

Egoism

on ethics and selfishness



George Matthews

2020

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- If you had such power, would you be able to resist the temptation to act on your selfish desires?
- Are people inherently selfish and only kept in check by fear of getting caught?

The philosophy of selfishness

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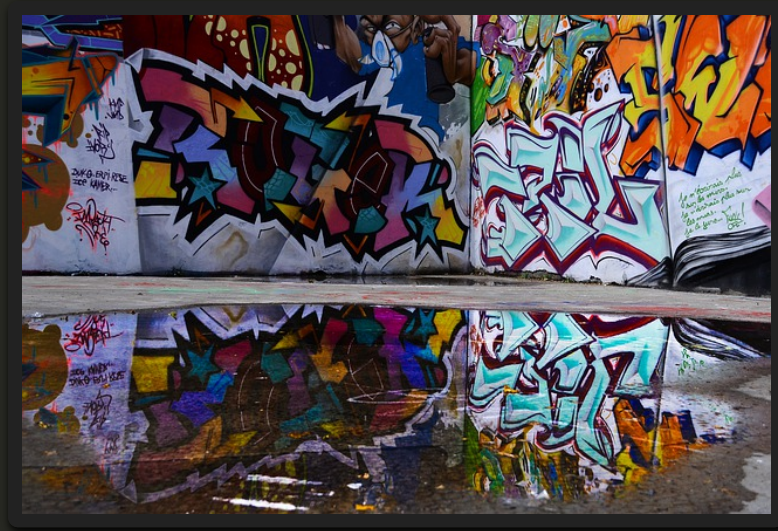
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These are related but different ways of pointing out the limitations of ethics, as either *unrealistic* or *counter-productive*.

Psychological Egoism

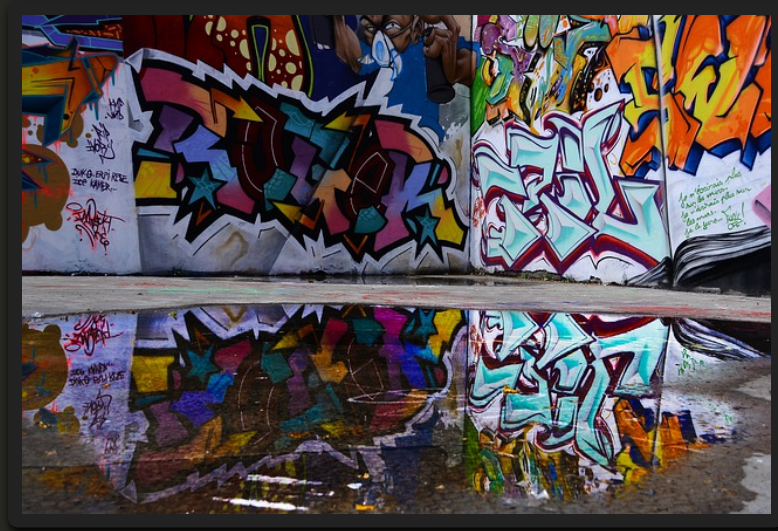


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- Claims that ethics is *impossible* since there is no such thing as a "selfless good deed."
- Presents itself as a realistic alternative to sentimental idealism about human beings.

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- How is this not just a cynical dismissal of generosity and instead a theory to be taken seriously?
- Let's consider the arguments...

Is PE true?

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My choices are mine...

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- But perhaps there is a subtle shift of meaning here: does it follow that all motives are *for my sake alone* just because they are *my motives*?

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- PE has *unlimited evidence* to back it up, since *any* action that seems altruistic can be dismissed as the result of hidden selfish motives, so it's a great theory, right?

Theories, evidence and testing

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- The problem here is a logical problem: this argument is **INVALID**.

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- This argument is **VALID**, and shows our explanation of the cause of autism to be a bad explanation.

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Is there really always a selfish motive behind everything we do? Maybe, maybe not, but PE simply *assumes* it must be there.

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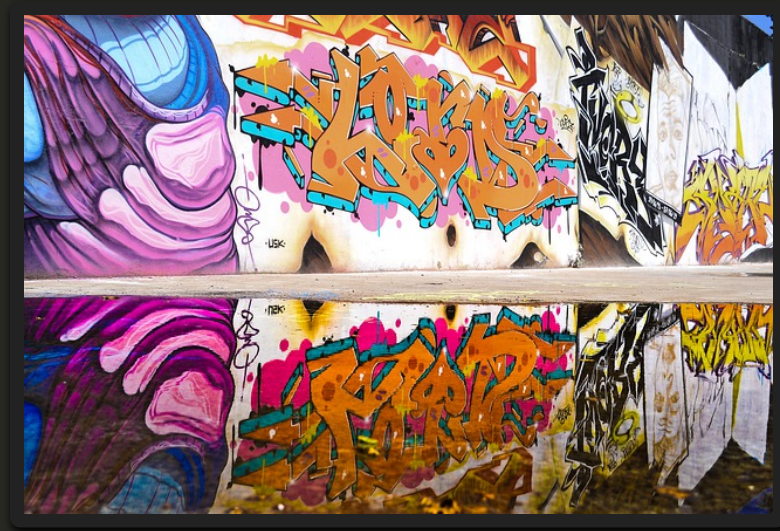
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Let's see why someone might argue this way.

