

Are our own actions motivated by anything other than our own self-interest?

Before starting to look at this question I would like to clarify the word 'self-interest'. Most importantly to make the clarification between self-interest and selfishness, they are two different words. Doing something out of self-interest does not necessarily mean that one is being selfish. One might want to work-out and eat healthy food. That would be considered in one's self-interest, but that doesn't seem to be selfish. And on the other hand, sometimes doing something selfish might have a negative impact on yourself in the end, therefore that would not be in your self-interest. Essentially acting in a self-interested way means to do something that has a positive outcome on your own life, not necessarily caring about how it affects other people. When as doing something selfish means to do something that is both in your self-interest (usually), and has a negative impact on others.

I will be looking at whether or not people only act with self-interested motives, what other motives there might be, is altruism a concept that actually exists or is it just a concept people have come up with, and why psychological egoism is false. I will also take a look at the environmental ethics, specifically why is it that we only now start to panic over the climate crisis, could there be self-interested motivations behind it?

I think that the answer to the essay question is yes. Yes, our actions are also motivated by something else than our own self-interest. For sure, sometimes or even most of the times people will make self-interested, even selfish acts, but I don't think that it is always the motivation behind our actions. I believe that there are purely altruistic deeds, without motivations that are self-interested. Even if good consequences may follow to the person doing the acts, motivations behind them can be altruistic. I would argue that people's actions are motivated by other factors than just self-interest.

Daniel Tippens, in his article *Why Self-Interest Makes Relationships Valuable*¹, explains altruism as an act in which someone wants to do something just for the other person without getting anything out of it for themselves. Sober Elliot and Wilson David suggest that "the thesis of altruism ... does not entail that *most* people are altruistic *all* the time, or that *some* people are altruistic *most* of the time..."² That essentially indicates that even one single non self-interested act would verify my argument. And that is what I will try to find out. If it is in anyway possible for there to be even a single act that does not have self-interested motivations.

Psychological egoism does suggest that “we are not capable of being unselfish.”³

Psychological egoism is defined as something that claims people only having self-interested goals. That people only act in regards of their own well-being, “as an end in itself.”⁴

Psychological egoism is a descriptive theory, so it is saying how people actually do behave rather than suggesting how people should behave.⁵

If one would argue that people *do* care for others and help others without any self-interested ulterior motives, psychological egoism stands behind a belief that the person would still only be doing it to get a benefit from the action for themselves.⁶ It would also argue that ‘altruistic’ acts are only done because of wanting “a more significant life, public recognition, feelings of personal satisfaction, and the hope of heavenly reward.”⁷

Essentially some people would argue that altruism doesn’t exist at all. Even seemingly altruistic acts can be brought back to self-interest. They would argue that anyone helping others, is only doing it so that they know that they will be helped, if they would be in a similar situation later. I find that there are people doing good deeds even to people in a condition they know for certain they will never be in. But in the end, in a way, this might also be pointing out that altruistic behaviour is still good and something people do search for, even if it would be for self-interested reasons.

Ethical Egoism on the other hand is a normative theory. It suggests that people should act in their own self-interest, “over the long run”⁸. It claims that selfishness is something we should try to achieve. I think that if every single person would only follow the rules of ethical egoism, the world could be quite an awful place. It could create a society in which people could do horrible things to other people and be approved of doing them just based on if they accept the acts themselves, and if the acts would have positive outcomes to the person doing them. It could even lead to a society with an even bigger gap between the rich and the poor.

To confute the psychological egoism theory we simply need a single example of someone doing an act that is not in their self-interest. And there are plenty of acts people have done only on the consideration of other people and not their own self-interest. William Irwin, in his book review *Does Altruism Exist?*⁹, is pondering whether there are any ways to falsify the psychological egoism theory.

“Because we have no way to read minds and no access to the subconscious motivations of either ourselves or others. However ... what matters most are not the thoughts or feelings motivating people, but the actions they take.”¹⁰

Maybe that’s just the way we should be trying to look at the question whether or not people do act in altruistic ways. If someone is saying that they are acting in the interest of someone else, and truly believes that themselves, we should probably consider it as an altruistic act. Is

it not enough that someone does end up helping other people, without getting any reward out of it?

“Love of God and love of neighbor should be one’s motivation, and heaven should be the natural reward of that, not the primary motivation for it.”¹¹

On the other hand common sense does suggest that certain emotions, like empathy and sympathy would make us act in altruistic ways.¹²

“The causal chain seems to be this:
Emotions of empathy and sympathy → desire to help → helping”¹³

I think that some alternate motivations behind people’s actions would be truly caring for one another, meaningful relationships and different emotions, such as empathy and sympathy.

