

compos mentis

Reconsidering Psychological Egoism

Amanda Galloway

Indiana University-Purdue University

ABSTRACT

Empirical evidence of altruistic behavior, such as studied in evolutionary biology and psychology, is often cited as a primary reason for dismissing Psychological Egoism as a reputable theory for human behavior. Although Psychological Egoism ought to be regarded as false, the manner in which this conclusion has traditionally been arrived at is faulty. An alternative argument is presented that is not only preferable to traditional ones, but sufficient to lay the theory to rest. This paper seeks to show that without this alternative argument, flaws in traditional reasoning render PE as being worthy for reconsideration.

KEYWORDS

Altruism, Selfishness, Motive, Empathy, Egoistic

compos mentis

It seems philosophical arguments against psychological egoism aren't quite as powerful as we might expect given the widespread rejection of the theory among philosophers. So the theory is arguably more difficult to refute than many have tended to suppose. (May n.d., Conclusion section, par. 1)

Despite the general consensus reflected in this quotation, I would like to explain why Psychological Egoism ought not to be dismissed lightly even though it makes more sense to conclude it's false. I argue that although many (and arguably all) human actions are egoistic, they are not necessarily so, and therein lies the flaw with Psychological Egoism (PE). I will begin by first defining the nature of this theory after which I will assess various arguments for and against it. Arguments against PE will be drawn from the perspective of one who advocates altruism in humans as a sufficient reason for dismissing PE.

By altruistic behavior, I mean behavior motivated by the sincere desire to benefit or avoid harm to another. By egoistic behavior, I mean behavior motivated by the desire to benefit (whether it be a hedonic state or not) or avoid harm to ourselves. When I specify pure altruism, I mean altruistic behavior with no trace of egoistic motive. That is, altruism without any regard or concern for one's own benefit or well-being. The theory of PE asserts that all human action is egoistic, and so pure altruism is impossible. Consider this example: a harried businesswoman takes an opportunity to relax with a book on her porch swing, when a neighbor's child comes crying. The woman, although sympathetic to the child, wants to continue with the little time she has to read her book. She comforts the child and then gets back to reading. David Hume maintains that empathy is often the underlying motive for behavior cases like this (Hume 2010).¹ But the Psychological Egoist says otherwise: according to PE, the underlying motive for helping the child

1. Hume appeals to empathy in order to show how pure altruism is possible. He presents the example of a mother who sacrifices her health to care for a sickly child who will inevitably die. Hume writes in Appendix II of *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, "Tenderness to their offspring, in all sensible beings, is commonly able alone to counter-balance the strongest motives of self-love, and has no manner of dependence on that affection," (2003, par. 9). What is in the mother's self-interest here? The child will never return the favor of care in the mother's advancing age and is bringing more distress on the mother. Of course, the egoist could point out a motive like avoiding the public shame or guilt of abandoning her child. But this could easily be refuted by the altruist as they point out that guilt cannot be felt in the first place if there were no genuine empathy for the child preceding the guilt.

is self-interest. The businesswoman helps the child at least in part (and perhaps wholly) so that he will leave her alone and she can continue her leisure time.

I don't think anyone would argue that self-interested motivations aren't accountable for some human behavior. But what the egoist needs to prove is that there can never be a case where self-interest isn't present and causally efficacious. If an opponent to Psychological Egoism could come up with even one instance of pure altruism (one instance of altruism where egoistic motives are, even if present, not causally efficacious), then we can lay PE to rest as a philosophical theory. Much of the confusion lies in what is possible versus what we actually witness. Even if it were the case that every instance of altruism has been accompanied by self-interested motives, this does not mean it has to be this way. An illusion of PE is created when the egoist can argue out a (perhaps hidden) self-interested motive in every circumstance. Even the popular example used by the altruist of the soldier sacrificing his life to jump on a grenade can be construed as self-interested (Shaver 2019, section 1). Perhaps the soldier couldn't bear survivor's guilt or wanted to be remembered as a hero. The list of potential self-interested motives goes on and could be rather convincing. Inferring PE based on this would, however, be a mistake. Even if all behavior is, as a matter of fact, egoistic, this is insufficient for Psychological Egoism.