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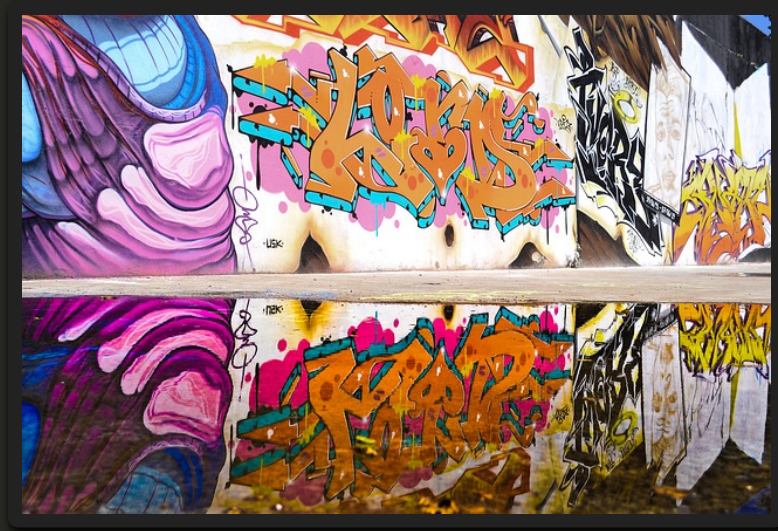


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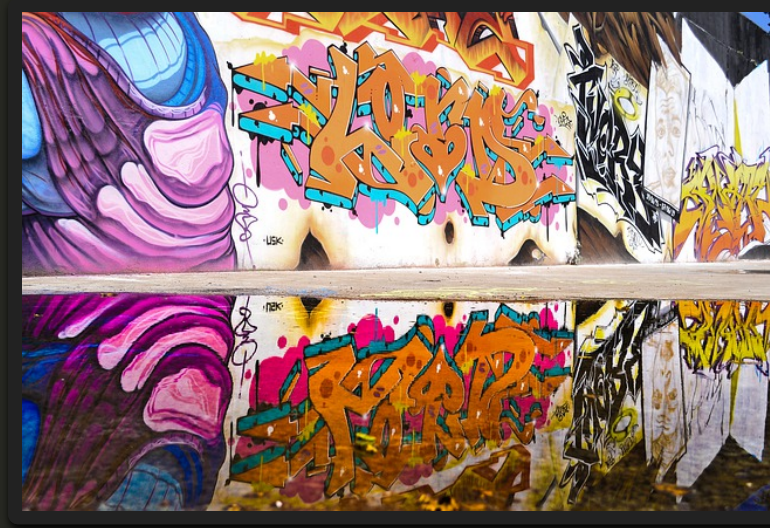
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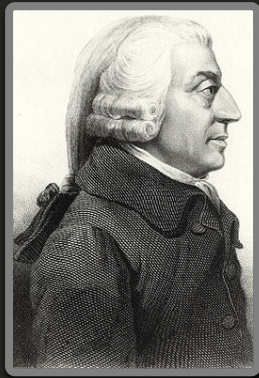
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- Ethical Egoism is a *normative* theory about what we should and shouldn't do.
- It claims that ethics is *self-defeating* since acting for the sake of others ultimately leads to a worse outcome, for *all of us*.
- Often used in political and economic arguments about capitalism and socialism.

Adam Smith's "invisible hand"



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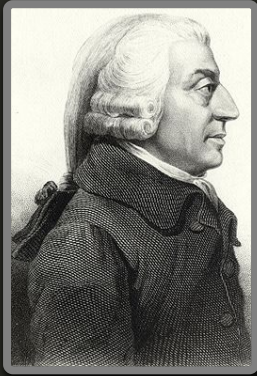
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- For Smith we need only allow people to pursue private gain in the marketplace and "the invisible hand" of supply and demand will ensure a socially optimal outcome -- fair prices, innovation, economic efficiency.

Rand on the virtue of selfishness



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- Among her fans are Ronald Reagan, Alan Greenspan, Rand Paul and Donald Trump.

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The best way to encourage competition is by appealing to our individual desires for rewards, our selfish desire to get ahead.

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- According to this argument, helping others hinders competition and undermines the benefits of competition.

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- So they must be broken up, and likewise in sports -- the winning teams in get the *worst* draft picks to ensure *fair* competition in future seasons.
- The capitalist's argument has a deeper problem: Why would selfish people even *care* about the good of all? Is it still a defense of *Egoism* if we all do care?

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- Rand assumes that the pursuit of happiness is a *zero sum game*--my gain requires your loss and vice-versa.
- But doesn't cooperation help us *all* out more than always going it alone?

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Is there a rational basis for the rules governing our lives together in society? Or are we stuck with appealing to custom, authority and our shifting alliances with others to maintain social order?

Find out more

Egoism: a comprehensive account from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

What's in it for me?, Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao, in *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics*. This chapter covers Egoism as well as our next theory, Social Contract Theory.

Inequality in The USA: a great video on what Americans want in terms of wealth distribution, our perception of what it is, and the reality. It turns out to be different than you might think.

The New Age of Ayn Rand: decades after her death her fiction continues to have an outsized influence on American public life. Read more in this article from the British news site *The Guardian*.



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