

Why Everyone Acts Altruistically All the Time: What Parodying Psychological Egoism Can Teach Us

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Abstract Psychological Altruism (PA) is the view that everyone, ultimately, acts altruistically all the time. I defend PA by showing strong *prima facie* support, and show how a reinterpretive strategy against supposed counterexamples is successful. I go on to show how PA can be argued for in ways which exactly mirror the arguments for an opposing view, Psychological Egoism. This shows that the case for PA is at least as plausible as PE. Since the case for PA is not plausible, neither is that for PE.

Keywords Egoism · Psychological egoism · Altruism · Hobbes · Selfishness

By ‘Psychological Altruism’ I shall mean the view that everyone always intends to act for the benefit of others. Psychological Altruism (PA) has not been defended much before, most likely because it is so obvious as to be barely worth stating. But, as there are opponents, such as Psychological Egoists, defending Psychological Altruism is worthwhile.¹

PA, a descriptive view, should not be confused with its prescriptive cousin, which is the view that one *ought* to act for the benefit of others at all times.² Nor should it be confused with another descriptive position we could call ‘Moderate Altruism’, viz., the view that people sometimes act selflessly, sometimes selfishly. PA can be captured as follows:

PA=_{def} For any agent S and any intentional act A of S, S intends (either consciously or subconsciously) by A to benefit an agent or agents other than S (regardless of the benefits that may also be acquired by S), or, A is intended by

¹For what is often considered a paradigmatic example of Psychological Egoism, and arguments for it, see Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, esp. Chapters III–XIII. Note that it is a matter of controversy, however, whether Hobbes (1968) was in fact a Psychological Egoist. For discussion see Moseley (2010) and Shaver (2010).

²For the purposes of this paper, I will use ‘selfless’ and ‘for the benefit of others’ interchangeably.

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S for self-benefit, but this benefit is viewed (either consciously or subconsciously) as a means to benefit others.

Yet another way of stating the view is that everyone acts *ultimately* for the sake of others. One might occasionally intend to benefit oneself by an action, but, according to PA, this immediate goal, when present, is instrumental toward the goal of benefiting others.

I claim only that PA is contingently true. That is, while it could be the case that people act in a selfish or self-interested way, as a matter of fact, they never do.

What can be said for PA? For starters, we should note, as a stepping stone towards establishing PA, that altruism is a daily occurrence. Many actions are obviously altruistic, such as parents with type-IV cancer caring for their children; people working jobs they hate to support their family; spouses deferring to their mates' dinner plans; soldiers dying for their country; volunteer work performed for the sake of losers, and so on. It has been anecdotally reported that most people who have been asked on their deathbed what was most important to them in their life gave some combination of the following as an answer: the good of their friends, families, countrymen, fellow man; or, in some cases, the good of their co-religionists, or working for the glory of God. In short, acting for the benefit of others is a daily occurrence. But what can be said for the view that everyone, ultimately, *always* acts selflessly?

Quite a bit. Let us begin by examining a passage from Stenos' ancient dialogue *The Commonwealth* wherein Setarcos (here being employed as Stenos' mouthpiece) defends the position that prudence or self-interest is an intrinsic good against the following argument of Simplicius. It is worth quoting at length, and is of interest, in part, for being the first discussion of the view that prudence is a social construct.

They say, then, that to be altruistic is naturally good, and self-interested, bad, but that the price of being wholly altruistic is a limitation on the altruistic actions one can do. The bad that all will suffer if everyone pursued only the good of others so far outweighs the goodness that will redound to others if one looks after oneself quite a bit, that it is profitable to come to an agreement that each will spend a considerable amount of time looking after one's own welfare. Looking after one's own welfare is not good in itself at all, Setarcos, but is only viewed as a means to the end of helping others. Prudence is a compromise...

We can see clearly that those who help themselves do so unwillingly. Everyone would help others exclusively, if only given the power to do so. It is the fear of consequences to others and lack of power that make people choose their own good. A real man would admit that he always desires to help others rather than himself, if only he was honest, it is just that modesty, inability, and a desire to not appear holier-than-thou, or to put others in his debt, makes him pretend to selfishness. Some have grown so used to acting this way that they actually believe that they desire to benefit themselves for its own sake!

Take an apparently altruistic man and an apparently selfish man. Both, if given the power, would help others.

