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Psychological Egoism

At some time in your life you will have heard somebody say that all acts are basically selfish, that whatever anyone does she does for herself, or for her own gratification, and that it would be stupid to believe anything else. According to people like this, the idea that anyone ever does anything for others, or for the sake of some ideal or principle not directly related to her or his own private satisfaction, is nothing but pretense, hypocrisy, or delusion. There is nothing trivial about this view of things, nor is it just an intellectual game, for if what these people believed were true, then acting out of care, concern, or sympathy for others would be literally impossible. Nor could there be concern, apart from one's own benefit (e.g. keeping up appearances), for justice or the public good, or even for being decent or honest, unless to give oneself a pat on the back for one's goodness, or in order to feel superior to others.

Of course, this would apply to everybody. It's not just that you don't give a damn for anyone else; no one else gives a damn for you either, or for anything else besides himself. If anyone does anything for me, that's only because he wants something in return, or because it somehow satisfies some selfish desire. If all this were true there could be no love, or even friendship, except as an exchange of favors, a kind of mutual back-scratching. Everybody is basically out for himself or herself and let there be no pretending about it. And since we have to share a world, everyone is in competition with everyone else for the goodies of pleasure, status, power, and material wealth. That is the name of the game. Even the so-called "good" people, those who pretend to themselves or to others that they have any concerns besides their own profit, are really only concerned with reputation or advantage or appearances, or how good it makes them feel. Everyone is fundamentally selfish. That is how human nature is.

Such a belief, if it is taken seriously, is bound to affect one's attitude toward

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oneself and other people and to color one's whole outlook on life – to color it cynical in fact. If it is true, cynicism about human pretensions to acting for anything but self-satisfaction is fully justified. If it is false, it is a terrible mistake. If it is true, the only reason we have for being decent to one another is self-protection, and what passes as love or friendship is nothing but self-interest. If it is false, we have no reason for doubting that we can, and sometimes really do, care about things other than ourselves including, most importantly, other people. What different worlds these are, and what a difference it must make to our lives, both as individuals and as a society, which one of these worlds is the real one, and whether we've got it right or wrong.

Psychological Egoism Stated

The view we have been considering here is called by philosophers *psychological egoism*, “psychological” because it states a belief about human motivation, and “egoism” because it claims that all human motives are *self-regarding*. This term “self-regarding” may be the first technical term or “term of art” that you will have encountered in doing philosophy. Many philosophers prefer it to “selfish” because, unlike that word, the word “self-regarding” is *morally neutral*. If we say that an act or a person is selfish, we usually mean to imply that there is something wrong about the act or something bad about the person, but if we say that an act is *self-regarding*, all we mean is that the person is doing it for himself or herself, and there is nothing inherently wrong or bad about that.

Many of the things we do – eating, sleeping, brushing our teeth, going shopping or for a walk, going to a football game or a concert, long-range projects such as career planning, and many other things – we do for ourselves, but we would not normally call these things *selfish*. An act is not normally called selfish unless it is unfair to others or is mean and grasping when kindness and generosity are called for. Many acts are *innocently* self-regarding; only some self-regarding acts are selfish in the sense that they are mean or grasping or unfair, and therefore morally bad. Nevertheless – and this is important – while not all self-regarding acts are selfish in the sense that condemns them morally, we can and do call acts that are not self-regarding *unselfish*, and this is a form of moral praise.¹ Because only some self-regarding acts are selfish in the moral sense, we need the morally neutral term “self-regarding,” but we do not need the clumsy term “non-self-regarding” because acts that are not self-regarding are quite properly called unselfish, even if they do not involve any self-denial or self-sacrifice.²

The doctrine of psychological egoism, stated in a morally neutral way – not meaning to praise or blame – is that *all human acts are done from self-regarding*

motives. Nothing else, the psychological egoist insists, can seriously be believed. Though the psychological egoist need not claim that all acts are selfish in the *moral* sense, he will insist that there is no such thing as an unselfish act because there is no such thing as an act that is not self-regarding. But even if we state psychological egoism as "All acts are self-regarding" rather than "All acts are fundamentally selfish" we are still expressing a cynical or dark view of human nature. If goodness involves concern for something beyond oneself, say, genuine sympathy for others, then we are saying that goodness is impossible. We are saying that because no one can *help* but act exclusively for his or her own benefit, no one can really be good. According to this view, we are all trying to get the best we can for ourselves, and saying or believing anything else is either pretense and hypocrisy or foolish innocence.

