

## Articles

### Psychological Egoism and Self-Interest

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#### 1. Introduction

In this article I defend an unpopular, some might say discredited, position: psychological egoism, the thesis that we are always ultimately motivated by self-interest.<sup>1</sup> In the course of this article we shall see that people may be mistaken about what really is in their self-interest.<sup>2</sup> We will also see that people commonly rationalize the choice of a present good that turns out not to be in their self-interest. Perhaps most surprisingly, we will see that, thanks to the merging of self and other, I can see another's interests and my own as forming a larger whole.

I will argue that, understood properly, psychological egoism is conceptually, tautologically true, but that it is nonetheless interesting and nontrivial. Indeed, psychological egoism implies an important truth that is often obscured in moral discourse, namely, that pure altruism is an impossible ideal. Christianity and Immanuel Kant have bequeathed to us a legacy of impossible expectations. In the Christian "economics of salvation" we are called on to sacrifice for others with the promise of heavenly reward.<sup>3</sup> However, on at least some interpretations of Christianity, it is not just the act of sacrifice that matters. If your motive for personal sacrifice is to gain heavenly

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua May, "Egoism, Empathy, and Self-Other Merging," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* vol. 49 (2011), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> There may also be cases in which several alternatives appear to be equally in one's self-interest. In such cases one must force a fallible decision.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the economics of salvation, see John D. Caputo, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 39, 61, and 72.

reward, then you are acting selfishly. Your actions must be motivated by love of God. However, as John D. Caputo puts it, “It is impossible to love someone who threatens infinite punishment if you don’t and promises infinite rewards if you do.”<sup>4</sup> Influenced and inspired by Christianity and the power of reason to discover duty, Kant gave his own impossible ideal in his call for the good will, the will which follows duty apart from all other motivations.<sup>5</sup> While not all Christians and perhaps not even Kant himself believe it is necessary to achieve this kind of pure motivation, it is put forth as a moral ideal. Following Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and other secular philosophers have argued that an action only has moral worth if its motivation is purely altruistic.<sup>6</sup>

In rejecting the ideal of pure altruism, I argue that we always ultimately pursue self-interest. To be clear, this does not mean that we are, or should be, unconcerned with others. One can still be guided by prudence in concern for others, layering concern for others on top of the foundation of self-interest. As we shall see, rational, enlightened self-interest is quite different from selfishness, the narrow form of self-interest that involves disregard for others.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to selfishness, self-interest more broadly construed usually involves considering others. As Robert Olson says, “A selfish man is simply one who fails to take an immediate, personal satisfaction in the well-being of others.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, rev. ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Ak 4:393 and 397.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, among others, sees an action as having genuine moral worth only when it is purely altruistic; see his *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> Neera Kapur Badhwar argues that self-interest can be the motivation of a moral act, but she does not make the clear distinction between self-interest and selfishness; see her “Altruism Versus Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* vol. 10 (1993), pp. 90-117.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Olson, *The Morality of Self-Interest* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1965), p. 38.

The difficulty in speaking of “self-interest” is that it has such a negative connotation (for some people) that it might as well be the same as “selfishness.” “Selfishness,” too, has an unduly negative connotation, but it would not be worthwhile, *pace* Ayn Rand, to try to rehabilitate the word “selfishness.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, we might as well keep it as a narrow, extreme form of self-interest. We are all ultimately self-interested, but we do not need to be selfish if by “selfish” we mean self-interested in a way that is inconsiderate of others. The irony is that it is not usually in our self-interest to be selfish, because when we are selfish, other people are offended and often retaliate. As we shall see, enlightened self-interest takes all of this into account.

## 2. I Always Do What I Want

The first step in arguing for psychological egoism is to note that the *I*, the ego, is inescapable. The word “egoism” itself suggests that the subject is primary. The *I* can never do what the *I* does not want to do. Alas, the illusion that a person can do, and perhaps ought to do, what that person does not want to do in the interest of others is a mainstay in philosophical discourse. Michael Slote, for example, worries, “If there is no such thing as (human) altruism, then the altruistic demands of most social codes and most moral philosophies may be deeply undermined,” and he scolds defenders of psychological egoism for “show[ing] precious few signs of recognizing and regretting the destructively iconoclastic direction of their views and arguments.”<sup>10</sup> I, for one, do recognize that psychological egoism is destructive and iconoclastic, but those are not reasons to deny a philosophical truth. As I shall argue below, embracing enlightened self-interest can alleviate Slote’s concerns about negative consequences.

Of course, why the *I* wants to do *x* is often complex. People believe what they think is true, and people do what they want to do. It does not make sense to say, “I believe the cat is on the mat, but I do not think it is true.”<sup>11</sup> If you did not think it was true, you would not

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<sup>9</sup> Ayn Rand, “Introduction,” in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. vii.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Slote, “Egoism and Emotion,” *Philosophia* vol. 41 (2013), p. 316.