If we take a look at sociobiology, it should show us that psychological egoism is false, as it is a descriptive theory. “Sociobiology is the study of *social* behavior from an evolutionary *biological standpoint*.”¹⁴ The term was first introduced by E.O. Wilson in his book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, published in 1975. Sociobiologists imply that altruistic behaviour is found in the animal world, including human beings. The evidence of the studies on sociobiology do show us that it most certainly falsifies psychological egoism.¹⁵ “Behavior is *not* always self-interested.”¹⁶

The next aspect I am going to imply will hopefully help to give verification to my argument. I will look at the current state of the climate crisis and how people are or are not responding to it. And how that might have something to do with the motivations behind our actions. If we would only act out of our own self-interest, especially in the long run, as ethical egoism suggests, the Earth would not be in the state it is in at the moment. People would live in more environmentally conscious and eco-friendly ways. Because in the long run that is what would be good for the planet. It would be keeping the planet alive, and that meaning it would keep *us* alive. And keeping yourself alive is surely a self-interested thing to do. But as current science shows us, that is not what we are doing at the moment. We are doing the complete opposite, destroying the planet. And that indicates that people do not always act out of self-interest, or even altruism. Sometimes people act in a way that is totally harmful for them and other people. Many people smoke a lot of cigarettes even if they know the negative consequences, smoking will have on them. That also shows that people don’t always act in their own self-interest.

You could ask that is caring about the environment altruistic? I think that the determinant is the motivation behind the act, rather than the act itself. In these cases at least. What could this say about human beings and the motivations behind their actions? It does seem that only now when the consequences of the global crisis has an impact on our generation, we seem to

really care about it, and globally try to preserve the Earth together. Not stating that people have not been environmentally conscious or eco-friendly before. But the fact that it has only now raised the general public might be suggesting that we do mostly act in self-interested ways. The general public, say over fifty years ago, might not have seen it as a highly effective crisis, at least not as clearly as we do now, *because* it would have not affected them during their lifetime. Now with predictions of how the climate crisis will affect us, and how it has already affected a large part of the population, we have a new aspect to it. Maybe the general public did start caring about it only now because of their self-interested motivations. Even though that would be true it doesn't suggest that everyone would be always acting out of self-interest. It does show us that the majority of people have an anthropocentric point of view of the world.

I believe that something called the altruism hypothesis wins the argument over the psychological egoism theory. Even if it is a descriptive theory, it is one that is flexible, and seems to fit in the real life world.

“The altruism hypothesis maintains that people sometimes care about the welfare of others as an end in itself.”¹⁷

The word *sometimes* makes a huge difference in my opinion. Theories that are flexible are more likely to actually fit in the real life world. Most of the times people would want a simple, strict answer on how *everything* works in the world. But I find the world to be too vague, too indefinite for an absolute theory with no exceptions at all. People are all different, we can not simply have one theory that fits in on how all of the people act in all of the different situations, and what are their motivations behind them. That is one of the reasons I think psychological egoism is false. People do sometimes act in purely altruistic reasons, if the motivation behind an act is to help someone else than yourself, without getting anything yourself, you are doing an altruistic act.

In conclusion, I do stand behind my argument that people do have other motivations behind their actions than just self-interest. Even if there would only be one example of someone doing an altruistic act, it would show my argument being correct. Our actions *are* motivated by something else than self-interest.

¹ Daniel Tippens 'Why Self-Interest Makes Relationships Valuable' *Philosophy Now*, 2016. Available at: https://philosophynow.org/issues/112/Why_Self-Interest_Makes_Relationships_Valuable (Accessed 10th October 2019).

² Elliott Sober & David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution And Psychology Of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998) p. 223.

³ James Rachels, *The Elements Of Moral Philosophy*, 4th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2013) p. 64.

⁴ Sober & Wilson, *Unto Others*, p. 224.

⁵ Lawrence M. Hinman, *A Pluralistic Approach To Moral Theory*, 5th edition, International edition (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2013) p. 95.

⁶ Sober & Wilson, *Unto Others*, p. 223.

⁷ Rachels, *The Elements Of*, p.64

⁸ Ibid. p.78.

⁹ William Irwin, *Does Altruism Exist?* (Review of 'Does Altruism Exist?' by David Sloan), *Philosophy Now*, Issue 112.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sober & Wilson, *Unto Others*, P.231.

¹³ Ibid. p. 232.

¹⁴ Hinman, *A Pluralistic Approach*, p. 99.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 99.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 100.

¹⁷ Sober & Wilson, *Unto Others*, p.228.