It is important to see how very strong the position of psychological egoism actually is. *All* human acts, it states, actual acts or merely possible or imagined acts, are done from self-regarding motives; hence no act could be anything but self-regarding. *One single instance* of an act that was not self-regarding, whether actual or merely possible or imaginable, would be enough to prove the theory false. We can all agree that many acts are self-regarding and that some of these are selfish in the moral sense of being mean or grasping or unfair (and therefore wrong or bad), but the psychological egoist claims that every single act *must* be self-regarding, that nothing else is possible.

Of course, if this were true, while many acts would remain innocently self-regarding, we would all be selfish people by our very nature. Why? Because we would not be capable of real concern for others or for anything besides our own satisfaction, although we could not be blamed for our selfishness since there would be nothing we could do about it. That is why psychological egoism, though its claim is simply that all acts are self-regarding, really does seem to justify a cynical view of human nature. It is not that we are by nature evil. We cannot help being the completely self-regarding creatures that we are. But goodness, if it means acting in ways that are not self-regarding, say out of genuine concern for others, is simply beyond our powers. We all know that there are many people in the world who never do anything except for themselves, and we can say that these people are thoroughly selfish, true kindness and generosity being quite unknown to them. But the psychological egoist says that *everyone* is like this because *all* acts are self-regarding.

Understanding Psychological Egoism: Some Mistakes to Avoid

We must be careful here not to confuse a psychological egoist, who is someone who holds a certain view of human motivation, with a person whose every act is self-regarding and who is therefore selfish. Nor should we make

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the mistake of supposing that because there are many such selfish people in the world, psychological egoism is true. Psychological egoism is only true if *nobody* ever does *anything* that is not self-regarding. Nor, for that matter, are selfish people necessarily psychological egoists, for they may in fact believe that people sometimes do act from motives that are not self-regarding. They may regard such people as fools, or they may admire them while despising themselves for their own selfishness. Another mistake we must not make is to suppose that a person who opposes the doctrine of psychological egoism believes that *no* acts are self-regarding, or that there is anybody who is completely selfless. The opponent of psychological egoism only believes that *some* acts are not self-regarding, that we have no reason for believing that *every* act is self-regarding, that we *sometimes* really do care about something other than ourselves.

Finally, we must not make the mistake of supposing that psychological egoism is a theory of what sort of person we *ought* to be, or of how we *ought* to conduct our lives. That is to confuse psychological egoism, the theory that we *can only* act self-regardingly, with ethical egoism, the theory that we *should always* act for our own greatest advantage. Because it deals with the question of how we *should* conduct ourselves, ethical egoism is an ethical or a moral theory. Psychological egoism, on the other hand, because it deals only with *motivation*, is not an ethical but a psychological theory, according to which the only thing that *can* move us to action is self-interest. According to one form of *ethical* egoism, our one guide to dealing with anyone and anything should be our own profit, and anyone who thinks or acts otherwise is a fool. Nice guys finish last.³ This obviously implies that we could act in ways that were not self-regarding if we chose, but that this would be a foolish choice. But a common form of ethical egoism that goes hand in hand with psychological egoism is this: since we are all out for ourselves and it can't be any other way, the thing to do is to be as clever as you can at controlling things to your own advantage. Since we are all adversaries anyway (there are no nice guys), the thing to do is to get, or try to get, whatever it is you want, using whatever means are available. And why should the greatest rewards not go to those who are best able to bring it off? On either view, we are admirable to the extent that we are clever, forceful, and able to work things so that we come out on top. Domination is the name of the game.

Interestingly, if psychological egoism is true, no account of what we should do or be makes any sense except some form of ethical egoism. Virtue (the quality of character that is admirable) can only consist in being clever at pursuing your own advantage. People who conduct their lives in this way thus have an *interest* in psychological egoism being true, for if every act is necessarily self-interested, how could anyone be to blame for pursuing his own advantage to the best of his ability?

