

Proof for Psychological Egoism

Psychological egoism is the notion that no individual does anything against what she or he thinks or believes or knows is in his her or best interest. You are an egoist when you help John because you want to and not because he is suffering. If you are 99% concerned about John but cannot act unless the 1% is about you then clearly that concern is really a kind of concern. It is not the real thing.

The Definitions

If you didn't have motives, reasons for acting, you would never do anything.

Philosophers say there are three possibilities for why we do what we do. No more and no less. They are saying there are three different motives. Altruism, Egoism and Egotism.

Altruism is being interested in the welfare of others and not in yourself. Others matter but you don't.

Egoism means you do what you do, and make others happy, out of self-interest. If you are nice to people because it fulfils your desire to be nice that is egoism. Egoism, when properly understood, does not say that you always do what has the most pleasure in it or that you necessarily do only what will result in very enjoyable consequences for you. It is more centred on fulfilling the desire to act than any other results or other pleasures that the act may bring. The only pleasure it is worried about is the satisfaction that is found in being able to do what you want – regardless of how good or poor the side-effects of this pleasure are. We do not always want to do whatever has the maximal pleasure in it. We would be too afraid that others would be able to control us if they could use pleasure as a bait to get us to do what they want. We value the pleasure of being free beings above any other pleasure however great.

Egotism means you do what you do out of self-interest without any concern for other people or that you just help people because you want to feel good about yourself afterwards.

Some psychologists believe in psychological egoism. This theory says that everything we do is caused by self-interest only. It says we can't help this – it is just the way we are made.

The definition of egoism that we will use here is, egoism is fulfilling your immediate self-interest by responding to your desire to act. In other words, even if you carry a beggar to his hometown on your back knowing there is nothing in it for you, the only thing there is in it for you is that you fulfilled your wish to do this. You may not have liked it very much but you liked it enough to do it. The definition has to be correct for most refutations of psychological egoism and most proponents of psychological egoism are based on the false supposition that egoism is saying that we only go after what has the most future pleasure in it for us. If the supposition were true every naïve teenager and egoist would be on drugs. But it is not necessarily true.

Motive

Psychological egoists and psychological altruists and everything in between claim that we can only guess at our motives but we cannot know them for sure. We can therefore do something we think is selfless and be wrong. The objection is that if you are bad at reading your motives that does not mean that the other person is not more accurate. But what if you think you are accurate but only by chance? What if it was only luck that you happened to be right? And the fact remains that believing your motives are selfless is not the same as being very sure. Belief is not certainty. If it is easy for motives to disguise themselves or for you to disguise them to yourself or if motives are a mixture of different outlooks such as selfishness and unselfishness and neutral stuff it stands to reason that we can never be sure that we are altruistic. Altruism hurts and we do well without it and others can benefit so it is wise to presuppose the dominating motive when we act is never altruism. A man can risk his life by jumping into the pond to save the drowning baby in a bid to become altruistic which means he is not being altruistic but trying to be. If altruism is idealised but unnatural then trying to be altruistic is a form of self-interest. It is selfish to try and exalt yourself over what you are. It is a form of arrogance.

Two interpretations of psychological egoism

What kind of egoism is psychological egoism about?

There are two proposed answers.

One: Those who argue that self-interest simply means acting because you want to – to satisfy the desire to act say that we are self-interested even if we help others without wanting anything back for we are getting something back: we are fulfilling a desire to act.

Two: Those who pretend to help others but are really doing it for themselves. They have no real wish to help others. It is a means to an end.

One is controversial. Many deny that that is really egoism. They claim that having a desire to help another does not mean you are selfish in having the desire. Even if that were true, it could mean it!

What about the argument, "You cannot get anything good without desiring things other than what is good". If you only look for your own welfare then you will fail. You must have considerations apart from yourself in order to be well and do well.

But that argument if it works shows we are not all about doing well at the expense of others. But then a new problem arises. It is clearly saying we are all self-interested! That means because it is good for me I help others.

Motive - the heart of the question

I am a motive having creature and if I don't have motives that is bad for me. So no matter what motive I have it is in that way about me. I do not use my sight to look at myself but that does not mean it is not about me. Merely seeing makes it about me. So a motive reaching out to another is about me. I have to be about me to make the motive not be about me. This is the answer to the argument, "psychological egoism thinks that because my intentions and motives and desires are mine they are about me. But this is untrue. It's a logical error. Because they are mine does not make them for me or about me." The argument is a half truth. The point is not that desires cannot reach out the point is that I have to desire for my own sake so even when I reach out it is still about me.

Psychological egoism claims that each person has but one ultimate aim: not their own own welfare but what they think is their own welfare. Nobody really knows that if the good things you aim for will really do you much good. The think part is important. It means a person can think they are being unselfish when they are being selfish. It means a person can make a totally convincing altruist and not be.