<sup>11</sup> G. E. Moore, “Moore’s Paradox,” in *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 207-12.

believe it (at least not anymore). Likewise, it does not make literal sense to say, “I do not want to exercise, but I am now going to exercise.” This, however, sounds more reasonable and less contradictory than the claim about the cat, the mat, belief, and truth. We can have competing desires. We can want and not want to do the same thing at the same time in the sense that our emotions and intellect may be in conflict. For example, a prudential, rational decision to do something unpleasant, like exercise, may override a strong emotional desire for something with more short-term pleasure, like lying on the couch. So it can make non-literal, hyperbolic sense to say “I do not want to do this at all” and yet do it in the next moment. But what is being expressed, in the exercise example, by “I do not want to do this at all” is that there is no emotional desire to do the action. The subsequent action attests, however, that there is a strong rational desire, which in this case trumped the emotional desire.

In *Human, All Too Human*, Friedrich Nietzsche says, “No man has ever done anything that was done wholly for others and with no personal motivation whatever; how, indeed, should a man be *able* to do something that had no reference to himself, that is to say lacked all inner compulsion (which would have its basis in personal need)? How could the ego act without the ego?”<sup>12</sup> The buck has to stop somewhere. It stops with the ego.<sup>13</sup> The ego ultimately does what it wants to do; it is foundational. At the ultimate level, why you want to do something for someone else is because *you* want to. Thus, all actions are ultimately rooted in the desire of the ego to do what it wants. The “my own-ness” of the action, the desire that motivates it, makes it egoistic and self-interested, just not necessarily in an ugly, selfish way.

Joel Marks argues:

What we do is always an action, and an action is always motivated, and another name for motivation is ‘desire’. Thus, even a moralist who always strove consciously to do the right thing, even when this meant acting in opposition to other

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), sec. 133.

<sup>13</sup> I take Nietzsche to be a psychological egoist at the time of *Human, All Too Human*. Guy Elgat disagrees in his “Nietzsche’s Critique of Pure Altruism—Developing an Argument from *Human, All Too Human*,” *Inquiry* vol. 58 (2015), pp. 308-26.

things she would much rather be doing, would, in the last analysis, be doing what she wanted to do, simply in virtue of being motivated to do the right thing.<sup>14</sup>

Marks believes that we always do what we want to do, but he also believes that what we want to do is not always what we perceive to be in our self-interest. That sounds reasonable at first, but it raises a question: If it is not in my perceived self-interest, then why do I want to do it? The easy answer is, “For the benefit of someone else.” However, that raises the question: “Why do I want to benefit someone else?” The answer then comes down to “because I want to,” and that desire may be bound up with love, guilt, duty, or what have you. But if I am doing it because I want to, then that is tantamount to acting out of self-interest. Clearly, I am acting out of an interest, and just as clearly that interest is my own. My loves, guilts, and sense of duty are my own, and I act to address them. Addressing them is my self-interest. I cannot act purely out of love, duty, or anything else. Foundational or ultimate egoism is inescapable. Foundational or ultimate or pure altruism is impossible because it would require what is impossible: doing what I ultimately do not want to do.<sup>15</sup> This is important to recognize because it dismantles an impossible ideal that sets people up for perpetual failure and the feelings that attend the failure.

To be clear, we should not equate egoism or self-interest with hedonism. For example, when you make a sacrifice to help your child, this does not necessarily mean that you are doing something you will enjoy or feel great pleasure in, but it does mean that you are choosing to do what you ultimately want to do. Satisfying that most basic desire is tantamount to serving self-interest as we have articulated it. Self-interest cannot be defined solely in terms of pleasure, happiness, or even advantage, but only in terms of desire to make a person’s life go best.

Talk of sacrifice calls to mind the well-worn example of the soldier who throws herself on a grenade to save her friends. This example is typically offered as a counterexample to disprove psychological egoism. The counterexample is ineffective, however,

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<sup>14</sup> Joel Marks, *Ethics without Morals: A Defense of Amoralism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> I use “foundational altruism,” “ultimate altruism,” and “pure altruism” synonymously.

because it could be that, seeing the opportunity, the soldier decides she would not be able to live with allowing her friends to die.<sup>16</sup> Or it could be that she sees this as a moment of glory that will allow her memory to live on. Or it could be that she believes there will be a heavenly reward, and so she will benefit after all. What is impossible is that the soldier does something that she does not want to do. In other words, an ultimately altruistic motivation is impossible.