Psychological Egoism: a Seemingly Irrefutable Position

Some of you, reading this, will recognize psychological egoism as something you yourself believe, while others, strongly opposed to it, will remember the frustration of having got absolutely nowhere with somebody who was arguing for this view. That is because the defender of psychological egoism can take *any example whatever*, actual or invented, that is offered as an other-regarding or ideal-regarding act and find a plausible ulterior motive for it that is self-regarding. (The ulterior motive of an act is its true but hidden motive.) Here are some of the things offered by defenders of psychological egoism as the *real* motives for acts that are supposed not to be self-regarding. If I do someone a favor, that is because I expect something in return. If I appear to do something or stop myself from doing it for the sake of an ideal, such as protecting the environment for the sake of future generations, or in order not to be hurtful or dishonest or unjust, that is simply because, with my upbringing or my social conditioning (indoctrination), it would make me feel bad. If I seem to care about anyone at all, other than myself, that is only because of the threat of personal loss, or because I expect good treatment in return for the good treatment I give. If I display courtesy or kindness, that is only to make myself well thought of by others, and so on and so forth, endlessly.

In desperation, the opponent of psychological egoism will turn to acts of extreme heroism and bravery, either at the risk of losing one's life or in the certain knowledge that one will die: jumping into dangerous waters to save a child from drowning (social conditioning, says the psychological egoist, or not wanting to seem a coward, or wanting to be a hero), rushing into a burning house to save the occupants (same thing, says the psychological egoist), and finally and inevitably, the soldier who throws himself on a grenade, knowing he will die, in order to save his comrades. (If he didn't do it he would suffer so much from shame that he couldn't live with himself, says the psychological egoist.) The psychological egoist seems to be in a position where he cannot be defeated. It doesn't matter what is offered as an example of an act that is not self-regarding; it can always be rejected by producing a plausible-sounding ulterior motive that *is* self-regarding.

If pushed to the wall, the psychological egoist will usually say that if there is no obvious conscious ulterior motive, then there is an unconscious one. The act simply cannot be understood, the psychological egoist will say, unless its true motive is self-regarding. This absolute refusal to give up the position, however hard pressed, shows that the psychological egoist sees his position as certain beyond the possibility of doubt, without any need for observation or investigation or, as philosophers say, true and certain *a priori* (a term meaning independently of, or prior to, observation or investigation).⁴

The psychological egoist sees an act that is not self-regarding as something

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beyond the possibility of understanding. Such a notion is, to the psychological egoist, literally incomprehensible. Notice that even though the doctrine is used to justify cynicism about human nature, the psychological egoist does not suppose that people lack the power to act with regard to anything other than their own interest *because they are weak*. It is rather that, to the psychological egoist, the idea of an act that is not self-regarding simply *does not make sense*.

The psychological egoist may not realize that this is what she thinks; she may think she is drawing attention to a universal human weakness or failing. But her underlying belief, which is that we cannot even make sense of the notion of an act that is not self-regarding, is revealed by her refusal to accept any example, actual or imagined, as counting against her theory. In philosophers' jargon, her theory, because (knowingly or unknowingly) it is held to be true *a priori*, has *no empirical content*. (This is a technical way of saying that it has no basis at all in observation, investigation, or experiment.) It is just clear and certain, period. It cannot be doubted. There is no need to look and see. What we observe or might observe in the world does not make the slightest difference.

Psychological egoism is not, therefore, a theory about human nature *as it is actually found in the world*, for such a theory would have at least to allow for the *possibility* of evidence that would count against it. A theory about human nature of this kind would have to be *based on* what we actually find in the world. A theory of human motivation as it actually is *but that it was possible for it not to have been*, cannot be assumed in advance to be true, and so we cannot know automatically that any and every motive will conform to it. Certainly, it can easily be seen that many acts are self-regarding, some of them when they pretend not to be, but this fact does not make it a law of nature that every act is self-regarding. We are not forced to reject in advance *anything* offered as an example of an unselfish act. We are not forced to accommodate anything and everything to the theory of psychological egoism.

Psychological Egoism: Why Does it Seem so Certain?