Desire

All intentions are ultimately to do with what you want to do. You may intend to buy a car or give to the poor but ultimately you intend to do what you want. It is what you want that you care about. What you want may take different forms such as wanting the car or to see the poor better off but it is wanting all the same. If you see blue and you see pink after it, it means that you have the one sight. You don't have one kind of sight for blue and another for pink. Seeing is just seeing and wanting is just wanting.

You are called an egotist if you sacrifice the love of family and friends for something less beneficial such as money. If you willingly sacrifice money for the family and friends you are called an altruist. This is ignoring intentions and going by results. The intention in both is exactly the same – to do what you want to do. The results have nothing to do with it. If desiring to sacrifice for money makes you selfish so does desiring to sacrifice for the family and friends. To say that desiring money to give it away is altruism and to desire it to have it yourself is not is really saying altruism and egoism are not judged by motives but by results. It is like saying that tasting sugar is altruism and tasting salt is egoism. Altruists don't commend the suicide victim who kills himself because he believes everybody would be better off if he died. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that altruists are really do-gooders.

Weakness

If my will is weak it means I might not do the things that I know are best for me. How does that relate to egoism? It means that altruism might be me making one of my mistakes. If it is a mistake it is not altruism!

Reality

The reality is I am me and nobody else and nobody knows what mistakes I should risk like me. I cannot feel the same way about me as I would about another person [I can just try very hard but the more I try the more I fool myself] for I am not that person and not living under their skin. Because of that I am continually pressured by myself to put myself first. It is not down to selfishness, selfishness as in taking from others and hurting them so I can benefit, but just the way we are made. Mind your own business is the most important saying there is. If I am programmed to be nice but for myself then it is selfish to tell me to be any different!

Belief

The only thing I know 100% is that I exist now. I cannot be as sure that I existed a second ago. Perhaps it was a dream or an illusion. I am less sure that other people are not dreams or visions than I am that I existed a second ago. The people I see in my dreams seem as real as the people I meet every day. I create my belief in other people. To serve them is to serve my belief not them though they may benefit. If I create an imaginary friend and believe in that friend I am called self-centred. If I come to believe that giving all my money away to the poor will plunge me into an ecstasy of delight that is worth it I am self-centred. I am not doing it for the ecstasy but for the belief I will get the ecstasy. Therefore all my actions for others are self-centred.

To serve my belief is to serve myself for my belief makes me what I am. Belief is about me.

Daniel Batson

Daniel Batson and his colleagues tested the altruism theory. It was based on empathy. He found individuals who had high levels of empathy helped others even when they knew others could do it anyway and were going to. He concluded that they just wanted to help and it was not about feeling bad for not helping. It was not about avoiding self-punishment if they did not help. He found that if their helping was made secret they still did it.

All I can say to that study is that the participants knew what it was for so you are going to expect such results.

Sacrifice

Altruists contradict themselves on morality. If I jump in to save people from drowning though I cannot swim that is not altruism but bravado for it is clear I cannot really want to help when I am not able to. Some insane altruists would call it altruism and say we should not judge. But the general consensus is you cannot be altruistic unless you measure the action in the light of compassion and love and justice and prudence.

I go into a burning house to save a child and I die. Altruism says that if I did this for the child without thinking of myself it is great. If I do it because I want to die a hero even if only in the eyes of a God then it's selfish, it's not altruism. It's selfish for helping the child is not what matters to me. If I do it for the child while believing that altruism is an unnatural perversion or deceit what then? Then I must be selfish as well for I am doing what I think is wrong. The altruist only assumes that going into the house is proof of altruistic behaviour. It is not evidence for altruistic behaviour. Also, when we panic we are not thinking properly. Impulse takes over. It is the same as temporary insanity. And nobody says you are being altruistic when you are insane! No evidence for altruistic behaviour can be found by observing the allegedly altruistic behaviour of others. You want to look good in your own eyes and all categories, altruist, egoist and egotist want that!

Altruism is selfish

If you ask somebody to be altruistic to you, you would be considered selfish for you wish to gain at their expense. And the altruist is being selfish in urging you to be selfish or encouraging you by doing what you ask. Altruism is a lie. Altruism is evil and therefore selfish.

Altruism is freely giving yourself to others. If you die for others and are under the influence of drugs, the drugs made you sacrifice yourself. That is not recognised as altruism but as egoism or more accurately as egotism. The distinction between selflessness and non-selflessness is totally arbitrary in this case. The vast majority of actions classified as altruistic are really acts of egoism or egotism.

Conclusion

Psychological egoism as a theory has a right to be accepted if it is coherent and it is. It should be respected as a legitimate theory and it should be admitted by those who cannot accept it that it could be true.

Everything points to us being psychological egoists. Desire is the mark of that beast.

Psychological egoism is true. Case closed.