I want to concede that it is possible to observe, or at least argue for, egoistic motives in all cases. I am arguing that, despite this concession, PE is still not true on logical grounds even if it cannot be dismissed on empirical grounds. To see what I mean, consider recent researchers' attempts to disprove PE. In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Psychological Egoism, Shaver comments on a series of experiments performed by Daniel Batson and colleagues in which they tried to show the implausibility of PE. In one of these, Batson set up a controlled experiment in which he attempted to manipulate empathy in order to see if there was a change in helping behavior towards a fictional student, Katie Banks, who was enduring a serious hardship (Batson 2019). In order to elicit and control for empathy, Batson had participants watch a video of a painful diathermy treatment before being presented with a request for help from Katie Banks. Batson divided participants into two groups as follows: The first was a watch-him/pain group where participants were supposed to focus on techniques the demonstrator used during the treatment that would contribute to the effectiveness of the message eliciting certain reactions in the audience. This would help ensure the focus was

diverted away from empathic triggers, inducing a lower amount of empathy for comparison. The second group was designated as imagine-him/pain, where the focus was on imagining the other person in pain. What Batson discovered was that a greater number of people from the higher empathy imagine-him/pain group were willing to help Katie.

The problem with the study is that empathy may not have been the reason participants helped. The egoist can think of other reasons to account for the helping behavior that are self-interested. Perhaps the participants feared judgment from a religious deity if they failed to serve their fellow beings. They even could have acted on an honor basis to contribute to societal behaviors that would in turn benefit them. Batson should have compared the imagine-him/pain group with an imagine-self/pain group to see if there was any difference between those two in helping behavior. This would have better determined whether actual empathy was at play. Imagining pain in another person should induce greater empathy in the participant in comparison to imagining pain in the self, which is oriented towards self-interest. In order to make a case against PE, helping behavior would need to be greater in the imagine-him/pain group. If the results were the same between the two groups, we would have no way of knowing whether the helping behavior was influenced by empathy any more than self-interest. However, if the results showed greater helping behavior in the imagine-him/pain condition over the imagine-self/pain condition, that would offer more support for refuting PE.

Thus, proving pure altruism exists runs into the same setbacks that egoism presents. We simply can't prove pure altruism is possible for humans even if we can imagine a world where it is. Every act of seemingly pure altruistic behavior can be countered by the egoist as having some possible self-interested motive as cause of the action. Once again, we would have to rely on empirical data to infer our best guess and even then, it might not be a sound conclusion. It would always be possible to find data to the contrary, discovering we were wrong all along in how we interpreted the original data. In the end, it seems that the theory of PE cannot be dismissed on empirical grounds. New evidence can always emerge that undermines current data, and our interpretation of it is subject to error due to insufficient understanding. Overlooking pertinent information shows how our analyses of a given situation can be underdetermined. Batson interprets his experimental results as support for altruism when it can conversely be used to support egoism depending on how the data is interpreted. For example, since

self-interest was removed from the watch-him/pain group, we could interpret this as higher egoism in the imagine-him/pain group versus the watch-him/pain group, which actually supports PE. The results can be interpreted in either direction, leaving us with no reliable answer.

In fact, there is room for the egoist to make a stronger case. He could make an argument where empathy itself is considered to be egoistic. What if the empathy one feels for doing something for the sake of another is a form of selfishness in and of itself that motivates the action? What if empathy itself is the pain or desire, stemming from one agent's identification with another, we try to remove or attain? In *A Buddhist Bible*, we find a quote from Eastern Pali Scriptures, "And what is the Suffering of not getting what one desires? ...But this cannot be got by mere desiring; and not to get what one desires is suffering" (Goddard 1966, 24). This surely applies not only to what we want for ourselves, but when what we want is directed towards the object of our desire. When our altruistic desires for another are thwarted, it is the same as suffering, as the Eastern text indicates. On the positive side, empathy itself is the pleasure experienced when witnessing the wellbeing of another. For example, I may feel your discomfort by proxy if I witness you trying to scratch an itch you can't reach. I scratch it to make myself feel better since your discomfort is my discomfort. Furthermore, your relief is my relief and I arguably acted in self-interest to scratch your back precisely because of empathy. It's worth asking whether I can count as a benefit that very feeling of satisfaction I get when I do something for the sake of another. The altruist would say no; self-interested motives are sometimes merely a by-product of the action instead of a cause of the action and are not wrapped up inseparably with empathy. But the burden of proof lies on the altruist to defend this--a burden I believe is met below.