Now when a person clings to a belief so strongly that he does not think anything *could* count against it, when he thinks that nothing could possibly show it to be false, this is a sure sign that, lurking underneath, there is something that one could understandably think to be true and certain without investigation. One takes it to be true *a priori* because denying it does not seem to make sense. Psychological egoism certainly looks like an example of this. What the psychological egoist says is that all human acts are self-regarding and that, in fact, you would have to be a fool not to see this right away. You don't even have to bother to investigate. We must ask: is there something here that

we can know on the basis of understanding alone, without investigation? Let's think carefully about this. Well, it really does seem absurd to deny that every human act is done to satisfy *some desire of the person whose act it is*, or, as philosophers say, some desire of the agent. For every conscious, voluntary, and intentional act – and we are not interested in any other kind – is done to achieve something that is actively desired by the person who does it, either for its own sake or as a means to some further desired end. *Otherwise we could not understand it as his or her act.* As her act it must have her motive which means that it must be done to satisfy her desire.

Two Principles Confused (Psychological Egoism Disarmed)

We seem to have uncovered, in the previous paragraph, a principle that we might very well be unwilling to give up under any circumstances, for giving it up would require us to believe that someone could do something without any motivation for doing it. The question now is: does this principle amount to a statement of psychological egoism? Look carefully, for the correct answer is “no.” Remember, what the psychological egoist says is that all acts are *self-regarding*. But this principle that we have just uncovered says nothing of the kind. It only says that agents always act to satisfy *their own* desires and that nothing else can be made sense of. It doesn't tell us anything at all about what the *object* of those desires might be, about what they are desires *for*. It doesn't rule out the possibility, for instance, that *I* have a desire for *your* well-being. The desire is still *mine* but it is not self-regarding. And so we have two principles, as follows:

- 1 Every act of every person is done to satisfy some desire of his or her own
- 2 Every act of every person is done to satisfy some self-regarding desire

These principles, although they are quite different, look very similar, so similar, in fact, that they can easily be confused, and it seems that this is what the psychological egoist has done. We have just seen that the first principle is arguably true *a priori*, for the reason that we cannot imagine what it could even *mean* to say that someone knowingly did something without having any desire to do it. She may not have wanted to do it because she liked doing it, or because she had a strong urge to do it, but at least she wanted to do it to bring about some further thing that she thought worth the effort, or to prevent something she wanted to avoid. So, in some way or other, she *wanted* to do it, and this desire was *her own*. Nothing else seems to make any sense.

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But this principle, unlike the second, does not say that the desire must be self-regarding. In fact, it leaves the question of what is desired completely open.

The psychological egoist has made the mistake – all unconsciously, of course – of attaching to the second principle (psychological egoism) the certainty that quite rightly belongs to the first. The two principles have been confused. *Own* desire is not the same as and does not imply *self-regarding* desire, and only the belief that it is or does could make psychological egoism seem certainly and indubitably true.

Psychological egoism has not been *disproven* by this argument, but the psychological egoist can no longer claim to occupy an impregnable fortress. If one is to go on defending the view, one must do so on the basis of evidence. Now, as has already been said, many supposedly unselfish acts really do have an ulterior motive that is self-regarding. In fact, any motive offered by the psychological egoist as the true underlying motive (ulterior motive) of an act supposed to be unselfish (not self-regarding) could be the real motive *sometimes*. But there must at least be reasons for suspicion based, say, on what we know about a person's character. Or we may know that the person obviously has something to gain by doing the thing in question (possibly a tax advantage). But there are many ordinary acts of kindness, compassion, and good will, where we have no reason at all to suspect that there is an ulterior motive, and the psychological egoist's claim that there must be one no longer has any force. Certainly, there are plenty of grounds for cynicism about many people's seemingly unselfish motives, but we run into examples every day where there is no reason to doubt, unless we appeal to the now discredited *a priori* version of psychological egoism, that the unselfish motive – simple kindness or concern, for instance – is genuine and real. There is no need to look for heroics; thinking of something other than oneself is a very ordinary thing. And, remember, the psychological egoist has been deprived of his (her) power. There is no longer any *must* about the matter.

