

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

Psychological egoists present human actions as motivated strictly by self-interest, reducing acts of kindness or compassion down to disguised personal gain. On the one hand, there is some truth in that self-interest is a huge motivator of action. However, this essay will aim to explore other factors of motivation, to prove the authenticity of altruism, by exploring empathy, the concept of instinctive humanitarian impulses and moral duty.

Political theorist, Hobbes, made a convicted universal claim that the nature of human actions after analysis, is selfishness, and that they are all prompted by individual desires.¹ In fact, he went so far as to systematically re-interpret motives that are commonly perceived as for the sake of other people's welfare. For example, the act of charity and giving to others, is a demonstration of power and surplus of resources, rather than something done to provide help from a place of genuine care.² However, this implies a variety of harmful non-truths, such as, humans acting only to fulfil their own satisfaction, that there is only one existing motivation for action and that we care only about survival of the self.

To begin, there are many instances where moral agents have made ethical decisions that do not provide any satisfaction for themselves. During WW2, some people took it upon themselves to hide people targeted by the genocide. A profound example is the Ulma family, who in 1942 protected eight Jewish people at their home in Nazi-occupied Poland. After two years of hiding them, German authorities executed Mr Ulma, Mrs Ulma who was heavily pregnant at the time, and their six children, on the spot.³ The relevance of this case is that it involves foreseeable suffering. The Ulma's knew this act was punishable by death, it was an act that led to immediate loss for them, not satisfaction or reward. Therefore, the motivation for this, considering the grave circumstances of the time and palpable risk to themselves, can only have been

¹ Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan*. Wordsworth Editions Limited. (2014). *Part 1, Chapter 14. Of the First and Second Natural Laws*. Available by download at: <https://www.vlebooks-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/Product/Index/823939?page=0&startBookmarkId=-1>. (Accessed 14/01/26).

² Hobbes, T. (1651). *Leviathan*. Wordsworth Editions Limited. (2014). *Part 1, Chapter 10. Of Power, Worth, Dignity, Honour and Worthiness*. Available by download at: <https://www.vlebooks-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/Product/Index/823939?page=0&startBookmarkId=-1>. (Accessed 14/01/26).

³ Guardian Staff & Agencies. (2023). *Vatican beatifies Polish family executed by Nazis for sheltering Jews*. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/10/vatican-beatifies-polish-family-executed-by-nazis-for-sheltering-jews>. (Accessed 14/01/26).

compassion. This shows the implausibility of the implication from psychological egoism, that we act only to satisfy ourselves. Moreover, it shows the error in its reductive nature, in that we have only one motivation of selfishness. This is empirically wrong through a posteriori knowledge of instances like the Ulma's, and accounts to some proof for a plurality of motives.

Additionally, the insinuation from this stance, that we only care about the survival of the self can be disputed on scientific grounds. It is observable in the documented behaviour of our ancestors that we are by nature, social creatures, who depend on one another to maximise flourishing. We can go as far back as tens of thousands of years ago, with burials, cooperative hunting and care for the elderly and disabled proving we work in groups and truly care about the people around us. Take looking after older and less able people for instance... keeping these less productive people alive, arguably reduces the focus on individual survival. Devoting time and resources to these types of people would have effectively reduced the efficiency of self-preservation, yet groups continued to do it, presenting genuine empathy as the motivation, not self-interest. This is apparent in skeletal evidence of early homo-sapiens which reveals people with debilitating or deteriorative conditions, but who had clearly lived long past the time of becoming physically hindered.⁴ During a time of intense pre-historic conditions, this would only have been possible if the communities were collaborative, providing long-term care or helping to feed others. The social feature of humanity is something in itself which proves a multiplicity of motivations for human action, allowing authentic empathy to be a real factor. It is only reasonable that we accept humans have an innate natural disposition of care and shared emotional responses.

From a similar stance, theologian and philosopher, Joseph Butler, supports the view that there is a plurality of motives as opposed to one of self-interest and the point that humans are social creatures. He argues that human beings have direct desires for objects or other people's welfare, stating that "there is a natural principle of *benevolence* in man, which is in some degree to *society* what *self-love* is to the *individual*."⁵ Therefore, compassion is a genuine thing that drives us, not a disguise for pursuit of the self, evident in the natural human capacity to rejoice with and weep for others.⁶ This can be held true in light of how we receive global news. One of the most

⁴ Bower, B. (2002). *Care-Worn Fossils*. Science News. Available at: <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/care-worn-fossils>. (Accessed 14/01/26).

