

# Psychological egoism



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One clarification needed to understand the view involves knowing what should count as a genuine *action*. There are, after all, some things which I do which I clearly do not do out of self-interest -- yesterday I tripped on some stairs, and surely I didn't do *that* out of self-interest. But, equally obviously, I didn't do that for the sake of others; rather, I didn't do it for any reason at all, since I did not do it on purpose. For the purposes of the discussion of psychological egoism, we will be setting such actions to the side, and focusing only on *intentional actions* --- actions done on purpose. Psychological egoism is a claim about all intentional actions.

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But a further clarification is needed to understand and evaluate psychological egoism. We need to ask: what does it mean for an action to be self-interested?





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Is the second premise of the argument true?

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Is the second premise of the argument true?

Is this argument valid? What does the example of the ocean liner and the consumption of coal show about this?





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About any such case, the hedonistic psychological egoist can come up with something to say. For example, he can say that in the case of the diaper changing, that I believe that changing this diaper will lead to her being healthy, and observation of her being healthy will cause feelings of pleasure in me.

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Are explanations of this sort plausible? Should they convince someone who is not already a psychological egoist?



Of course, to raise problems with hedonistic psychological egoism is not to show that psychological egoism is false -- it just shows that the psychological egoist should come up with some definition of “self-interested action” other than “action which aims at bringing about sensations of pleasure in the agent.”

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One intuitively plausible idea about how to do this is to say that self-interested actions are those in which the person performing the action *aims at satisfaction of his or her own desires*. Let's call this *desire satisfaction psychological egoism*.



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(A note on terminology: Feinberg classes this view as a version of hedonistic psychological egoism; it seems to me clearer to keep the two apart.)



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For example, consider my action of showing up for lecture today. Perhaps it is the case that I was sitting in my office, considering my various desires, and found among them my desire not to be fired. I then came to desire that this desire not to be fired be satisfied, and it was this that caused me to come to lecture.

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Maybe some actions are like this, but it is not very plausible that all actions are like this. For one thing, it makes actions way more sophisticated than they plausibly are. It seems that in many cases I am moved to action by a desire like a desire to get out of the cold, or a desire for pleasure --- I am not always moved to action *by a desire about another desire*.

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We need to come up with a better interpretation of the idea that all actions are aimed at the satisfaction of our own desires.





A natural idea is that our actions are not aimed at the satisfaction of some desire in the sense that the desire which moves us to action is always a desire about some other desire, but rather the simpler fact that *we are always moved to action by our own desires*. Perhaps all of our actions are self-interested in the sense that they are always motivated by our own desires.

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A benefit of this sort of 'desire satisfaction psychological egoism' is that we can give a very plausible argument that every intentional action is brought about by one of the agent's own desires: after all, if an action is *not* caused by one of the desires of the agent, then it seems as though it must have been done by accident rather than on purpose, and so is not an intentional action.

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To establish the truth of the desire satisfaction version of psychological egoism, then, we need to show only one more thing: that any action caused by *my* desires is done in *my* interests.



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On one interpretation of the theory, it says that we always act out of a desire that some desire of ours be satisfied. This interpretation seems implausible, because we sometimes act out of a desire for something -- like chocolate, or money -- other than one of our own desires.

We can sum up our discussion of the 'desire satisfaction' version of psychological egoism as follows.

On one interpretation of the theory, it says that we always act out of a desire that some desire of ours be satisfied. This interpretation seems implausible, because we sometimes act out of a desire for something -- like chocolate, or money -- other than one of our own desires.

On a second interpretation of the theory, it says that we always act out of *our own* desires. This version of the theory seems to be true, but it does not seem to imply that we always act out of self-interest. To get this result, we need to add the assumption that all of our desires are self-interested, which is (at least closely related to) what we were trying to establish.



But the psychological egoist is not out of options. Let's consider a third version of psychological egoism, which defines 'self-interested actions' as 'actions done in order to further one's own welfare or well-being.' Let's call this *welfare psychological egoism*.

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This is similar in form to hedonistic psychological egoism, but aims to improve upon that theory by allowing that we sometimes have self-interested motives other than desire for sensations of pleasure. So, for example, sometimes we might eat food to satisfy our hunger, rather than just to cause sensations of pleasure.

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Can we give any argument for this sort of view?



One sort of argument might be based on the idea that humans evolved by natural selection. Oversimplifying, the theory of evolution by natural selection leads us to expect, in general, that evolution will favor those traits which improve the chances of the the bearer of the trait having a relatively large number of viable offspring. So, if this theory is correct, we should expect that the tendency to help others at the expense of one's own reproductive prospects will not be passed on to future generations -- unless that tendency leads, in some other way, to the propagation of your own genes.



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This last point might help to explain the example of diaper-changing we discussed above. Perhaps in that sort of case, I am not acting directly in my own self-interest, but am acting in the interest of the propagation of my own genes, by doing what I can to ensure that my daughter will remain healthy until an age at which she too will be able to reproduce, and hence pass along (in part) my genetic material.

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On this view, what we call 'altruistic behavior' is really just 'biological altruism', which is a way of (to speak metaphorically) furthering the welfare not of yourself, but of your own genetic material.



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Of course, if there are exceptions to the general rule stated above, then that general rule, and this version of psychological egoism, is false. Psychological egoism is not the view that people are quite often selfish, which is clearly true, but that they always are.



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If this is right, then neither interpretation provides a claim which is both established by the theory of evolution, and favors welfare psychological egoism.



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And there are many other cases, perhaps the clearest of which are cases of self-sacrifice. These can be extreme -- giving your life to save others in a war, for example -- or minimal, like a case in which you hold a door for someone in bad weather even though you are cold and don't feel like it, and are in a strange city and never expect to see them again.

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As with our discussion of hedonistic psychological egoism, we can concoct stories about how these actions could be aimed at increasing one's welfare: for example, the soldier could be doing this to avoid feelings of shame in the future, and the door could be held in the expectation that that person will do similar things for you in the future.

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The problem is that, as with the examples discussed in connection with hedonistic psychological egoism, these explanations seem a bit forced. One way to see this is by looking at the implausible ascriptions of beliefs they require: does the soldier really think that the shame would be so great that the best way to maximize his own well-being is immediate death which avoids the shame? Does the person holding the door really hold the wildly implausible belief that they will see this person again, and that this person will be in a position to help them?



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1. Is there any version of psychological egoism which is more plausible than the versions we have considered?
2. Is there any good reason to believe psychological egoism?