Of course, it is possible that the soldier throws herself on the grenade automatically, without time for deliberation. A single case, like this, may appear purely altruistic on the surface, even though it is actually rooted in a larger habit or pattern that is self-interestedly motivated in its adoption and continuation. Often, we do not have time for conscious deliberation, but instead are moved by habits. When we do something out of habit and without deliberation, it does not count as an action. Some habits we do not choose to develop. However, the habits we do choose to develop are habits we believe will lead to our best interest overall.<sup>17</sup> In this case, out of self-interest, the soldier may have developed the habits of acting bravely and protecting comrades. These may seem like odd habits or virtues to cultivate in support of self-interest, but that is only if we conceive of self-interest as crass and selfish.<sup>18</sup>

By way of comparison with the soldier, consider that planting a tree whose shade I will not live long enough to enjoy might seem devoid of self-interest—but it is not.<sup>19</sup> I take personal satisfaction in the

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<sup>16</sup> Slote, “Egoism and Emotion,” p. 327, argues that avoiding feelings of guilt and desiring to be liked are neither egoistic nor altruistic, but rather occupy a space between egoism and altruism. I disagree. The motives in such cases may be a blend of egoism and altruism such that the prevailing tone is rather neutral, but the ultimate motive will always be egoism.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Olson, “Morally valuable acts of self-sacrifice are explained as exemplifications of habit-patterns themselves deliberately cultivated for the promotion of self-interest” (*The Morality of Self-Interest*, p. 35).

<sup>18</sup> See Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* vol. 13 (1984), pp. 134-71. Railton develops the position of “sophisticated consequentialism” in which the agent does not “bring a consequentialist calculus to bear on his every act” (*ibid.*, p. 153). For its similarities to Railton’s view, the egoism I am positing might be called “sophisticated egoism.”

<sup>19</sup> This example is inspired by Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Zorba the Greek* (New

thought of the shade that the tree will provide. Of course, the defender of altruism might want to say that to count as altruistic, an act does not have to be purely, that is, 100%, for another person; it just has to be done more for the other person than for yourself. What that means is unclear, though. Does that mean it benefits the other person more than it benefits oneself? On that consequentialist account, it is trivially true that I do altruistic acts all the time. Or does it mean that I am doing the action partly for myself but I am doing it more for someone else? How could that be? Doing something for someone else is like feeling someone else's pain, metaphorically possible but literally impossible. It is impossible for me literally to feel another's pain or joy. I can only feel my own pain or joy in response to my own perception of their pain or joy. If I consciously decide to do something, it is because I have decided that, all things considered, this is what I want to do.<sup>20</sup> Thus, I am ultimately doing it for myself, even though it may benefit someone else much more and even though it may cause me harm. So, yes, it is possible, and indeed common, to consider others in choosing one's actions. If consideration of others is all we mean by altruism, then yes, altruistic elements can be layered on top of an egoistic foundation.

### 3. The Critique of Pure Altruism

Mark Mercer says, "It seems a mere tautology that it is never intentional of an agent that she takes a course of action she finds less attractive than another course of action she believes open to her."<sup>21</sup> Though it is a tautology to say that everyone pursues self-interest in this way as we have defined it, it is a tautology that bears repeating against those who would obscure it. Sometimes, a tautology is not obvious to everyone. That everyone acts in self-interest may be tautological when understood in a certain way, but so is  $6/3 + 6/3 = 4$ . There is an ontological relationship between egoism and action, but that does not mean there is a semantic identity. Just as it is worth

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York: Simon & Schuster, 1952).

<sup>20</sup> This is akin to the position that Shane Courtland defends in his "Lomasky on Practical Reason: Personal Values and Metavalues," *Reason Papers* vol. 29 (2007), pp. 83-104. Courtland writes, "The key to personal value is that the end is perceived as being of value simply because it is the agent's own" (ibid., p. 83).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Mercer, "In Defence of Weak Psychological Egoism," *Erkenntnis* vol. 55 (2001), p. 228.

pointing out the ontological identity of water and H<sub>2</sub>O because they are not semantically identical, so it is worth pointing out the ontological identity of egoistic action and intentional action because they are not semantically identical. That is, just as some primitive people may not realize that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, so plenty of people do not realize that intentional action is ultimately egoistic.<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, the tautology is not trivial because highlighting it frees people from the tyranny of the impossible ideal of pure altruism.

It might be objected, though, that the tautology does not really deliver egoism. Thus, W. D. Glasgow asks:

Is it really feasible then, for the egoist to adopt the obvious, and nowadays popular, solution, namely, that his doctrine expresses a conceptual truth? This means that any action, properly so called, must always conform to at least one condition: it is in accordance with what the agent considers to be his own interests. This, however, is a purely formal condition. Consequently, there is no logical limit to what he might consider to be his own interests. So it is possible for an individual to identify his own interests with those of other people: he might value other people's interests as much as, or more than, his own. But if psychological egoism as a conceptual truth allows this possibility, where is the egoism? To treat it as a conceptual truth is indeed to destroy it.<sup>23</sup>

The mistake in Glasgow's description is that it is not possible to value other people's interests as much as or more than one's own. The interests of others can be merged with one's own, but as a part of one's interests they will never be greater than the whole of one's interests. The egoism remains. It simply is not the ugly or selfish egoism that some want to impute to psychological egoism.