⁵ Butler, J. (1726). *Human Nature and Other Sermons*. Cassle & Co. Edition. (2007). *Sermon 1: Upon Human Nature*. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3150/pg3150-images.html>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

⁶ Butler, J. (1726). *Human Nature and Other Sermons*. Cassle & Co. Edition. (2007). *Sermon 5: Upon Compassion*. Available at:

recent and ongoing tragic humanitarian crises happening is in Gaza, and it is a clear example of something inciting a worldwide emotional response. In the UK alone, charity organisations, government officials and British civilians have expressed a huge emotional reaction to the deaths of innocent civilians on the other side of the world. For example, OXFAM have published many articles raising awareness and accepting donations for the people in Palestine⁷, the UK government have issued statements with the UN asking Israel to ensure international NGOs can operate in Gaza⁸, and hundreds of thousands of British people have marched the streets of London expressing solidarity with the people dying.⁹ The important insight from all of this, is that there has been a worldwide unified outrage, upset and empathy rooted purely in compassion; understanding human suffering and identifying with situations you haven't been in yourself simply because you are human too. This shows that the inference by psychological egoists, that our only motivation to act is self-interest, lacks credibility.

The concept of instinctive humanitarian impulses is supported by Hume and his theory of sentiment, sympathy and natural benevolence. Within this, sympathy is considered a psychological mechanism where another person's joy or pain can produce the same feeling in us, adding to the point that we feel distress in response to distant humanitarian tragedies.¹⁰ His idea that benevolence is natural, is proven by the fact that we praise benevolent action regardless of if it harms the agent, (i.e. they sustain an injury in protecting another life) and we condemn sinister action regardless of whether the agent benefits (i.e. they experience prosperity winning the lottery through fraudulent means). This argument lends strongly to the point that we can be authentically empathetic, and that we act on sentiment as opposed to self-interest.

Aside from the evident real empathy and instinctive humanitarian impulses observed in humans, there is also the possibility that humans can resist their individual desires and

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3150/pg3150-images.html>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

⁷ Oxfam International. (2025). *Gaza Crisis Appeal*. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/emergencies/gaza-crisis-appeal>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

⁸ Gov UK. (2025). *Joint Statement on the Gaza Humanitarian Response*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/jointstatementon-the-gaza-humanitarian-response>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

⁹ Middle East Monitor. (2025). *Global Day of Action: Over 300,000 march in London to demand justice for Gaza*. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250906-global-day-of-action-over-300000-march-in-london-to-demand-justice-for-gaza>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

¹⁰ Hume, D. (1751). *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Section 2: *Benevolence*. Early Modern Texts Edition. (2007). Available at: https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1751_1.pdf. (Accessed 18/01/26).

act upon a feeling of obligation. Arguably, egoism creates an image of people whereby we are unable to use our own logic and are limited by our selfish desires. However, it is more reasonable to believe we are in complete control of our urges and that we apply our own rationale to everyday ethical dilemmas. For example, if I am a student, my independent desire of the self is to relax, or not attend classes. Ultimately, this would increase my own satisfaction and lends to the common self-interest of avoiding hard work and choosing effortlessness. However, if I am not compelled by the prospect of achievement, then I might be driven by my sense of duty to the people who dedicate their time to teaching me. Therefore, by using my own tool of reasoning, I can determine that I am obligated to do something, that doesn't align perhaps with my initial self-interest.

This response is one that can be backed up by Kant and his idea of duty to the moral law. He makes no exception for if an act does not contribute to our individual happiness or puts our own advantages at stake. One follows the duty of the moral law irrespective of what it means for ourselves, which includes actions that do not align with our self-interest, evident when Kant expressed that duty 'admits no exception in favour of inclination.'¹¹ His example of the honest shopkeeper is a direct criticism of egoism, illustrating that a shopkeeper who gives fair prices to customers but only to maintain a good reputation, acts with no moral worth *because* it is done out of self-interest, a direct contrast to Hobbes' understanding of human ethics. The shopkeeper must do it from a place of duty to authentic honesty.¹² This is a much more comprehensible stance, in the sense that it allows for humans to use their own reasoning before acting, rejecting the egoist claim that moral motivation is reducible to self-interest.

In conclusion, the proof of acts that can only possibly be motivated by compassion, the scientifically demonstrable social nature of human beings, the worldwide emotional reactions presented rooted in human solidarity, the innate humanitarian impulses from our natural possession of benevolence, and our ability to reason and act out of duty, ultimately show that our human action can be motivated by things other than self-interest.

¹¹ Zimmermann, S. (2025). 'No Exception in Favor of Inclination'. *A Defense of Kant's Distinction Between Perfect and Imperfect Duties in the 'Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.'* International Journal of Philosophical Studies. Pages 1-24. Available at: <https://doi-org.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09672559.2025.2498984>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

¹² Sandel, M.J. (c.2009). *Lecture 11: Mind Your Motive, Justice: Harvard*. Available at: <https://justiceharvard.org/lecture-11-mind-your-motive/>. (Accessed 18/01/26).

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