

LECTURE FIVE: PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM (IS FALSE)

10 February 2014

Today we are going to be discussing the following thesis:

Psychological Egoism: All human actions are ultimately motivated by self-interest.

We'll start by clarifying this thesis.

1. All human actions *are* ultimately motivated by self-interest.

First: what is the difference between descriptive and normative theories: between 'is' and 'ought'? Roughly, descriptive statements admit of straightforward quasi-scientific verification. 'Prince Charles is on his horse' is a descriptive statement, and it can easily be verified by finding the Prince and checking what he is doing. Normative statements are not so easily verified. They refer to things that we *should* or *shouldn't* do, or states of affairs that would be *ood/bad/right/wrong* etc. 'Le Pen should eat more vegetables' is a normative statement.

Distinguish two theories: Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism. According to Ethical Egoism, all human actions *should* be motivated by self-interest. Psychological Egoism is a descriptive theory of human nature; it makes a claim about *how we actually act*. Ethical Egoism is a normative theory of morality; it makes a claim about *how we should act*.

What is the relation between facts about human psychology / human nature and facts about morality? This is a great question to keep in mind.

2. *All* human actions are ultimately motivated by self-interest.

There are a number of interesting distinctions we can make here. Firstly notice that this isn't a *definition*. The Psychological Egoist does not maintain that the truth of his theory follows from the meanings of the words. Rather it is an empirical truth. It purports to be a 'deep fact about human nature.' What does this mean? It means, in the jargon, that it is a fact which is *modally robust*. That just means that the claim will hold under lots of alternative circumstances.

Secondly notice that a weaker version might be available. Perhaps Psychological Egoism is true, except in highly unusual circumstances. So 'all' doesn't literally mean 'for every human being, everywhere in the world, throughout all of human history.' Instead it means 'for nearly every human being, everywhere in the world,' This will help the PE-ist to cope with jumping-on-grenade type counterexamples while still maintaining the relevance of his view.

3. *All human actions* are ultimately motivated by self-interest.

'Human': so the claim doesn't apply to animals or Martians. There remains a question about how humanity is defined: genetically, psychologically, by manifesting some property such as a desire for life? By 'human' the Psychological Egoist probably also means to rule out babies, very elderly people, and the mentally infirm.

'Actions' are special sorts of events, namely ones which involve human agency in the right sort of way. This should be understood broadly enough to include thoughts, intentions, states, dispositions, etc.

4. All human actions are *ultimately* motivated by self-interest.

It is important that human actions are *only* motivated by self-interest. It is not that all actions are self-interested, but some are also altruistic. According to Psychological Egoism, none are altruistic.

There is an important distinction here between *intrinsic* motivations and *instrumental* motivations. An intrinsic motivation is a motivation for something for its own sake. An instrumental motivation is a motivation for one thing because it is a means to something else. Psychological Egoism does not claim that humans are never motivated to do things that benefit other people. Rather it claims that humans are never motivated to do things that benefit people *just because* they benefit other people. Rather, whenever humans do things that benefit other people, that is only because they are motivated to get something else, and see benefiting others as a means to this end.

5. All human actions are ultimately *motivated* by self-interest.

Here we can make a distinction between on the one hand the physical, physiological and psychological mechanism which *causes* the action (in some sense), and on the other hand the *end* of the action, that *for the sake of which* the action is performed. We are 'motivated' in both these ways at once: by brain state B and by the fact this action is one of *spending time with friends* (or whatever).

6. All human actions are ultimately motivated *by self-interest*.

There are three standard ways of thinking about self-interest: either as some kind of pleasurable experience, or the satisfaction of your desires, or as your flourishing. To defend Psychological Egoism, one would need to say which conception of self-interest one had in mind. Notice that benefits to other people might be in one's self-interest in a broad sense on some of these conceptions. For instance it might be in your interest that your children flourish.

SOME ARGUMENTS AGAINST PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Argument One: *Counterexamples* everywhere you look. Consider soldiers throwing themselves on grenades? (Let's restrict ourselves to soldiers who don't believe in life after death, for whom the balance of reasons would definitely favour life, even with the guilt of not having saved the other person.) As C.G. Chesterton says about a similar case, "it is an extraordinary extension of the meaning of the word 'self-indulgent' which allows a philosopher to say that a man is self-indulgent when he wants to be burned at the stake."

Argument Two: *Degrees of Selfishness*. According to Psychological Egoism, jumping on grenades to save one's country is precisely as selfish as, say, lying about a competitor in order to secure a job for which one is not as well qualified.

Argument Three: *Other Animals*. Psychological egoism is false of most animals. It would be surprising if it were true of us.



SOME ARGUMENTS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Argument One: *My motives are my motives*. Every action of mine is prompted by motives which are *my* motives and not somebody else's. This fact might be expressed by saying that whenever I act I am always pursuing my own ends or trying to satisfy my own desires. And from this we might pass on to – 'I am always pursuing something for myself or seeking my own satisfaction.' Here is what seems like a proper description of a man acting self-interestedly, and if the description applies to all actions of all men, then it follows that all men in all their actions act self-interestedly.

Reply: A careful examination of the egoist's arguments reveals that he redefines the word so that it means (roughly) 'motivated,' or perhaps 'intentional.' Since the egoist apparently means by 'selfish' simply 'motivated,' when he says that all motivated action is selfish *he is not asserting a synthetic empirical hypothesis about human motives; rather his statement is a tautology roughly equivalent to 'all motivated actions are motivated.'* And if that is the case then what he says is true enough; but, like all tautologies, it is empty, uninteresting, and trivial.

Argument Two: *Pursuit of pleasure*. It is a truism that when a person gets what he wants he characteristically feels pleasure. This has suggested to many people that what we really want in every case is our own pleasure, and that we pursue other things only as means. In *prima facie* cases of benevolence, according to this view, we are motivated not by the benign consequences to other parties but by the expectation of pleasurable moral emotions and social consequences.

Reply: This confuses *correlation* with *causation*. It may be true that acting morally will often, perhaps almost always, benefit the agent herself. But that is just because she is virtuously disposed to take pleasure in doing the right thing. This certainly does not entail that she does the right thing *because* by so doing she will get pleasure. On the contrary, it is plausible that she

gives to charity because it will benefit those far worse off than herself, or that she helps a friend with his homework because otherwise he might fail an important class, and so on. The pleasure that she takes in doing these things is an effect of the moral action, not that *for the sake of which* she acts. (William James example: an ocean liner constantly consumes coal on its trans-Atlantic voyage, therefore the *purpose*, or that for the sake of which the liner crosses the ocean, is to consume coal.)

Argument Three: *Self-deception*. Often we deceive ourselves into thinking that we desire something fine or noble when what we really want is to be thought well of by others or to be able to congratulate ourselves, or to be able to enjoy the pleasures of a good conscience. Since we are so often misled it is reasonable to think we are always misled.

Reply: We should not accept the second premise. It is a huge leap from sometimes to always. Moreover as we have seen, there are good reasons to reject this leap.