A story told about Abraham Lincoln supplies a prime example of unselfish egoism. In the midst of defending psychological egoism in

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<sup>22</sup> These are all points that Joel Feinberg misses in his discussion of psychological egoism and tautology in his "Psychological Egoism," in *Reason and Responsibility*, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), pp. 495-96.

<sup>23</sup> W. D. Glasgow, "Broad on Psychological Egoism," *Ethics* vol. 88 (1978), p. 368.



discussion on a coach, Lincoln asked the driver to stop so that he could rescue some pigs. When his discussion partner suggested that Lincoln's actions disproved his theory, Lincoln responded that the truth was quite the opposite, that he took the action for himself. Lincoln reportedly said, "I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see?"<sup>24</sup> What can you say to Lincoln? That he was not serious? I take Lincoln to be serious, and even if he was not, I would be serious in saying the same thing. Can you say to Lincoln that he is overanalyzing things? Perhaps. But, speaking for Lincoln, I would say that you are not analyzing things deeply enough.<sup>25</sup> Can you say to Lincoln that he is missing the point, that the very fact that the pain of the pigs upsets him shows that he is ultimately motivated by concern for others?

This last is the response that Bishop Joseph Butler would have given. Butler argues that it must be the case that, sometimes, we are motivated ultimately by the desire to help others. In such cases we do not act in order to attain satisfaction. Rather, it is in the fulfillment of

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<sup>24</sup> James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 69; see also Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," p. 496.

<sup>25</sup> Mercer says, "from the psychological egoist's perspective, those who deny psychological egoism have not earned the comfort their attitudes bring them. There is something disturbingly pollyannaish about thinking that people can on occasion set their preferences and plans, their wants and desires, their likes and dislikes, aside, and something viciously distasteful in the idea that it is ever appropriate that they should. To cling to the view that entirely selfless actions are both possible and, sometimes, just what is called for, is not so much to think that people really are capable of right action for the right reasons as it is to refuse to grow up, to refuse in principle to take pleasure in the world as it is, and to enjoy one's own contingent personality. What is admirable in the person who sacrifices his life in assisting others is not that he acted rightly despite his inclinations, but rather that he was so strongly inclined to be concerned for others. Perhaps it is true that sometimes psychological egoists display a knowingness of the inner recesses of the human heart that gets annoying, just as those who think selfless altruism possible can be insufferably smug and self-righteous, though there is nothing in either position that makes it inevitable that its partisans will be annoying or insufferable. Still, it seems to me, if cynical knowingness is a risk taken by those who would put away childish things, it is very much a risk worth running" ("In Defence of Weak Psychological Egoism," p. 235).

that desire to help others that we find satisfaction.<sup>26</sup> As Wayne Johnson captures it:

Butler argues that while we do get satisfaction when the object of our desire is attained, this does not show that it was the resulting satisfaction itself which we desired. The Psychological Egoist mistakenly believes that we want to do something because of the satisfaction we will get from doing it. Butler maintains the reverse; we get satisfaction from doing something because we wanted to do that thing. We did not help the injured child in order to get the satisfaction which followed; rather, we gained satisfaction from helping an injured child because what we desired was help for the child, not our satisfaction.<sup>27</sup>

Butler, though, simply gets it backward in his understanding of human psychology. As Scott Berman argues:

It is wrong to suppose that a human *could* want some external object for its own sake because in order for a human to want some particular external object at all, she must be able to integrate her beliefs about what's best given her circumstances into an initially indefinite thought-dependent desire for what's best given her circumstances.<sup>28</sup>

As Berman highlights, the view that we inherit from Butler, namely, that humans can want objects or states of affairs completely apart from themselves, is misguided. What is more, this view is pernicious because it sets us up for failure in meeting Butler's Christian ideal of selflessness every time we look deeply into the motivation for our actions.

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<sup>26</sup> Joseph Butler, "Sermon XI," in *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, in *British Moralists: 1650-1800*, ed. D. D. Raphael, vol. 1 (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), pp. 365-66.

<sup>27</sup> Wayne G. Johnson, "Psychological Egoism: Noch Einmal," *Journal of Philosophical Research* vol. 17 (1992), p. 256.

<sup>28</sup> Scott Berman, "A Defense of Psychological Egoism," in *Desire, Identity, and Existence: Essays in Honor of T. M. Penner*, ed. Naomi Reshotko (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 2003), p. 146.

