

# 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.
  - ❖ You should always pursue your 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*.



# 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.