The strength of PE is that in the background, before any desire for an object is experienced, seems to lie a desire for personal benefit. The first cause for an action is actually an "ultimate" desire, followed by an object of desire which causes pleasure (May 2021). Let's take the example of desiring water to quench your thirst. According to PE, we only want water because of an ultimate desire which includes self-benefit: avoiding pain of thirst, deriving pleasure from quenching our thirst, and to survive. Water is just a means to an end of bringing about the ultimate desire for self-benefit. And so, in this way, the ultimate desire includes the seeking of pleasure/avoidance of pain in and of itself. If we didn't have a desire

to avoid the pain of thirst and feel the pleasure of that thirst being quenched, we would not want the water to begin with.

However, there is a way for the altruist to refute this point, and, I argue, this refutation uncovers a fatal flaw in Psychological Egoism. Joseph Butler presents such a refutation, which is basically two arguments in one. His idea is that you cannot receive pleasure by seeking pleasure directly because the desire one feels for any given object is directed towards another rather than inward, which yields two different concepts, one that is essentially object-directed and another that is essentially self-directed and, thus, egoistic: "There is then a distinction between the cool principle of self-love, or general desire of our own happiness, as one part of our nature, and one principle of action; and the particular affections towards particular external objects, as another part of our nature, and another principle of action" (Butler 1999, 47). In order to receive self-benefit, we must first seek something other than self-benefit. I must actually desire that "something other" for its own sake in order to experience the benefit of ensuing pleasure. If I did not desire that "something other", then I would not feel the benefit of pleasure I expect to derive from it.

In this case, the object of desire appears to be a tool that is used merely for the purpose of deriving pleasure. Perhaps this is similar to what John Stuart Mill meant when he wrote, "The utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end," (Mill 1971, para. 2). While this may be true operationally, it is still the case that desiring the object is and must be a separate condition from desiring pleasure itself. This is important because the egoist makes a mistake in equating the object with said pleasure. Because the object of desire is a separate condition, it functions as a sort of cause and effect rather than it being a unified companion with self-benefit. I want the object which causes me to have pleasure. Desiring to have pleasure as a first cause does not necessarily entail that particular object of desire. Even if it did, I must actually want and obtain that object for itself in order to receive the pleasure. Consequences, or recognizing benefits we might reap, ought not to be confused with initial motivation. Pleasure may be derived from the action, but there is a difference between pleasure resulting from an action and doing the action for pleasure itself. Genuine concern for another person may be a prior reason to do any given act while any self-interested effect is independent of

this act. Having our conscience eased doesn't appear before empathy is felt (i.e., by an agent toward another being) and that is the key there.

Supposing we accept that an egoistic motive must always be present with altruism, it is in accordance with Butler's view that self-interested benefits in some cases are only a by-product of doing something good for another. For example, if I can't sleep because I'm worried about someone, and I get out of bed to go help them, I may be merely fooled into thinking I only went to help them so that I could sleep at night. In reality, since the fact that my lack of sleep was preceded by feeling bad for the person, my egoistic feeling was only involved as a corollary. It is even only a corollary with an ultimate desire and is an independent event which does not arise from that. Even if always observed to be present along with altruistic acts, egoistic motives may only be there coincidentally. The altruistic feeling precedes the egoistic feeling, which means the root cause couldn't be self-interest. So even if the egoistic feeling always follows, if altruism is present, egoism does not have to be the cause. If the altruistic feeling is the sole cause, it doesn't matter whether or not egoism is also present and if that is the case, PE is false.

