-semantic distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
 - ❖ A sentence is analytically true/false *iff* it is true/false purely by virtue of its logical form or by virtue of the meanings of its words and independently of matters of fact.
 - ❖ A sentence is synthetic *iff* it is not analytic.

PE and EE Contrasted

- ❖ PE is, then, a *descriptive* claim.
- ❖ EE is, by contrast, a *normative* claim.

Descriptive Claims

- ❖ Descriptive claims purport to describe the world as it is.
- ❖ One may fairly and uncontroversially ask, when confronted with a descriptive claim: is this claim true or false? What fact, if any, makes this claim true?
 - ❖ Some examples:
 - ❖ Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
 - ❖ The speed of light in a vacuum is 299,792,459 metres per second.
 - ❖ N.b. that we may not actually know the truth value of this or that descriptive claim:
 - ❖ Uruguay won the first World Cup, in 1930.
 - ❖ It is not possible that anything can travel faster than the speed of light.

Normative Claims

- ❖ Normative claims make appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to some *norm*; they are generally evaluative or prescriptive.
- ❖ Some examples:
 - ❖ Wagner is the greatest opera composer of all time.
 - ❖ One should never harm another person willingly.
 - ❖ ‘Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.’ (Benjamin Franklin)
 - ❖ You really should do something about that brother of yours.

A Dispute about Normativity

- ❖ Although many people suppose this is so, we do not want to make it *definitional* of normativity that normative statements are not truth evaluable.
- ❖ Consider:
 - ❖ Murder is always and everywhere wrong.
 - ❖ If there are *moral facts*, then this is simply true.
 - ❖ The sunset over the Alps was simply gorgeous.
 - ❖ Each person should always pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively.
- ❖ The crucial point: such statements make implicit or explicit appeal to some norm, either prescriptively or by being evaluative.

Now, to PE

- ❖ PE is, or purports to be, an empirical hypothesis about human motivation.
- ❖ PE holds that all humans, whenever they act, act so as to maximize their own narrowly construed self-interest.
- ❖ PE claims, then, then everyone is always, everywhere, in every action, *selfish*.

Six Bad Reasons to Accept PE I

- ❖ Open your eyes: PE is plainly observable fact.
 - ❖ No, it's not: if anything is a plainly observable fact it is that people act from motives of self-interest with great regularity, but even they, along with many others who do not so act, often do things from altruistic motives.
- ❖ No-one would ever act unless they had a motive of their own.
 - ❖ True, but the having of a motive of one's own does not entail that the motive in question is a selfish motive.
- ❖ Even people who act altruistically derive pleasure, or at least satisfaction, from their actions. So, that shows that PE after all.
 - ❖ No it doesn't: even if ϕ results regularly and predictably from doing a , it does not follow that people do a for the sake of ϕ .
 - ❖ Some people regularly drink too much, though they know they will get a hangover. It doesn't follow that they drink in order to get a hangover.
 - ❖ Each time I drive, I pollute the atmosphere. It doesn't follow that I drive in order to pollute the atmosphere.
 - ❖ Moreover, if S^* derives satisfaction or pleasure from helping S^{**} , that seems rather to indicate that S^* regards S^{**} as having an intrinsic good of her own and is thus motivated to act for the sake of another—else S^* could proceed with perfect indifference to S^{**} 's suffering.

Six Bad Reasons to Accept PE II

- ❖ No-one would ever be motivated to act unless they believed their action would benefit them.
 - ❖ Question begging: PE, because PE.
- ❖ Possibly, every seemingly altruistic motive is really, upon inspection, a selfish motive.
 - ❖ Possibly, but not actually.
 - ❖ What is more, possibly every seemingly selfish motive is really, upon inspection, an altruistic motive.
 - ❖ Again, possibly but not actually.
- ❖ Necessarily, every seemingly altruistic motive is really, upon inspection, a selfish motive.
 - ❖ Question begging in the extreme: PE, because necessarily PE.

Against PE

1. PE is either analytic or synthetic.
2. If PE is synthetic, then it is plainly false (because counterexamples abound).
3. If PE is analytic, then it is not an empirical claim about human motivation at all (and it is trivial, because stipulative).
4. Ergo, PE is either false or trivial.