

5. CHAPTER 5: PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

5.1. Is Unselfishness Possible?

According to the theory of psychological egoism, each person is so constituted that he will look out only for his own interests. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect people to behave "altruistically". Human nature being what it is, people will respond to the needs of others only when there is something in it for themselves. Pure altruism is a myth-- it simply does not exist.

5.2. The Strategy of Reinterpreting Motives

A great many people feel that psychological egoism might be true. It especially appeals to a certain cynicism in us, a suspicion that people are not nearly as noble as they seem. It is not a conclusive method of reasoning, for it cannot prove that psychological egoism is correct. We still need other arguments to show it is true.

5.3. Two Arguments in Favor of Psychological Egoism

If we describe one person's action as selfish and another person's action as unselfish, we are overlooking the crucial fact that in both cases, assuming the action is done voluntarily, the person is merely doing what he/she most wants to do. (This argument goes wrong in just about every way an argument can go wrong: the premises are not true, and even if they were true, the conclusion would not follow from them.)

Acting "unselfishly" makes people feel good about themselves. If we have a positive attitude toward the attainment of some goal, then we may derive satisfaction from attaining it. The object of our attitude is the attainment of that goal; we must want to attain the goal *before* we can find any satisfaction in it.

5.4. Clearing away Some Confusions

The fundamental idea behind psychological egoism cannot be expressed without falling into confusion; and once these confusions have been cleared away, the theory no longer seems even plausible.

If we simply observe people's behavior with an open mind, we find that much of it is motivated by self regard, but by no means all of it. There may indeed be one simple formula, as yet undiscovered, that would explain all of human behavior, but psychological egoism is not it.

5.5. The Deepest Error in Psychological Egoism

Sometimes, people think only of themselves. At other times, they do not think of themselves at all but act from a concern for others. Psychological egoism tells us that there is really only one motive, self regard. The psychological egoist has only announced his determination to interpret people's behavior in a certain way, no matter what they do. Therefore, nothing that anyone could do could possibly count as evidence against this hypothesis. The thesis is irrefutable, but for that very reason it turns out to have no factual content.

Paradoxically, if we do not allow some way in which we might be mistaken, we lose all chance of being right.