Speaking in terms of first-order and second-order desires, Johnson likewise exposes the mistake in Butler's reasoning:

Any first order desire must be accompanied by the second order desire of self-love before an action would be reasonably undertaken. This second order desire clearly involves a motive which is either self-regarding or has a self-referential stimulus. Thus Butler fails to demonstrate that we are not aiming at our happiness when we act on a first order desire.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, it may not be our happiness, but rather something else in our self-interest, that we are pursuing.<sup>30</sup> Butler discusses the situation in which a person pursues revenge even though it will ultimately leave the person himself worse off.<sup>31</sup> This would seem to suggest that Butler is correct in arguing that we sometimes ultimately want something external to us for its own sake, in this case the harm done to another person through revenge. This is not correct, however. Rather, the person seeks revenge in order to satisfy a desire that he cannot bring himself to ignore. He thus considers pursuit of revenge to be in his self-interest; it is a desire that he ultimately endorses. He recognizes that scratching that itch will leave a scar, but concludes that scratching the itch is nonetheless what he wants to do. He would prefer that it leave no scar, but he is irrationally overcome with the emotional desire to scratch the itch despite the inevitable scar.

Clearly, I am not suggesting that everyone always coldly calculates what will be in their self-interest. The decision-making process is usually much more subtle, and can even be self-deceptive. Indeed, motivation is often so influenced by biochemistry that we do not ourselves know why we do the things we do; it is not always completely transparent to us what our motives are. And, of course, not

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<sup>29</sup> Johnson, "Psychological Egoism," p. 257.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Nilsson does a fine job of showing what is wrong with Butler's argument, and then he uses Butler's argument as the basis for a better argument against psychological hedonism. I am not convinced by Nilsson's argument against psychological hedonism, but in any event the argument does not refute the broader view that I argue for, namely, psychological egoism. See Peter Nilsson, "Butler's Stone and Ultimate Psychological Hedonism," *Philosophia* vol. 41 (2013), pp. 545-53.

<sup>31</sup> See Butler, "Sermon XI."

everything we do follows from deliberation. Rather, some things we do from unthinking habit. Indeed, lots of our mental activity is unconscious. For example, we may eat something believing that we have chosen to eat it because it is good for us, when the deeper reason is that, without our knowing it, the item contains caffeine, which we find stimulating. Likewise, we may think we are choosing to do something because it will help someone else, when in fact the deeper motivation is that we desire the feeling that will accompany the release of oxytocin upon helping the other person. If kicking old ladies produced oxytocin, we would see a lot more of that behavior. But evolution has made it so that helping others, particularly kin and those in close proximity, produces oxytocin. This is not to say that we always consciously intend to produce a helper's high with the release of oxytocin, but it is nonetheless foundational to our motivation—we would lose the desire to help if there were no good feelings that resulted.

Some may be troubled that, by this reasoning, psychological egoism is unfalsifiable.<sup>32</sup> This should not be troubling, however, because we are considering a conceptual claim, not an empirical claim. The thesis of psychological egoism is a tautology, and tautologies are not falsifiable. No one has yet devised an experiment that can conclusively settle the matter empirically.<sup>33</sup> For that reason, the focus of this article is on the conceptual claim. The value of exposing the

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<sup>32</sup> Hun Chung, "Psychological Egoism and Hobbes," *Filozofia* vol. 71 (2016), p. 202.

<sup>33</sup> C. Daniel Batson has devised experiments that he believes disprove psychological egoism; see C. Daniel Batson, "Altruism and Prosocial Behavior," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. D. T. Gilbert and S. T. Fiske, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp. 282-316. On the other side, Robert Cialdini has done experiments to show the possibility of psychological egoism; see Robert B. Cialdini, "Altruism or Egoism?: That Is (Still) the Question," *Psychological Inquiry* vol. 2 (1991), pp. 124-26. See also Robert B. Cialdini et al., "Reinterpreting the Empathy-Altruism Relationship: When One into One Equals Oneness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* vol. 73 (1997), pp. 481-94. For discussion of Batson and the extent to which his experiments do not disprove psychological egoism, see Steven Stich, John M. Doris, and Erica Roeder, "Altruism," in *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. John M. Doris and the Moral Psychology Research Group (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 169-201.

tautology to the light of day, as we have seen, is to free us from the impossible ideal of pure altruism.

#### 4. It's All about Self-Interest

From an objective standpoint, self-interest is what would make a person's life go best.<sup>34</sup> To see why we inevitably act in our perceived self-interest, consider that the question "Why act in my self-interest?" is baffling, almost nonsensical. The answer is "Because it is in your self-interest." As in the case of the revenge-seeker, people may be mistaken about what really is in their self-interest, but not whether they have a good and ultimate reason to act in their self-interest.<sup>35</sup> The details of self-interest will vary considerably from one individual to the next and even for the same individual across time; one size does not fit all. Self-interest is not strictly identifiable with pleasure or happiness or advantage.<sup>36</sup> Rather, self-interest is a matter of what will make one's life go best. Of course, a lot can be learned from empirical study to offer generalizations about what will typically maximize pleasure, well-being, happiness, satisfaction, or whatever may be aimed at as constituent of self-interest. Still, the things we take satisfaction and pleasure in are not completely under our control. I enjoy walking the dog, but this enjoyment is not chosen. My wife does not enjoy walking the dog, and this is not chosen either. I walk the dog for the pleasure and satisfaction in doing so, even though that pleasure and satisfaction are related to the pleasure and satisfaction the walk brings to the dog. I am not ultimately doing it for the dog but for myself.

