

A Case for the Death of Self

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“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” - Matthew 16:24

While conversing with my friend once more in a somewhat heated discussion (my manners escape me more often than I'm comfortable with, I'm working on it), we came across the topic of motivations and intentions of actions. Specifically, are all premeditated decisions made with ultimately selfish motives. With the likes of "the selfish gene" and a culture which often encourages an inwardly looking individualistic perspective, one would be forgiven for thinking that all actions ultimately serve to further our own self interests. I only did that nice thing for you to make me feel good and so you would do nice things for me in the future etc. But is this really the case? Fundamentally in my heart I don't believe this to be so, or at least, not for them who have taken up their cross. In this essay we will explore some reasons for our actions, and try and show that self can be tamed for those to whom self has been crucified.

Some disclaimers before we start. I am not a psychologist and will not pretend to be. My arguments are given on the assumption that there is still a conversation to be had, and the jury is still out on the inner workings of our minds. I understand that the case could be made that evolution seeks to preserve its own gene pool, and thus we must ultimately do the same, but I disagree with Mr Dawkins on two counts. First, we are being forced into this conclusion without a reasonable or fair evaluation of human psyche. I understand that this may well be a logical conclusion to draw from evolutionary theory, but that doesn't make it true. Rather, if evolutionary theory is in fact true, we shouldn't be afraid to take stock of our motives and indeed should expect to find that we are all selfish by nature. If the theory matches reality, we can argue that the theory has reasonable grounding. We should not try and make reality match our theory, lest we fall into the trap of irrationally confirming our own biases. The second count is that even if Mr Dawkins was indeed correct, it is then a step too far in my opinion to assume we cannot overcome our natural animalistic tendencies. If that were not so, society would be a lot more chaotic than it currently is. It's difficult to deny that we possess some level of self control which allows us to operate beyond that of our most immediate wants and needs. Now we shall discuss whether this self control transcends that of selfishness, but my reasoning is that just because the general case 'may' be our ultimate preservation and furthering of self, this does not

mean there cannot be outliers to this rule in our day to day lives. And if there are indeed outliers, they can be exploited for the good of others.

My second disclaimer is that, despite my short tangent, I do not subscribe to the idea of a selfish gene governing every decision, or even the vast majority of our decisions. Many factors are involved in any one decision, and personal upbringing and experience plays an important, if not more important role in our decision making.

My third and final disclaimer is that I will be approaching this topic from my own personal perspective. If you desire to do your own reading on the topic, take a look at "Psychological egoism". For risk of polluting my own ideas from which to draw from however, I have not taken this liberty.

So, as usual, let's begin by defining the statement a little more so we're all on the same egotistic page. Specifically, I want to discuss motive for action. But even before we discuss this, I would like to play the very much overused Hume card, that of cause and effect. Hume argued that cause and effect are not always linked, and in fact unless there is a specific law that the future will always resemble the past, we cannot assume cause always leads to effect. No such law exists. What does this have to do with our discussion? That will become apparent, just keep this in mind for now, if you will. So what of motive. The trusty oxford dictionary describes motive as "the reason for doing something". Synonyms include 'explanation', 'grounds', 'basis', 'excuse', 'motive', 'justification' and 'pretext'. I will extend and specify this definition slightly, by saying for the purposes of our discussion I would like to define motive as the our ultimate and highest reason for making a decision. And now that we have defined it, I would like to ask if this definition resembles any decision at all? For it does not make sense to believe that any given decision hinges on one factor. To the contrary, there are a string of factors, variables and perspectives which have culminated in one path being chosen. One has to ask if, before we've even begun our discussion, we are face with a wall of irreducible complexity. The question being, is it even possible to pin any one decision on a single ultimate factor. To understand if this is the case, let's explore a bit more what it means to make a decision.

In the simplest case, we are presented with two possible actions. Let's take the trolley problem (mostly due to its memic nature). A trolley is hurtling along a track towards a junction. You stand next to the junction switch. If undisturbed, the trolley will run over 10 people tied to the current track. If you choose to flick the switch, the trolley will change to a different track and only run over one person. Basic utilitarianism would suggest the most logical outcome would be to flick the switch and save the 10 people, but then you become personally responsible for the death of one person. If you leave the switch, you can go on your merry way knowing that nature took its course and, although people died, you weren't personally responsible. But then, by merely being in that situation, are you not already involved and responsible for the outcome. What does this look like from the perspective of the selfish person who only looks for self interest. Well they would probably choose the result that brought them the most joy. Well in this case, neither of them bring joy. Well then they

would probably choose the action that resulted in the least amount of grief for them. But is it possible to quantify this amount of grief? Are we psychologically capable of comprehending such unquantifiable factors in stressful situations, or is it more accurate to say that the factors one would consider in such a situation are much more philosophical than they are animalistic. Your level of empathy will be a contributing factor, if you had a loving childhood, you may be more willing to intervene and save some people. If your childhood was less than ideal and you learned to fend for yourself from a very young age, you may be more inclined to leave them be, after all they got themselves into this situation. In both cases one could argue that the person is acting out of self interest, but is that the 'highest' contributing factor? I would argue that in the case I have presented, it cannot be, as the deciding factor, and thus ultimately the highest contributing factor was their upbringing. Both are acting out of self interest, so this cannot be the deciding factor, the only difference is their upbringing.

