

# *Psychological Egoism*

By Matthew Mullenweg for Dr. Philips, Ethics

EVERY HUMAN ACTION is at its root a selfish act; even acts that are altruistic on the surface are primarily motivated by a deeper selfishness — or so a psychological egoist would say. Psychological Egoism is a descriptive theory that, rather than suggesting as ethical or rational egoism does how people ought to live, suggests how people actually go about their lives. The assumptive nature of the theory introduces a number of possible avenues for refutation, some of which are very compelling.

One of the more common arguments for psychological egoism states that even though on the surface one person's acts might appear selfish and another person's acts might appear unselfish, in both cases each person is just doing what they want to do, which is inherently selfish. If S donates money to the poor, then S is donating money because that's what S wants to do. Of course, if helping others is what S wants to do, that is what would generally be defined as altruism, but for a psychological egoist that doesn't counteract the fact that S *wanted* to do it. Some actions could also be said to be done through a sense of duty rather than a desire, such as paying your insurance or having a bad tooth removed, neither of which is an immediately attractive proposition; it's self-interest, not

selfishness. This argument may be countered as still being motivated by larger selfish goals. Anyway a deeper problem should be immediately apparent, as in the course of trying to justify psychological egoism, the theory has been reduced to empty tautology; we have said that the motivation for our actions is what we are motivated to do. This is not terribly meaningful in terms of describing human nature.

A second argument for psychological egoism suggests that people just do what makes them feel good, thereby making all acts selfish. For example, you might help a turtle across a highway because if you didn't you would be distressed about its well-being crossing the road. So in order to feel good about yourself, you help the turtle cross the road. The problem with this is it sounds like it is describing an unselfish person, one that derives pleasure from helping others. A selfish person most likely wouldn't have been terribly concerned for the turtle in the first place. Also, if we look to the deeper motivations of the turtle helper's actions, as the psychological egoists tend to do, and ask *why* the person derives satisfaction from helping others in general and the turtle specifically, you will most likely run into the conclusion that the person cares about what happens to others. Quite an egoist we have here. This line of argument is in fact a confusion of the object of desire and ancillary results of the consummation of that desire; if once you get married you are extremely satisfied, that does not necessarily

suggest that you got married with the desire for that satisfaction in mind, rather the satisfaction is a function of your desire for marriage, and would not exist otherwise.

Psychological egoism is a particularly persuasive theory because at its core it is impossible to empirically prove it wrong. However, it is just as hard to empirically prove it right, or to prove its opposite wrong for that matter, and therein lies its fallacy. Once the premises of psychological egoism are accepted, every action can be interpreted to support it. Like the spouse who you've decided is cheating, every action which otherwise may be perfectly innocent is held in question and may be construed in a way that supports your hypothesis but is not true to the action itself. The problem is that psychological egoism rests on the question of moral motivation, which is by definition intrinsically personal and private. Therefore psychological egoism is a *closed* theory, one that rejects competing theories on its own terms and is non-verifiable and non-falsifiable.<sup>1</sup> At *most* psychological egoism could allow you to describe your own motivation for every action, but it would be shallow to try and reduce the incredible breadth of human motivation down to one for the sake of the simplicity in an inherently flawed theory.

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<sup>1</sup> *Egoism*, Alex Moseley. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.  
<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/e/egoism.htm>