We have an objective self-interest in any given situation, even if we do not know with certainty what it is and even if (like the exact number of stars in the universe) it is impossible to know it, practically speaking. An all-knowing being could know my objective self-interest with certainty, even if I cannot. My objective self-interest is a

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<sup>34</sup> There is an objective answer to what would make the person's life go best, even though there is no universal, objective formula for what makes life go best for all humans.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. David Copp, "The Ring of Gyges: Overridingness and the Unity of Reason," in *Self-Interest*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., and Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 105.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Mark Mercer, "Psychological Egoism and Its Critics," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* vol. 36 (1998), p. 558.

metaphysical fact no matter how epistemologically elusive it may be. We can specify some things that will almost certainly be against most people's objective self-interest, for example, shooting heroin with an HIV-infected needle.<sup>37</sup> But even examples such as this will have exceptions. After all, if one already has AIDS and a heroin addiction, then in some circumstance it may be in one's self-interest to shoot heroin with an HIV-infected needle.<sup>38</sup>

The individual will not always be the best judge of what will make her life go best, that is, what her objective self-interest is. The revenge-seeker, for example, may convince herself that the immediate pleasure of taking revenge is objectively in her self-interest, whereas her friend can see that it is not. It is a common feature of human action that we hyperbolically discount future costs in favor of present desires. As a result, people are often no better at resisting present desires in the name of prudence than in the name of morality.<sup>39</sup> That is, we may rationalize and convince ourselves that something is in our objective self-interest when it is not.

Kant gives the example of a shopkeeper who passes up the opportunity to cheat a customer not out of a sense of duty, but because he realizes it is not in his self-interest to cheat the customer.<sup>40</sup> Acting in self-interest is not necessarily the same as acting prudently; self-interested motivation is inevitable, whereas prudence is not. All actions are ultimately self-interested, but not all actions are prudent in the sense of being wise, practical, and well-considered. Kant's shopkeeper may have been both self-interested and prudent, but a different shopkeeper who rationalized that it was somehow in his self-interest to cheat the customer would have been self-interested but probably imprudent. Like the first shopkeeper, he did what all of us do, which is that he did what he perceived to be in his self-interest, although it was probably not prudent and may ultimately turn out not to have been in

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<sup>37</sup> Kelly Rogers, "Beyond Self and Other," in *Self-Interest*, ed. Paul, Miller, and Paul, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Of course, such a person may well have taken actions against his self-interest that led to contracting HIV and developing a heroin addiction, but not necessarily.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. David Schmitz, "Self-Interest: What's in It for Me?" in *Self-Interest*, ed. Paul, Miller, and Paul, p. 121.

<sup>40</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak 397.

his objective self-interest. Of course, yet another shopkeeper may have been both prudent and self-interested in cheating a customer. Much depends on the particular circumstances.

### 5. The Sacrifice Bunt and the Last Doughnut

Does the concept of sacrifice make sense under psychological egoism? Yes, but only in a limited sense. One can still sacrifice for one's children, even sacrifice one's life. All that one cannot do is what one does not want to do. Joshua May asks, "Does it not seem, for example, that your motivation to promote the well-being of your children, say, isn't instrumental to any other desire to benefit yourself?"<sup>41</sup> I may be perceived as a monster for saying so, but no. Indeed, my children are a good example of what psychologists mean by the merging of self and other.<sup>42</sup> As Robert Cialdini et al. say, "Our view [is] that the perception of oneness with a needy other generates empathic concern and that the experience of empathic concern generates the perception of oneness. However, it appears to be oneness and not empathic concern that mediates help."<sup>43</sup> C. Daniel Batson disagrees with Cialdini's interpretation, claiming that the experiences of oneness that Cialdini speaks of are metaphorical.<sup>44</sup> Slote disputes Batson and offers another interpretation, saying, "There is no reason to call them metaphorical, and it makes more sense to interpret them as invoking or involving qualitative identity, oneness, or sameness rather than numerical."<sup>45</sup>

I disagree. The oneness is not merely a metaphor, nor is it a matter of equivocation such that the oneness is qualitative rather than numerical. Actually, it is a matter of perception. Thanks in part to

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<sup>41</sup> May, "Egoism, Empathy, and Self-Other Merging," p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Courtland's discussion of metavalues and personal identity, "Lomasky on Practical Reason," pp. 93-100.

<sup>43</sup> Cialdini et al., "Reinterpreting the Empathy-Altruism Relationship," p. 489. See also Jon K. Maner et al., "The Effects of Perspective Taking on Motivations for Helping: Still No Evidence for Altruism," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* vol. 28 (2002), pp. 1601-10.