Ok so maybe self interest is not necessarily a deciding factor globally when comparing between the decisions made by two different people with different backgrounds, but what about for the individual with a fixed background? Then the case may be made that for them, their governing principle (as we have shown by this example) is to maximise personal pleasure and minimise personal pain. To show that I do not believe this to be the case, let's think about motive once more. In our previous example, we assumed that the decision that would be taken is the one that lead to the most benefit for self, but this is an assumption. Let's examine why we would, or would not make such an assumption. In every decision, there is a list of possible motives for taking a certain course of action. In the case of the trolley problem, self interest is not the only motive. We already named one which we briefly skipped over when we mentioned utilitarianism. Specifically, this is subscription to a set of moral guiding principles which allow you to make a decision. Your loyalty to your moral framework leads you to make a decision, and thus acts as your motive. But one could argue that we have chosen our moral guiding principles based on what gives us most pleasure, and this may be the case for some, but again this is an assumption. One leave no room to maneuver in a counter that we have some moral autonomy to choose what we believe is the right thing to do if we keep arguing that all decisions have self interest at heart without some reason why this is the case. One may then argue that it is the case because of evolution but as stated earlier, this is not proof based on observation, but rather attempting to keep our narrative consistent by introducing factors which have not yet been proved to contribute in a meaningful capacity. If one cannot start from an observation of actions and reach evolution, then it makes no sense to make the assumption that choice of moral framework is governed by self interest. If this were the only possibility, then this assumption would be valid, but as other reasons for choosing a moral framework exist (such as believing in an ultimate good such as that taught in the Bible, for example the 10 commandments), we cannot come to this assumption. One might then suggest that actually we only believe in this higher good because it serves our own interests, but again that's not the only explanation for believing in God. One can arrive at belief in God

though logic (as many have in the past) and so that would be reason enough. One could further argue that you only believe in logic because it serves your ultimate good (if you didn't like the outcome, you wouldn't believe it). To this I have two rebuttals. First, logic is logic and transcends personal preference. Second, one would still be trying to shoehorn in the idea that all decisions must be motivate by self, rather than taking an objective view of our motives. The proof of this is that we can entirely remove the argument from our train of logic and there is nothing up until now which would remotely suggest that the path we have taken to reach this logical belief in God was motivated by self.

The counter to the selfish person is the person who is prepared to believe the truth no matter the cost. This is a decision which is completely devoid of all self interest by definition. One cannot argue that the person made the decision based on self interest, as the nature of what 'truth' is is yet unknown to him. Further, once the decision is made, all decisions that follow are driven not by self interest, but rather by following the principle of doing what is 'true'. Even if you argue that the person made this decision on the assumption that it would lead to the greatest good for them, all subsequent decisions may not lead to personal satisfaction, and if the general trend is not advancement of self, then you are held captive to your own decision to follow the truth. You will be forced to reach a point where you are no longer acting out of self interest because you made the 'wrong' decision. The point being, we have found a case where it is impossible for your decisions to continue being motivated by self. And if this is the case here, then we cannot assume that all decisions are motivate by self, as to do so we would have to argue that there can be no other possible motivation for making a decision, and we just found one: being held captive by one of your previous decisions.

There is a hole you can poke in this argument. One could say that at each and every decision you make, you have the option to break free from your promise. And thus the only reason you hold on to your decision to follow the truth is because you believe that ultimately you will preserve self interest. And for this I have no answer. Or rather, I don't like the argument, but it is agnostic to the situation. You can always make this argument whatever the case, because it'll always be an extra layer that can rest on top. It's like the argument that the universe has no ultimate creator because everything must be created by something. Who created the Earth? God. Who created God? The point being you can't argue against it because the argument assumes it will always be applicable to all circumstance. The easy answer in this case it that God is eternally existent and thus requires no creator, but this is just an alternative to the belief that God has a creator. For the argument to work, you must assume that all things have a creator. Likewise, with the selfish person, you must assume that all motives are motivated by self for the argument to work. To pose another alternative does not fit within this framework, and so cannot be argued against if this is the overarching assumption. To illustrate this point, let's add an even higher level. All selfish motives are actually motivated by selflessness, because we subconsciously know that if we treat ourselves as the priority we will eventually serve others, as we will reach a position of wealth

and prosperity which will spill over into the lives of others. Ultimately we are serving the good of the community, through selfless selfishness. There is no self counter to this argument, because we can always apply this additional layer. If we say our selflessness is actually just motivated by self, we can counter with that self is motivated by selflessness.