Psychological Egoism: the Last Defence

But perhaps it is too early to proclaim victory. The hard-line psychological egoist is not finished yet. If we always act to satisfy our own desires, she says, doesn't this mean that we act *for the sake of* their satisfaction, and since this is *our own* satisfaction, doesn't that make all acts self-regarding? To this she may add that it is only the thought of the satisfaction that produces the desire, that without this thought there would be no desire. And so we really do always act to satisfy *ourselves*; no acts are *really* unselfish.

Before we can finish this off we must deal with an ambiguity in the notion of satisfaction. We say (1) that a *desire* is satisfied if, in fact, we get what we

want. This does not necessarily mean (2) that *we* are satisfied, for we might not find any value in the thing we wanted when we get it. And even if we are satisfied, that does not necessarily mean (3) that we have a *feeling* of satisfaction, if by that we mean a rush, a buzz, or a high.

Now, to answer this final objection. In sense (1) of satisfaction, a desire *just* is something that wishes to be satisfied, so simply to *have* the desire is to have the thought of its satisfaction. This is *a priori* and harmless — part of understanding what it is to have a desire. Like the first of our two principles, it leaves the question of what is desired completely open. No egoism is implied. Still, we do suppose (2) that getting what we want (the satisfaction of our desire) will satisfy *us*. Does this mean that it is really *for the sake* of this satisfaction that we act? Finally (3), suppose that when I get what I want I have a strong *feeling* of satisfaction. Does this mean that it had to be *for the sake* of this feeling that I acted, that I only did it for the kicks?

Let's consider an example. Suppose you have a headache, and I give you a pain-reliever because, out of sympathy or compassion, I do not want you to be in pain (I want you not to be in pain). If your headache does go away, not only is my desire satisfied, but my distress on your behalf is relieved and I am really pleased. In other words *I* am satisfied. I may even have a strong *feeling* of satisfaction. Does this mean that I did not really care about you — that I was only thinking of my own satisfaction? The answer here is “no,” for my satisfaction is precisely *in* your no longer suffering pain, and if I hadn't wanted you not to suffer, I would have received no satisfaction at all. *My satisfaction is dependent on my caring about you.* Nor did I act for the sake of the *feeling* of satisfaction, to get a particular kick, as a person does when, out of malice, hatred, envy, or spite, he tries to make another person suffer. (We can say that such a person takes pleasure in the other person's suffering, but he wants the other person to suffer *for the sake* of the pleasure that this gives him. The act is therefore self-regarding. Unlike the giver of the pain-reliever, he does not act for the other person's sake.) Certainly, I took pleasure in the relief of your pain, but I did not try to relieve your pain *for the sake* of the pleasure it gave me. The disappearance of your headache may have made me very happy, but that does not mean that I tried to cure it for the sake of my own happiness or to prevent my own misery, that I really did not care about you at all. In fact, if I had not cared about you I would have felt nothing. Not only does my feeling satisfied *not* mean that I acted for the sake of that feeling and not really for your sake at all, but my feeling of satisfaction *depends on* my having cared about you.

This does not mean, of course, that I *might* not have given you the pain-reliever to make you like me better, or just to demonstrate my powers, or to place you under an obligation or a debt to me. Any one of these things *could* be the true story sometimes, but nothing like this *has* to be true. We have no

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reason to doubt that I acted in this case simply in order to relieve your suffering (for the sake of relieving your suffering), and the fact that my success satisfied me or even gave me a feeling of satisfaction in no way changes this. It does *not* show that I was really only thinking of myself. Finally, it should now be plain, without further argument, that while I would not be motivated to do something without the thought of some satisfaction in it, that does not necessarily mean that it is *for the sake of* that satisfaction that I act. And when I am satisfied, it may be only because my desire for the relief of *your* pain or burden, for the sake of which I acted, has been satisfied. Because I am sympathetic and concerned, what satisfies *me* could easily be that something good has happened to *you*. It may very well have been for *your* sake and not my own that I acted.

