

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

Human motivation has always been a point of debate in philosophy, psychology, and theology. One of the central questions is whether people ever act from anything other than their own self-interest. Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes argued that even apparently generous actions are driven by hidden motives like fear, desire, or the hope of personal benefit.¹ Modern psychology adds another layer through the concept of narcissism, which describes a personality shaped by self-importance, entitlement, and a lack of empathy.² This raises the question of whether non-self-interested action is possible, or whether it is simply a more subtle form of self-interest.

The Bible offers a different perspective on human motivation. While it acknowledges the reality of self-centredness, especially after the Fall in Genesis 3,³ it also presents a vision of love that goes beyond the self. Biblical teachings on *agape*, humility, and self-sacrifice challenge the idea that all human actions are driven by personal gain. Paul's description of love as "not self-seeking" in 1 Corinthians 13⁴ and Jesus' command to love one's neighbour⁵ suggest that humans can be motivated by something deeper than self-interest. The ultimate example is Christ's self-giving love, shown in his willingness to lay down his life for others.⁶ This essay will explore whether our actions can truly be motivated by anything other than self-interest, drawing on philosophical arguments, psychological insights into narcissism, and biblical theology to show that Christian thought allows for a transformed, other-centred form of motivation.

The question of whether humans can act from anything other than self-interest has been central to philosophical debate for centuries. One of the strongest positions in favour of universal self-interest is psychological egoism, the view that every human action is ultimately motivated by personal benefit. Thomas Hobbes is one of the most influential defenders of this idea. In *Leviathan*, he argues that even acts which appear generous or compassionate are rooted in fear, desire, or the pursuit of personal security.⁷ According to Hobbes, humans are driven by a constant need to preserve themselves, and any kindness shown to others is simply a strategy for maintaining peace or avoiding harm.

Other philosophers have challenged this reduction of all motives to self-interest. Joseph Butler, writing in the eighteenth century, argued that psychological egoism confuses the

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), p. 78.

² American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Washington, DC: APA, 2013), pp. 669–72.

³ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3 (NRSV).

⁴ *The Holy Bible*, 1 Corinthians 13.5 (NRSV).

⁵ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 22.39 (NRSV).

⁶ *The Holy Bible*, John 15.13 (NRSV).

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 78.

pleasure that follows from an action with the motive that caused it.⁸ For Butler, the fact that someone feels satisfaction after helping another person does not mean that satisfaction was their goal. This distinction opens the possibility that humans may act from compassion, duty, or concern for others, rather than from self-interest alone. Immanuel Kant takes this further by insisting that the moral worth of an action depends on whether it is done from duty rather than inclination.⁹ If someone helps another person because they feel like it or because it benefits them, Kant argues that the action lacks moral value. True morality, for Kant, requires acting from respect for the moral law, even when it conflicts with one's own interests.

Modern psychology adds another dimension to this debate through the concept of narcissism. Narcissistic individuals tend to act from self-enhancement, entitlement, and a desire for admiration, which seems to support the egoist claim that humans are fundamentally self-interested.¹⁰ However, the very existence of non-narcissistic individuals — those capable of empathy, mutuality, and genuine concern — challenges the idea that self-interest is universal. If some people consistently act in ways that prioritise others, even at personal cost, then psychological egoism cannot fully explain human motivation.

These philosophical and psychological perspectives create a useful framework for evaluating the biblical claim that humans can be motivated by agape love. While egoist theories highlight the reality of self-interest, especially in its narcissistic forms, thinkers like Butler and Kant leave open the possibility that humans can act from motives that transcend the self. This tension sets the stage for exploring how Christian theology understands human motivation in light of sin, love, and transformation.

Christian theology offers a distinctive perspective on human motivation, one that both acknowledges the power of self-interest and challenges it through the call to love, humility, and self-sacrifice. The biblical narrative begins with an account of human beings turning inward, seeking autonomy and self-elevation. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit is driven by the desire to "be like God," a form of self-exaltation that mirrors what modern psychology would describe as narcissistic motivation.¹¹ The Fall introduces a distortion of human desire, where self-interest becomes disordered and often takes priority over obedience to God or concern for others.

