



# **Psychological vs Rational Egoism**

# 02 Psychological Egoism

- A claim that people only ever act out of self interest – even if it may seem altruistic
- It's not saying we **should** act selfishly – just that we always do, even when it looks like we're helping others.
- Whenever people help others, they do it:
  - To feel good
  - To avoid guilt
  - To gain social approval
  - Or to get something in return

# 03 Example of Psychological Egoism

**You are donating a sum of money to a group of individuals who are requesting a donation**

A psychological egoist would argue different things such as:

1. You donate because you feel empathy — but empathy itself is what makes you feel bad, so donating relieves your discomfort.
2. You like the recognition that you get or you get some sort of tax benefit
3. It boosts your reputation, or gives a sense of moral superiority.



# Psychological Egoism: Woke or Broke?

**Question:** does psychological egoism hold an objective or subjective understanding of human behavior?

**Answer:** Objective! The psychological egoist believes as truth that self-interested behavior is an accurate description of *how we are*.

**A setup:** Suppose I'm in a conversation with someone whom I dislike. I could make some excuse and leave at any time, but wait for them to finish before ending the conversation.

**Question:** how can we explain this behavior?



I didn't enjoy cleaning my room as a child, but I did it anyway. Did I actually want it, deep down?



# Challenging the Psychological Egoist

**The setup:** I leave an unpleasant conversation later **than I could have**

1. **Therefore:** this implies that I can take actions I “don’t want”
  - If not, they are assuming their conclusion (“people can only take actions that they want”)
2. **It gets worse:** If we can, there must be other motivations or reasons for our behavior (e.g. being polite to my conversational partner)
  - The egoist can argue “I wanted actually to be polite”
3. But if we can “want” anything in this manner, then it is only vacuously (and trivially) true that “we do what we want”
  - This formulation of wanting is also unfalsifiable

**Food for thought:** If someone performs an action out of guilt or obligation, are they acting in their self interest? For example, two people volunteer at a soup kitchen. One from guilt, the other for joy helping others. Are both equally selfish?



The psych. egoist's claim is too ambitious.  
Could a revised premise save it?



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# 06 Rational Egoism

- A rational egoist standpoint would be to act in accordance to their desire (operative/direction)
- The moral standpoint would be that there has to be a compelling reason in order to deviate and act altruistically (reasoning)

# 07 Rational Egoism Examples

**Scenario:** A friend of yours has a difficult situation and they need advice. Your advice is a difficult truth, potentially risking your friendship

- "Lying would be easier, but telling the truth builds trust and integrity in the long term, which are more valuable to me. I want meaningful relationships, not fake ones."
- Honesty is moral here — because it pays off in long-term relationships and identity.

**Maximizing your own well-being and happiness is the ultimate goal, so you'd tell the truth**

# 08 Problems with Rational Egoism

- 1. You ignore moral obligations unless they benefit you**
- 2. Rational egoism is based on a naive view of how clearly people can calculate what's actually the best for themselves**
  - a. Growth vs Comfort
  - b. Short vs Long Term Success
- 3. What happens when everyone acts in their own self interest?**