Psychological Egoism: a Form of Moral Skepticism

There is a kind of moral theory, originated by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), which is a relatively benign form of ethical egoism.⁵ According to theories of this kind, morality is a matter of people agreeing among themselves to treat one another decently. This they will do for their own benefit, if they are smart, because trying to go it alone is too risky. Breaking the agreement would be discouraged by the threat of isolation and the loss of the benefits of cooperation. According to Hobbes, the parties to the agreement should willingly submit to a ruler or governing authority who or which would ensure by force or the threat of force (punishments for violators) that the most important rules, those ensuring peace and good order, were obeyed. Since it only benefits people to obey the rules if others are doing so too, they need to know that violations are discouraged in this way, for only then can they be sure that sticking to the rules won't be to their disadvantage. Theories of this kind are compatible with psychological egoism and often assume it to be true. And while, unlike other forms of ethical egoism, they do tell us that we should be decent to one another, this is for purely self-interested reasons. Moral goodness is still unrelated to anything beyond my own interest as distinct from, and in competition with, the interests of others. Such things as kindness, generosity, or concern for the common good beyond my own profit have no part in it.

To be a skeptic about something is to have doubts about its reality or even its possibility. If being morally good means not just thinking of ourselves all the time, then psychological egoism is a very serious form of moral skepticism. But we have now defused or taken the sting out of psychological egoism in its most dangerous, menacing, and persuasive-sounding form. This is the form that reveals itself upon inspection to be based upon a confusion of two

identical-looking but actually quite different principles. The first is a harmless one that can plausibly be claimed to be true *a priori*; the second is a threatening one (psychological egoism) that most certainly cannot. We are not required to discard, in advance, any theory of morality according to which being morally good involves sometimes thinking of something other than ourselves.

The Defeat of Psychological Egoism and the Possibility of Altruism

One final but very important point. You will notice that I have been careful to avoid the use of the word "altruism," even though egoism and altruism are often opposed. If an act is not egoistic, it is said, it must be altruistic, by which is meant selfless. But if a person always acts, necessarily, to satisfy some desire of his or her own, to do or bring about something he or she wants, and if she is pleased to do it or to bring it about and frustrated if she does not, how can we speak of altruism? She is not being selfless; she is doing what matters the most to her, even if it is for the good of another person or group or the community as a whole. In an important sense, there is no real sacrifice or self-denial involved – something usually claimed for altruistic acts. For how can we say that a person is denying himself when he is doing what matters the most to him? He may be giving up something he could otherwise have for himself, but this is his choice; this is what he prefers to do and he would not have it any other way. In an important sense, there is no such thing as altruism, if altruism means self-sacrifice, self-denial, or selflessness. A person is not denying herself in doing things that are not self-regarding; she is doing what means the most to her. She is doing precisely – and nothing else is possible – what she wants to do, and if her expectations are fulfilled, she is satisfied. Although unselfish acts are not egoistic, they are not altruistic either. We may call this the grain of truth in psychological egoism.

SUMMARY

- 1 Psychological egoism is the doctrine that every act of every human being is motivated by *self-regarding* considerations, and that it could not be any other way.
- 2 This would mean, if it were true, that no one could ever act for the sake of anything besides herself or himself – not for other people nor for any ideal such as justice or the betterment of the world.
- 3 If psychological egoism were true, I *could not* care about anything

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besides myself, and this would be true of everyone else as well. Therefore, any notion of moral goodness as involving concern for others, or for the community as a whole, or for any ideal, would be a vain and foolish notion.

- 4 Psychological egoism is not a moral theory but a theory of human motivation. Still, if it were true, it would justify cynicism about supposedly unselfish motives. Since most of us do see moral goodness as involving concern for something other than ourselves, it is a form of *moral skepticism*.
- 5 There is one kind of moral theory, however, that psychological egoism will allow, and that is *ethical egoism*. If psychological egoism is true, then everyone is really in competition with everyone else to get as much as he or she can for himself or herself. Ethical egoism can take the crude form that the admirable thing is to be *smart* at outdoing others in this competitive struggle.
- 6 Ethical egoism can also take the more refined form, first advocated by Hobbes, that since not everybody can make it big, and you can never know whether you will be a winner or a loser, it is better to enter into an agreement with everybody else to restrict your conduct so that people do not have to live in perpetual fear of one another. (This is a form of what is called *contractarianism*.) (Note that what is being said is that it is *in your interest* to enter into such agreement. There is no appeal to motives that are not self-regarding.)
- 7 Psychological egoism is an extremely nasty view of human nature – nobody really cares about anybody or anything else besides himself – and whether we believe it or not greatly affects our outlook on life. We should therefore examine it carefully.
- 8 People who believe that psychological egoism is true typically do not let *any example whatever* count against their position. For any act whose motive seems not to be self-regarding, they are always able to produce a plausible-sounding *ulterior* motive that *is* self-regarding, and which they say *must* be the real motive. They regard their position as undefeatable – nothing can or could count against it.
- 9 Now when a person sees his or her view as undefeatable in this way, that is a sure sign that she has latched on to something that is true *a priori*, or, in other words, something of which one can be absolutely certain without appealing to any actual evidence.
- 10 The *a priori* truth that the psychological egoists have latched on to is this: *Every act of every person is done to satisfy some desire of his or her own*. This seems to be genuinely true *a priori*, because we cannot *make any sense* of the idea that someone might consciously, voluntarily, and intentionally do something without having any desire to do it. Desire is