<sup>44</sup> C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 159.

<sup>45</sup> Slote, "Egoism and Emotion," p. 327.

human evolution, I see my children's interests and my own as forming a larger whole—call it the team's interests. Just as a baseball player may sacrifice bunt to move a runner over for the good of her team, so will I do something for the good of my team by helping my children. The bunter is sacrificing ultimately for her own well-being inasmuch as she regards the team's well-being as an important part of her own well-being. Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for my sacrifices for the benefit of my children and our team. Those are only for the cases where my own self-interest in doing something for my children is not more naked and apparent. To be clear, the perception of oneness is largely involuntary, although it can sometimes be cultivated. A team may be as small as two members, and the perception of oneness applies not just to an abstract entity, the team, but to particular members of the team as well.

The foregoing analysis is not meant to endorse group selection. Quite the contrary, it is meant to endorse the theory that genes, not individuals or groups, are the basis of evolutionary selection. Evolution has inclined us to favor those nearby because they are most likely to be kin who share our genes. Thus, potentially experiencing oneness with those nearby, seeing them as members of a team, enhances the prospects of survival for our genes.

So altruism, in the pure sense of acting for others *with no concern for oneself*, is impossible. If I freely perform an action, then it is because I prefer to perform that action, even if I am mistaken in thinking that it is in my objective self-interest. Altruism is possible only in the limited, impure sense of acting with concern for others. But the interests of others are never wholly separable from our own interests; we will be affected positively in benefiting others. The more obvious negatives may grab our attention, but there are always positives as well. As Nietzsche says, “anyone who has really made sacrifices knows that he wanted and got something in return.”<sup>46</sup> Continuing along this line of explanation, Ayn Rand says, “If a man who is passionately in love with his wife spends a fortune to cure her of a dangerous illness, it would be absurd to claim that he does it as a ‘sacrifice’ for her sake, not his own.”<sup>47</sup> On a more mundane level, it is

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), sec. 220.

<sup>47</sup> Ayn Rand, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 44-45.



in my interest to treat my wife well. If I simply selfishly do what I want whenever I want without regard for her wishes, I will ultimately alienate her, and in doing so act against my own objective self-interest. If I leave the last doughnut for my wife, the negatives are obvious: my immediate desire and hunger go unsatisfied. But there are possible positives, less obvious and direct. My wife may appreciate my thoughtfulness and reciprocate. So it makes sense that we generally make sacrifices for people in close proximity to us rather than people far removed from us; the benefits are more likely to come our way. As Nietzsche says, “Egoism is the law of perspective applied to feels: what is closest appears large and weighty, and as one moves farther away size and weight decrease.”<sup>48</sup>

Along similar lines, Adam Smith considers a hypothetical earthquake in China that kills one hundred million people. Smith says that the typical European would express sorrow and melancholy upon hearing the news. He adds, however:

The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions [sic] of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.<sup>49</sup>

There is a ready explanation for this. Those people are not on his team, except in the vaguest, most extended sense in which they all belong to the human team. This typical European would be more disturbed by the loss of a single person in his family or, for that matter, by the prospect of the loss of his little finger. Of course, the world has become smaller since Smith’s time, thanks to media and communication technology. We now see vivid images of suffering people around the world, and we forget distant suffering less easily than we did in Smith’s time. We may thus be inclined to aid people suffering in

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), sec. 162.

<sup>49</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1976), III.I.46.

distant lands, but the suffering of those nearby still tends to pull harder at our heartstrings. Some would say that we should cultivate a sense of oneness with the whole human team. Perhaps, but that oneness would not come easily, and the emotional consequences might be too much for most people to bear.

## 6. Fictional Case Studies

To illustrate the argument thus far, let us consider two fictional examples. Jordan Belfort, as portrayed in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, is a caricature of the egoist, concerned with his self-interest in only the most narrow and unenlightened sense. He is ready, willing, and able to lie, cheat, and steal to get sex, drugs, and money. He has some good times, but predictably he meets a bad end, losing his money, his wife, and his freedom. It is unfortunate that when most people think of egoism, they think of someone like Jordan Belfort. Extreme cases of the foolish, selfish pursuit of self-interest exist, but so do cases like Azarya, the Rebbe's son in *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*.<sup>50</sup>

Secretly, Azarya no longer believes in God and wants to leave the isolated community of Hassidim in which he has been raised. However, just as he is about to make the decision to leave the community and become a mathematician, Azarya receives news that his father has died. Azarya is now faced with a heart-wrenching decision: Should he continue on his path, leaving the community to become a mathematician? Or should he return to his community who value him above all others as next in line to be the Rebbe? The community will be devastated if he leaves them now. If his father had not died, perhaps other arrangements could have been made, but now that is not possible. Azarya cannot bring himself to leave. Unlike Belfort, he cares for people and his community. On the psychological egoist's interpretation, it is no longer in Azarya's objective self-interest to leave the community. He would not be able to live well with the guilt from disappointing his community. Performing a sacrifice bunt, Azarya gives up his chance to swing for the mathematical fences and returns to give happiness to the team, the community of which he will always feel a part. Of course, we do not know what happens after the action of the novel concludes, and someone might interpret Azarya's decision differently. Perhaps it will turn out that he was mistaken about his objective self-interest. Perhaps his decision will cause him deep

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<sup>50</sup> Jordan Belfort, *The Wolf of Wall Street* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008); Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

unhappiness, making him ineffective as the Rebbe and community leader.