This might be best illustrated if we look at how the ancestor of Gyges of Lydia acted when he got such a power. As the tale goes, he was a lowly shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. After an earthquake the ground broke open.... and he found a ring...and found that when he turned the setting towards the inside of his hand he turned invisible. He immediately set to work helping

people. Before, as a lowly shepherd, most of his time was spent eking out a meagre existence with nary the time to loan a cup of honey to his neighbor. But with the ring, he saw new opportunities. He arranged to become a messenger of the king, surely a more helpful profession, and one more suited to his acumen. After having been taken into the queen's confidence, and upon observing the interactions of the king and queen, as well as the king's lack of skill in rule, he determined that, not only would the queen and his own concupiscence be more fecund and enjoyable than that between the king and queen, but that he would be a far better ruler than the king. Surely he must have hesitated before assassinating the king and taking the queen to wife, not only due to the personal risk, but the putting on of both kingly and husbandry responsibilities in one fell swoop!

And yet we can imagine another kind of ring. Imagine that it grants omnipotence. One can become arrow-proof, eliminate the starry host with a thought, or produce vast fields of wheat. Let us suppose there are two such rings, one worn by a supposedly selfish man and one by an apparently altruistic man. Surely neither could resist eliminating poverty, hunger, wiping out or changing the characters of wicked individuals, and so on.

You see, Setarcos? This shows that no one values prudence as an end in itself, but only as a means to the end of helping others. All would help, if only given the means to do so.³

As many commentators have noted, the argument is not decisive. Simplicius' purpose is slightly different than our own. Simplicius is successful overall if he merely shows that it stands to reason that most individuals would act altruistically if only they could, and certainly the Ring of Gyges example supports that. The Psychological Altruist, however, needs to go further. PA holds that all individuals act only for the benefit of others, at all times. We should begin by noting how PA can successfully and coherently show that all behavior is interpretable as motivated by altruism, and rebut some obvious objections before we turn to why we *should* interpret all motivation this way.

There are many apparent cases of selfish actions. But these *prima facie* selfish actions can always be interpreted as motivated by what are ultimately altruistic ulterior motives. If one of the most apparently selfish series of actions possible can be, without incoherence, interpreted as motivated by altruistic reasons, then, *a fortiori*, all less apparently selfish actions can be coherently interpreted as altruistically motivated as well. This does not itself establish PA, it merely shows that all behavior is interpretable as consistent with PA. But, when this reinterpretive strategy is combined with the everydayness of altruism and the ability of PA to unify and simplify our account of agent motivation and agency in general, and solve the prudence/duty dilemma, then inference to the best explanation strongly supports it. Before we get to the latter part of the argument, let us first examine the reinterpretive strategy. Let us turn to the *Case of the Murderous Thief*:

Jim breaks into a house and attempts to carry out a television. Bob, the resident, tries to stop him after calling the police. Jim shoots Bob, and kills two

³ *The Commonwealth*, A⁹B6,9#ff. My translation. c.f. *Republic* Bk II.

policemen and several pedestrians in the high-speed chase that ensues. Jim eventually gets captured.

To the unreflective, it may *seem* that Jim is selfish. But this would be wrong. Before we talk to Jim himself, what interpretation of Jim's actions can the Psychological Altruist give? For starters, the purpose of Jim's visit could have been to teach Bob, or his family, about the transience of material possessions. Jim knows, as we all do, deep down, that we should not be too attached to our possessions. And what could reinforce this more than occasionally sundering our connection to them? Also, by stealing Bob's TV, Bob is more likely to spend quality time with his family, or read more. But, you might think, why did he kill Bob then? Another motive can be supplied. Jim, upon seeing Bob's wretched countenance, and his poor taste (gleaned from a glance at his glass unicorn and Hummel collections), comes to believe that Bob's life is a terrible tapestry of pain and woe. Jim helped Bob shuffle off this mortal coil. But, isn't Jim inconsistent? Jim wants to provide Bob's children with more time with their father, and yet he kills him. Well, the obvious rejoinder is that people are often irrational and have conflicting motives about how best to help others. It is no part of PA that everyone is perfectly rational. Jim might not have known that Bob was at home, and initially attempted to teach Bob's family about the transience, but, finding him there, saw a target of opportunity for exhibiting his altruism. Or, maybe Jim was not irrational. His plans changed only after collecting new data (e.g. Bob's face and his collections). I am not saying that we can *know* offhand what Jim's motive is, or what any person's *particular* motive is in every case—just that we can always find a way to interpret someone's actions in line with PA. PA is also consistent with one intentionally harming others, or making someone else's life worse, just so long as the purpose of all such actions are to benefit someone other than oneself. So, Jim could have been eliminating people who he believes are gentrifying the neighborhood, or lowering property values, or drive SUV's and harm the environment, or are corrupt, and so on.

