

## Are our actions motivated by anything other than our own self-interest? (2000 words)

There has been a debate around whether or not our actions are motivated by our own self-interest for some time. To me, I believe they are deeply motivated by our own self-interest and even acts that are altruistic are deeply motivated by nothing but our own self-interest. I will be exploring arguments that support my claim and why I believe these arguments are strong while also comparing them to counter arguments and explaining why I believe that while these arguments may be strong to an extent, I also believe that they may not be as strong as my idea.

The social contract theory is often an argument that is used when defending the idea that all actions are motivated by our self-interest. It was first recorded by Socrates when explaining to Crito why he should remain in prison himself and accept the death penalty given to him. He explains it as a theory that a person's agreement to social rules is dependent on an agreement in which society would copy from, and therefore he should remain and accept the death penalty as it would set a moral rule which would be copied by others. (Celeste Friend, The Bonds of Brotherhood, 12th of May 2014). This theory was later developed further and exposed to the world more by author Thomas Hobbes in which he says that mankind is solely self-interested, but is also reasonable in this. He uses the example, he is walking along a road with a priest when they find a man asking for money, Hobbes agrees and gives him money and the priest states he believes Hobbes only did that to help the man, but Hobbes responds by stating he did it so that if he ever is in the same position where he needs money, he would hope someone would also give him money as part of the social contract, which he explains as 'a mutual agreement where people surrender their freedom to a state of security to escape the force of nature' (Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651). Hobbes also states further that the self-motivational drive to help others is enhanced by the feeling of us wanting to show our power over that person. (Celeste Friend, Social Contract Theory - Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2004). The social contract theory reassures my idea that even altruistic acts, such as giving money to those who need it, as shown by Hobbes, are self-motivated as a way to alleviate our own personal fears and that's the deeper self-motivation. A further argument that reinforces my point is the theory of egoism which is the idea that all actions are purely and only self-motivated and any action can be put back to self-motivation. Egoism as a theory was usually seen as a natural and unproblematic theory when first developed properly and was often seen as the ideal counter argument to the under-thought idea of altruism which was treated as

suspicious as most acts of altruism were often pinned down to a special form of self-altruism, an act which is meant to be an altruistic act but has self-motivated means to it. (Hans Bernard Shaw, Philosophical Egoism: Its Nature And Limitations, 1st Of July 2010). A study done by C. Daniel Batson, et al, showed that people would often help each other in situations which would usually require a high empathetic reaction, this however was disputed by psychological egoists which said the study itself was valid, but the reading was subjective as they argued that the participants only helped to keep a self-image of themselves to make them look good which then prevents their distress which they then concluded that even in a situation where a person thinks they might be acting out of empathy or altruism, a self-motivated mean can always be thought of as another cause of the act. (Is Empathetic Emotion A Source Of Altruistic Motivation, C Daniel Barson, 1st of February 1981). This study shows that all actions can be motivated by the persons self desires which can be further supported that if an action is a complex one, then there has to be a way to link it back to the persons self benefitting from it. An interesting idea however is psychological altruism. It's claimed that psychological altruists are actually philosophical egoists in the way that they claim to be motivated by the desires of the person they are helping, much like Hobbes example of giving money to someone in need, but deep down, the ultimate objective is that fulfilling the desires of the other person makes your desires met as well. So the core motivation is that your action to help others is actually a self-motivated action, also known as other directed desires. (Hans Bernard Shaw, Philosophical Egoism: Its Nature And Limitations, 1st Of July 2010). To me, egoism as a whole concept, while often disputed, is somewhat a strong idea on the basis of it. The idea that almost all actions are self-motivated, even subconsciously, makes sense to me as human nature often shows that we as humans are self-motivated in almost all our acts and this can be seen in everyday life. A further theory that supports my claim is the counterargument to the idea that everything is good in itself thought of by Immanuel Kant. His claim is that objects and actions are in themselves good, so an act of goodness to Kant is only good because it is a good act. (Colin Marshall, The Philosophical Quarterly, July 2023). However, the counterargument, to me, is much stronger. My argument that giving to charity may not be good in itself and has self-motivation within the act as well. When you look at people who donate money, the comparison between income to the donation amount really is not much with the average donation being between 0.8%-1.2% whereas donations for religious reasons are still only on average 10% of an annual wage (Robert Booth, The Guardian, 15th December 2021) so while the intention of the donation may be a selfless one on the face of it, but when you look deeper, the majority of income is kept to the person to enjoy their own personal pleasures such as food and