The point is that we don't need to prove the existence of pure altruism in order to dismiss PE. We only need to prove its possibility, and for that it suffices to show the actuality of impure altruism. This is because so long as impure altruism exists, pure altruism is possible. That is, so long as there is impure altruism, it is *possible* for it to be an initial cause as already explained, which makes any accompanying egoism causally irrelevant, and that suffices to show that PE is false. In the end, the answer remains somewhat inconclusive but comes down to a Descartes-style analysis as the basis of belief (Descartes 2008).²

In the same way Descartes shows we have no way to prove we even have bodies (see Meditation I), so is there no way to prove pure altruism exists. Taking a trip down the rabbit hole of radical skepticism takes an unreasonable turn which ends up leading to the conclusion that there's no reason to think that even impure altruism exists based on the premise that it can't be proven. However, Descartes does conclude in Meditation II that he can know that he exists as a thinking thing.

2. In *Meditations*, Rene Descartes justifies his own existence as a thinking entity by acknowledging his own ability to think, even if only apparent to himself. In fact, it is imperative to recognize that this can only be apparent to oneself. Descartes artfully demonstrates the epitome of extreme skepticism in Meditation I by arguing we have no reason to believe that anything, even our bodies, exists.

In a similar way, we can conclude by our own intimate acquaintance with and phenomenal experience of our thoughts and emotions that we have altruistic motives. This is how PE ought to be countered. Consistent with Descartes' demonstration, this can only be detected from the vantage point of one's own mind. There is no way to prove altruism exists in others nor a way to prove to others that altruistic motives occur in ourselves.³ In fact, it is not even possible to prove to ourselves that our own actions are purely altruistic. But as I have been arguing, this is unnecessary. Since individuals get the sense that they themselves have altruistic motives, they may conclude that pure altruism is possible, and that is all that is needed to assert that PE is false. So long as altruism is experienced by any human, it is *possible* that this alone can be a motive for helping behavior even if egoistic behavior is always coincidentally present. Of course, some individuals might deny that they ever perform even impurely altruistic actions, and they might argue that anybody who thinks otherwise is in the grips of a delusion or a Cartesian madman's dream. But if the arguments in this paper works, it is reasonable for the rest of us to conclude that psychological egoism is false even if it can't be dismissed absolutely.

REFERENCES

- Batson, Daniel C. 2019. *An Unsettling Surprise*. In *A scientific search for altruism: Do we only care about ourselves?* Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Joseph. 1999. "Sermon 4 and 5- Upon the Love of Our Neighbor." Essay. In *Five Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and a Dissertation upon the Nature of Virtue*, edited by Stephen Darwall, 46–57. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.

3. The conventional approach to oppose PE is typically an appeal to the existence of altruism based on empirical argument. But as I have tried to show above, this is a fallacious method: it may lead to a true conclusion, but it does so via an invalid argument. Nonetheless, denying that pure altruism exists becomes extreme in the same way that skepticism can lead us to believe that other humans besides ourselves may not be sentient beings. Whether or not there is a way to prove that others have phenomenal experience is highly controversial, but it would be absurd to draw the conclusion that everyone besides ourselves is merely a robotic creature with a convincing external portrayal of thoughts and emotions characteristic of human consciousness. Since we know that we ourselves have phenomenal experience, we trust others do in the same manner.

- Descartes, René. 2008. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Goddard, Dwight. 1966. *A Buddhist Bible: Selections from Pali Sources*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hume, David. 2010. *A Treatise of Human Nature: An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Vol. 2. Project Gutenberg.
- May, Joshua. n.d. "Psychological Egoism." In *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed September 2, 2021. <https://iep.utm.edu/psychological-egoism/#H3>.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1971. *Utilitarianism*.
- Shaver, Robert. n.d. "Egoism: Psychological Egoism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, January 15, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/egoism/>.