- necessary to motivate, and, of course, if it is going to motivate *me*, it must be *my* desire. (I may not want to do the thing for its own sake; I may want to do it because it achieves something else that I want.)
- 11 Psychological egoism states, however, that *every act of every person is done to satisfy some self-regarding desire*, and this is *not the same* as the principle stated in (10) above. Because a desire is *mine*, it need not be *self-regarding*. In fact, its object could be your good, or the good of society, or anything you please. "Own desire" does not mean the same as "self-regarding desire," and the believer in psychological egoism has confused the two.
 - 12 *The certainty that quite properly belongs to the first principle in (10) above has been mistakenly transferred to the second (11)*. In other words, the *owner* of the desire has been confused with its *object*. Coming to see that this is so takes the ground out from under the feet of anyone who would claim that psychological egoism is true beyond the possibility of doubt.
 - 13 One difficulty remains. The believer in psychological egoism might say that if everything is done to satisfy some desire of one's own, does that not mean that it is done *for the sake of* that satisfaction? Is it not, therefore, basically *egoistic in the final analysis*? But suppose that I do something to relieve your pain because I really care about you. Naturally, I am satisfied if I succeed; that, after all, was what I wanted. But not only does this *not* prove that I really didn't care about you at all, but if I *hadn't* really cared about you, I would have experienced no such satisfaction. Of course, I am satisfied when I achieve what I want to achieve, but that does not mean that I only acted *for the sake of* that satisfaction. Here my concern was with *your pain* and its relief. *That* was what mattered to me.
 - 14 Of course, I can only act for the sake of what matters to me, even if that is another's good, or justice, or the good of society, or whatever you like. *In that sense* there is no such thing as altruism or selflessness. This is the grain of truth in psychological egoism.

Some Mistakes to Avoid

- 1 Do not confuse *psychological* egoism, which denies that unselfish acts are *possible*, with *ethical* egoism, which says that one *should* always act in one's own self-interest. (One can be an ethical egoist – saying that people who act for anything but their own self-interest are simply fools – without being a psychological egoist.)
- 2 Do not confuse a *psychological* egoist (someone who believes that

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psychological egoism is true) with someone who is completely selfish. A completely selfish person need not believe that psychological egoism is true.

- 3 Do not confuse psychological egoism with the view that some or many or even most people are selfish. (This could be true while psychological egoism was false.) Psychological egoism claims that every human act is *necessarily* self-regarding.
- 4 Do not confuse psychological egoism with the view that some or many or even most of a person's acts are self-regarding. (This could be true while psychological egoism was false.) Psychological egoism claims that *every single one* of a person's acts is self-regarding and that it could not be any other way.
- 5 Do not suppose that if psychological egoism is false, then all or most of our acts must be unselfish. If there ever was, or ever could be, even *one* unselfish act, then psychological egoism is false.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- 1 The world is full of selfish people. Does this mean that psychological egoism is true?
- 2 Do you agree that a person can only act to satisfy some desire of his/her own? Why does this seem undeniably true? Does this mean that psychological egoism is true?
- 3 If psychological egoism were true, would this mean that *no* morality was possible? Why is psychological egoism a form of moral skepticism?
- 4 Is altruism possible? Explain why or why not.