housing so that is their self-motivation, and for those who claim to be altruistic and claim donating makes them feel 'good', through donating a large amount, some of them may be unhappy doing it as they feel pressured to do it with the self-motivation to do it for religious reasons or peer pressure. A final philosophical theory that I believe supports my claim is the theory of virtue ethics. The virtue ethics theory was thought of by Aristotle, Socrates and other Greek philosophers to find ways in which to understand 'the virtues' in order to become a better person. These virtues are self-agent based feelings such as courage, empathy, honesty and integrity to name a few, and the goal is to have a level of balance in order to have a truly fulfilled life and develop a better moral character. For example, having too much honesty would make you too honest to others, but not being honest enough would make you distrustful, but having a level balance between them would make you honest and trusted. According to Aristotle's theory, getting to this balanced level allows you to make the right ethical choices when they are needed. (Author Not Listed, Ethics Unwrapped - Virtue Ethics, Date Not Listed). To me, the core idea of this theory is that the virtues that need to be balanced, which in turn make you a better person, and that then is self-motivation in the sense that you want to become a better person for yourself, not for others.

However, the counter arguments to my idea also have to be looked at. One main point for discussion is Immanuel Kant's 'good will' theory. Kant's theory says that the only thing that is truly good in itself is the 'good will' which Kant claimed is what drives our actions and grounds the motivations for these actions. For Kant, the good will he mentions is the only possible thing that can ever be good in itself, and the use of knowledge as an example of this is one often used. Knowledge can be accepted as good, but only sometimes good. This is because while knowledge can be used for good, such as academic books, knowledge can also be used to cause bad in the world, such as creating nuclear weapons, so because of this, something like knowledge can only ever be good sometimes. Another example is courage, we value courageous acts such as war veterans as good, but someone robbing a bank would also show a form of courage which means courage is also only sometimes good. (Heather Wilburn P.H.D, An Introduction To Kant's Moral Theory, 2020). I believe this to be a counter argument against my claim as Kant's theory basically says that actions aren't done out of self-interest, like my claim says, but the reason for our motivation is the good will being the only thing good in itself. Auguste Comte's positivism theory is another argument used against egoist claims and ideas similar to mine. The main point behind his argument is his use of the word 'altruism' which he describes as "living for others" as written in his book 'Catechism'. His theory is one in which was later developed into almost a religion of sorts which promotes living your life for the purpose of others and to make any

egoistic thoughts and ideas into altruistic ones which could be argued makes positivism is one of the most selfless theories for human nature. (Suzanne Keen, Altruism Makes A Space For Empathy 1852, August 2012). Comte's theory very clearly argues against my idea in the way that positivism as an idea's only goal is for people to live for others, not for themselves and therefore surely can't be motivated by self-interest at all. A further counter argument is the theory that we don't truly know what our motivations are for any acts which is supported by Edward T. Welch who says "We see behaviours, but not the underlying motives behind those behaviours" (Edward T. Welch, Motives: Why Do I Do The Things I Do?, 2003). Welch's theory is that many acts may have more than one motivation to it, he uses the example of a man at work. He says that a man at work doesn't want to do a certain job, Welch's theory says it may be because he is lazy and not doing the work brings him pleasure, but he says it could also be because he thinks that certain job is too difficult for him so he won't be able to do it, and therefore he doesn't want to because he feels he'll lose the respect of his co-workers. The point he tries to make with this example is that the more we try to understand what our motivations are, the more complex it gets and often will leave us with more questions the more we try to understand. However, Welch has a secondary theory, being a devout catholic, he brings forward the claim that the word of God, through sacred texts, is the true motivation. The reason he makes this claim is because he had the idea that there is no guidance to tell us what should or shouldn't motivate us which he thinks would take us further as humanity. So he brought forward that the bible could be a book of guidance as he believes there is no stronger way to take humanity forward than with the word of God (Edward T. Welch, Motives: Why Do I Do The Things I Do?, 2003). I believe that both of Welch's theories counter against my initial idea that motivations are self-interested. His first shows that while self-motivation could be a motive, there's a higher chance that it is not the only motivation. His second theory also counters my idea as it says that motivation should have guidance and that comes from religious texts such as the bible, rather than something un-guided like self-motivation.

I believe that the arguments given to support my idea are stronger than the counter arguments. Socrates saying he should stay for the death penalty to support his social contract which later helped Thomas Hobbes to develop his own social contract theory further, while it does support my idea, it is perhaps not the strongest of arguments to support it. Egoism as an ethical concept is a stronger supporting argument however with its main idea being that all motivations are down to self-interest which is possibly one of the strongest supporters to my idea that motivations are self-interested. However, counter arguments such as Comte's

theory of positivism, a theory based only that people should act for the purpose of others benefit and pleasure, is a strong one.

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