Despite this recognition of self-centredness, the Bible consistently presents a vision of love that goes beyond the self. One of the clearest expressions of this is found in Paul's description of *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13. Here, love is portrayed as patient, kind, and "not self-seeking," directly challenging the idea that all human actions are motivated by personal gain.¹² Agape is not based on mutual benefit or emotional reward; it is a form of love that

⁸ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London: William Innys, 1726), pp. 35–36.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by H. J. Paton (London: Routledge, 1948), pp. 65–67.

¹⁰ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Washington, DC: APA, 2013), pp. 669–72.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3 (NRSV).

¹² *The Holy Bible*, 1 Corinthians 13.5 (NRSV).

gives without expecting anything in return. This stands in stark contrast to narcissistic motivation, which seeks admiration, validation, or control. Paul's teaching suggests that humans are capable of a kind of motivation that is fundamentally other-centred, rooted in a transformed understanding of love.

Jesus' own teaching reinforces this idea. In Matthew 6, he instructs his followers to give to the needy "in secret," without seeking recognition or reward.¹³ This command undermines the egoist assumption that people only act generously when they stand to gain something. Jesus presents a model of giving that is intentionally detached from self-interest, emphasising the purity of intention rather than the outcome. Similarly, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan's compassion is shown without any expectation of repayment or social advantage.¹⁴ These teachings suggest that the possibility of non-self-interested action is not only real but central to Christian ethics.

The most powerful biblical example of other-centred motivation is found in the life and death of Jesus. In John 15:13, Jesus states that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."¹⁵ His crucifixion is presented not as an act of self-interest but as the ultimate expression of sacrificial love. Paul expands on this in Philippians 2, describing Christ as one who "emptied himself" and took the form of a servant, acting out of humility rather than self-exaltation.¹⁶ This portrayal of Christ stands in direct opposition to narcissistic tendencies. Instead of seeking admiration or power, Jesus willingly accepts suffering for the sake of others. In Christian theology, this becomes the model for human behaviour, suggesting that believers are called to imitate a form of love that cannot be reduced to self-benefit.

At the same time, Christian theology does not deny the ongoing struggle with self-interest. The doctrine of sanctification acknowledges that while humans are naturally inclined toward self-centredness, the work of the Holy Spirit gradually transforms their motives.¹⁷ This transformation does not eliminate self-interest entirely, but it reorders it, placing love of God and neighbour above personal gain. In this sense, Christian ethics does not simply claim that altruism is possible; it argues that humans are called and empowered to pursue it.

Taken together, these biblical themes present a complex but hopeful picture of human motivation. While the Fall explains why self-interest is such a powerful force, the teachings

and example of Jesus reveal that humans can act from a deeper, other-centred love. This theological vision challenges the philosophical claim that all actions are self-interested and

¹³ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 6.1–4 (NRSV).

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible*, Luke 10.25–37 (NRSV).

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible*, John 15.13 (NRSV).

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible*, Philippians 2.5–8 (NRSV).

¹⁷ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), pp. 45–47.

offers a framework in which genuine altruism is not only possible but essential to the Christian life.

The contrast between narcissistic and non-narcissistic motivation provides a useful lens for examining whether humans can act from anything other than self-interest. Narcissism, as described in modern psychology, is characterised by entitlement, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy.¹⁸ These traits align closely with the philosophical claim that all human actions are ultimately self-interested. A narcissistic individual tends to interpret relationships in terms of personal gain, validation, or status. Even acts that appear generous may be performed to maintain a positive self-image or to secure admiration from others. In this sense, narcissistic motivation represents the extreme end of the egoist spectrum, where the self becomes the primary reference point for all decisions.

The Bible offers several examples of behaviour that resembles narcissistic motivation. Jesus criticises the Pharisees for performing religious acts “to be seen by others,” highlighting a desire for recognition rather than genuine devotion.¹⁹ Their actions may appear righteous, but their motives are rooted in self-promotion. This mirrors the psychological understanding of narcissism, where outward behaviour can mask inward self-interest. Such examples support the idea that self-centred motivation is not only common but deeply embedded in human nature.