What about Jim's running away from the police, and killing people along the way? Surely that is selfish—an attempt to elude prison? No. Perhaps Jim believes that it is better to be dead than be a police officer. Alternatively, Jim realizes that his chances of continuing in his altruistic ways would be hampered by serving hard time. Certainly Jim can't kill *everyone* he thinks would be better off dead, but by escaping he increases his chances of (in his mind) helping more.

Now, suppose that Jim, when asked why he acted this way, claimed, 'I wanted the money, and don't give a damn about anyone else. I'll kill anyone who gets in my way.' Suppose he is cornered by a Psychological Altruist and accused of being selfish, and Jim replies, 'No no no! I *really* did it *only* for my own benefit.' Is this a counterexample to PA? Certainly not a definitive one. Who of us really know what motives lie buried deep in the human heart? Certainly Jim could be self-deceptive, or just modest. Why can't an altruistic motive be subconscious? Maybe Jim's modesty and selflessness make him deny his altruistic motives in order to avoid putting anyone in his debt. All things considered, it is obvious that it is *possible* that Jim's actions are, according to his own logic, supererogatory. Jim attempted to benefit others, at great expense and personal risk. This was permissible (according to his own principles) but not required, as there are other ways to benefit others without such personal risk.

Lastly, Jim could be a secret *Cainite*⁴. It is possible that there are remnants of the heretical Cainites, who have a perverse theology. They, let us suppose, hold that God's glory is magnified by His forgiveness of sins, and so, in order to increase His glory, one must sin as much as possible (while making sure to repent, of course). Cain was revered by the Cainites as a hero, since he introduced murder into the world. While this does not benefit the people Jim sins against, Jim is doing this to benefit other persons, such as God and those who will later appreciate or be moved by God's acts of grace in cleansing Jim from his sins. If Jim was a Cainite we could not tell, as no Cainite will admit to being one. Lying is sinful, and hence to be done.

I am not denying that Jim's actions are horrible, or misguided. And I am not in favor of believing that Jim is a Cainite. But a strong case can be made (see below) that we should hold that his *intent* was to benefit others, even if he did not, or did not appear to intend to benefit others. It is not a part of PA *simpliciter* that no one makes mistakes in their calculations or assessment of what the good is for others. It is also not a part of PA, stated generally, that life is bad, or that the good people aim to produce in others is hedonistic, eudaimonistic, Satanistic, or what have you. I am not defending a conjunction of PA and any particular moral theory or account of the good, but only a version of PA which is prescriptively theory-neutral.

So far I have not been arguing that PA is true, only that (1) altruism is a commonplace, and that (2) PA is compossible with the third- and first-person observational data. PA gets strong support by inference to the best explanation when we combine (1) and (2) with the following two additional points: (3) we can unify and simplify the explanation for all human behavior, and hence enormously simplify our accounts of human action, agency, and rationality; (4) PA can resolve the prudence/duty dilemma better than either MA or PE can.

Now we turn to more substantive objections, and, in so doing, defend (3) and (4). One objection is that sometimes people act, if not selfishly, then at least self-interestedly. Take, for instance, brushing one's teeth. While it is true that one might brush one's teeth for one's own mastication-related goods, is it necessarily true that this constitutes the *ultimate* (i.e., primary and foundational) motivation for brushing one's teeth? Of course not. While brushing one's teeth is indeed for one's own good, this is merely *instrumental* to a greater good, namely, the good of mankind. This is what putatively self-interested non-selfish actions aim at. Certainly it is no part of PA that no one can act in any way which helps or is intended to help oneself whatsoever. But, self-interested action is consistent with the *point* of these kinds of actions being for the benefit of others. If one does not brush one's teeth, one would allow harm to come to oneself, and, in so doing, undermine one's ability to help others. Furthermore, cases of supposed conflict where an agent is supposedly choosing between (a) a prudential good for oneself vs. (b) a moral good for others, can be reinterpreted as cases where the agent is in fact weighing between (c) the more immediate good of her neighbor versus (d) her own immediate good, where (d) is instrumental to a more temporally distant but most likely greater good for others (e), where (e) > (c). One cannot, and should not, eliminate self-interest from one's psychology even if one is a Psychological Altruist. As Setarcos himself has argued,

⁴ The Cainites were an actual Gnostic sect, although I have changed some of their theology to suit my purposes. Call Jim a possible 'Cainite*' if you wish. See Doressse (1986), pp. 36, 45.

it might be partially *constitutive* of the highest good of others that oneself is benefited as well. (*The Commonwealth*, A_qBB76³v)