### 7. The Pursuit of Self-interest

The preceding fictional examples illustrate the extremes of selfish self-interest in the case of Belfort and enlightened self-interest in the case of Azarya. Most people are unlikely to be so extreme. Accepting psychological egoism, a person may still layer altruistic concern for others on top of the foundation of self-interest. Indeed, one's ethical code may call for such altruistic concern. Even if one rejects altruistic ethical codes, one is still likely to act like Kant's shopkeeper, who is motivated by self-interest in not cheating customers. "Every man for himself" does not have to mean stabbing your neighbor in the back. In fact, it can mean serving your neighbor well. Smith crystallized this insight when he noted, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest."<sup>51</sup> In the economic realm, the pursuit of self-interest is not necessarily an impediment to promoting a common good. Again, as Smith rightly observes, every individual "intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his original intention. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it."<sup>52</sup>

Many are willing to admit that Smith is correct about the economic realm (at least to a certain extent and perhaps reluctantly), while nonetheless insisting that in the personal realm pure altruism is called for. In Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, the despicable Jim Taggart responds to his wife's question, "What is it that you want to be loved for?" by saying, "I don't want to be loved *for* anything. I want to be loved for myself—not for anything I do or have or say or think. For myself—not for my body or mind or words or works or actions."<sup>53</sup> Taggart had deceived his wife into thinking that he was a sincere man of action rather than a duplicitous parasite, and now he wants her to

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<sup>51</sup> Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Bantam, 2003), pp. 23-24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 572.

<sup>53</sup> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Signet, 1957), p. 809.

love him anyway. Taggart was asking for too much. Loving another person means merging my identity with that person to some degree, making him part of my team, making his flourishing apiece with my flourishing. Ordinarily, another person must have some clear value in order for me to love him as a friend or spouse. Thus, Jim Taggart's wife no longer finds it possible to feel oneness with him.

Of course, none of us is perfectly loveable or worthy of love. Certainly, there will be conflicts in the pursuit of self-interest. *Contra* Slote, I remain optimistic, though, that a broad acceptance of psychological egoism would ultimately have good consequences. Although ultimate altruism is impossible, altruism in the form of concern for others can still be layered on top of the ultimate foundation and motivation of self-interest. In fact, this would be common in a world in which everyone accepted psychological egoism. Yes, upon accepting the truth of psychological egoism, some people would foolishly indulge themselves and hurt others, à la Jordan Belfort, but most would ultimately learn to live with, and even cherish, the responsibility. Like students away at college for the first year, many might overindulge for a time, but most would ultimately realize that they hurt themselves by doing so.<sup>54</sup>

Even though we do not all share the same self-interest, we can help one another in the pursuit of self-interest. We can praise those who realize that their self-interest incorporates the interest of others. Robert Olson says, "by praising a man for acting consistently in his own best interests one encourages him to cultivate habits of rationality and rational self-control with all of the social advantages which this entails."<sup>55</sup> None of this is easy, however. Acquiring self-knowledge, developing prudence, and applying them both in pursuit of self-interest requires discipline. But not only is the effort worth it for the individual's own sake, it is worth it for the individual to help others in their development as part of a more livable society. In Olson's words: "[I]f each of us were prepared to make reasonable sacrifices for the sake of more or less distant personal goods, the result would be a state of society in which private and social interests tend to coincide, thus

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<sup>54</sup> This all holds, even if one rejects moral realism for reasons other than the impossibility of pure altruism, as I do. See William Irwin, *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 89-128.

<sup>55</sup> Olson, *The Morality of Self-Interest*, p. 9.

eliminating the ‘need’ for anyone to make unreasonable sacrifices for the good of others.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, some people pursue self-interest broadly and wisely and some pursue it narrowly and unwisely, but all pursue it. Ultimately, it is in everyone’s self-interest for everyone to pursue it wisely. As we have seen, psychological egoism does not imply that we cannot, or should not, care about others. Prudence can still motivate us to care about others a great deal.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> None of these fine folks should be mistaken for agreeing with me, but they all helped despite my hard-headedness: Jim Ambury, Shane Courtland, Fred Feldman, Joel Marks, Mark Mercer, Edwardo Perez, and two anonymous referees.