However, the existence of non-narcissistic motivation challenges the claim that all actions are self-interested. Non-narcissistic individuals are capable of empathy, compassion, and genuine concern for others, even when such actions offer no personal benefit. The Bible provides strong examples of this kind of motivation. In the story of the widow’s offering, Jesus praises a woman who gives “all she had to live on,” despite receiving no recognition or reward.²⁰ Her action is not driven by admiration or status but by sincere devotion. Similarly, Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6 instructs believers to give in secret, emphasising that true generosity is detached from the desire for praise.²¹ These examples suggest that non-self-interested action is not only possible but central to Christian ethics.

The ultimate model of non-narcissistic motivation is found in Jesus himself. His willingness to serve others, wash his disciples’ feet, and ultimately lay down his life reflects a form of love that cannot be reduced to self-interest.²² In Christian theology, this kind of self-giving love becomes the standard for human behaviour, demonstrating that motivations grounded in humility and compassion are both real and attainable.

¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Washington, DC: APA, 2013), pp. 669–72.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 23.5 (NRSV).

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Mark 12.41–44 (NRSV).

²¹ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 6.1–4 (NRSV).

²² *The Holy Bible*, John 13.1–17; John 15.13 (NRSV).

Although Christian theology presents a compelling case for the possibility of other-centred motivation, several counterarguments challenge the idea that humans can ever act without some form of self-interest. One common objection is that religious behaviour itself may be motivated by the desire for reward or the fear of punishment. Critics argue that Christians may act generously or sacrificially because they hope to gain eternal life or avoid judgement, rather than out of genuine love for others.²³ This perspective suggests that even apparently altruistic actions are ultimately grounded in self-preservation, aligning with the egoist claim that all human motivation is self-interested.

Another counterargument comes from evolutionary psychology, which proposes that altruistic behaviour developed because it increased the survival of individuals or their social groups²⁴ From this perspective, helping others is not truly selfless but a strategy that benefits the individual indirectly by strengthening social bonds or ensuring reciprocal support. Even acts that appear costly may contribute to long-term survival or reproductive success. This view challenges the idea that humans can act from motives that transcend biological self-interest.

A further objection is that altruistic actions often produce internal satisfaction or a sense of moral fulfilment. Some argue that people help others because it makes them feel good, which again suggests a form of self-interest.²⁵ However, Christian theology responds by emphasising intention rather than emotional by-products. The fact that someone feels satisfaction after doing good does not mean that satisfaction was their motive. Jesus' teaching on giving in secret assumes that actions can be performed without seeking recognition or reward, even if positive feelings follow.²⁶

These counterarguments highlight the complexity of human motivation, but they do not eliminate the possibility of genuine altruism. Instead, they reinforce the need to distinguish between motives and outcomes, a distinction that remains central to Christian ethics.

The question of whether humans can act from anything other than self-interest is complex, and both philosophy and psychology highlight the powerful role that self-centred motivation plays in human behaviour. Psychological egoism and the concept of narcissism show how easily actions can be shaped by the desire for validation, security, or personal gain. Yet these perspectives do not fully account for the range of human motivation, nor do they explain the existence of actions that appear genuinely self-giving. Philosophers such as Butler and Kant argue that motives cannot always be reduced to self-interest, and that humans are capable of acting from duty, compassion, or concern for others.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 32–35.

²⁴ Robert Trivers, 'The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism', *Quarterly Review of Biology*, 46 (1971), 35–57.

²⁵ C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 45–48.

²⁶ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 6.1–4 (NRSV).

Christian theology strengthens this possibility by offering a vision of humanity that acknowledges the reality of self-interest while insisting that transformation is possible. The biblical themes of agape, humility, and self-sacrifice present a form of motivation that cannot be explained by egoism alone. Jesus' teaching on giving in secret and his own example of self-emptying love reveal that humans can act from motives that prioritise others rather than themselves.²⁷ While self-interest remains a powerful force, the Christian tradition maintains that genuine other-centred action is both real and essential to the life of faith. This suggests that human motivation cannot be reduced to self-interest alone, and that the capacity for altruism is a central part of the Christian understanding of what it means to love.

²⁷The Holy Bible, Philippians 2.5–8; Matthew 6.1–4 (NRSV).

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