This points towards an important side-benefit of PA. Many, going back towards the beginning of philosophy, have noted the disturbing putative conflict between duty and self-interest (or prudential versus moral good). The usual response is to maintain that either: 1) despite appearances, duty and self-interest are one and the same; 2) whenever duty and self-interest conflict, duty trumps self-interest; 3) whenever duty and self-interest conflict, self-interest trumps duty. This is no place to survey the literature, but, suffice it to say, (1), (2), and (3) all have intolerable consequences. Psychological Altruism allows us to cut this Gordian knot. If PA is true, then self-interest and duty never actually conflict, since no one ever pursues self-interest (as an ultimate goal). Hence, PA gains yet more inductive support. PA dissolves the ‘Why be moral?’ question, or the self-interest/duty dilemma, since no one ever intends to benefit oneself. (Or, that one always intends to act ‘morally’, in the weak sense of always intending to act for the benefit of others according to one’s substantive or subconscious moral theory).⁵ One partial and possible explanation of how PA could be true is that, given our nature, it is a matter of physical necessity that we always act altruistically. (Although this is consistent with this behavior being contingent, since evolution could have gone on differently, or the laws of nature might have been different—hence, we *could have* acted selfishly). If one always *must* do what one believes (either consciously or unconsciously) is good for others, then it is to no purpose to ask whether one ought to.⁶ That is, if the ‘ought implies can’ principle is true.

Another important objection is that PA renders our talk of selfishness (as opposed to ‘selflessness’) meaningless. For example, compare Arnold, who steals money from a blind beggar, versus Chucky, who puts some money in the beggar’s cup. According to the PA’ist, these actions are both equally selfless (in the sense of not being selfish, *not* in the sense of being equally beneficial to the beggar). But, “surely,” says the interlocutor...

“these actions are not equally selfless. Chucky’s actions are selfless, whereas Arnold’s are apparently selfish. If your view is right, then we might as well classify actions of the kind Chucky did as selfless₂, and actions of the kind that Arnold did as selfless₁. Then the folk will say that acts of the selfless₂ kind are ‘bad’, whereas acts of the selfless₁ kind are ‘good’. But, then, ‘selfless₂’ just

⁵ The issue is more complicated than this, however. As [Adam Sennet] has pointed out (personal communication), it is not clear that PA dissolves the self-interest/duty conflict, since there can be cases such as the following: Arnold acts out of self-interest as a means to the good of Barbara, but, in so doing, harms Charley (and, in fact, this is the *only* way to benefit Barbara in this particular way). So, here is a case of self-interest and duty again coming into conflict. I do not think this ultimately harms my claim, as this has far more to do with trade-offs between different possible beneficiaries, and the response to these kinds of issues would have to rely on a substantive moral theory, which I am not prepared to defend here. Also, it seems like one’s self-interest, in this case, can be paraphrased away (although this is unclear). But, this line of thought does bring up some interesting possibilities. As [Sennet] points out (personal communication), it could well be that just getting rid of the ‘self-interest’ component of the duty/self-interest dilemma doesn’t solve anything, as the problem is really about the conflict of duty versus interests per se (not just *self-interest*). [Sennet] calls this the ‘duty/non-self-interest’ dilemma.

⁶ It is, however, worthwhile to determine what the *summum bonum* is, if we wish to correctly benefit others.

means ‘selfish’ and ‘selfless₁’ means ‘selfless’. Nothing has changed. Your view has the implication that we should equally praise every action, but, even if we accept your theory, we’ll just go on calling and denigrating selfless₂ acts as ‘bad’ and ‘selfish’. So, since we shouldn’t equally praise every action, you must be wrong. Another way of putting the objection is like this—if PA is right, it would, or should, have a profound impact on our moral judgments. But, it won’t, so PA must be wrong.”

This objection is faulty. For starters, while the PA’ist believes that all actions are equally selfless, he need not believe at all that all actions are morally equivalent, or are all equally good, if good at all. Not all courses of action are equally effective. They can spring from incorrect moral or political theories. Agents can choose amongst a range of potential altruistic actions in an irresponsible manner. Agents can be incorrect in their assessment of what will be to the benefit of others, or what the best means to a good end are, and so on. So, there are still many perfectly good senses in which we can regard an action as blameworthy, even if all motives are selfless.

An important objection to PA is that it is put forth as a contingent hypothesis, but (the objection continues) it is non-falsifiable. If PA is an empirical hypothesis established by observation, then the PAist ought to be able to say what kind of observations would falsify PA. But it seems that the PAist cannot do this. So, PA must *not* be an empirical hypothesis. But certainly it is not an *a priori* truth either. So, it must not be true at all.

However, the most that can sensibly be required of an empirical hypothesis is that it is weakly falsifiable, as the logical positivists acknowledged. This means that we can imagine observations that, if we had them, would count significantly against its truth even if they did not completely disprove it. Take a New Age healer (let’s call him ‘John of God’) who says that Chi energy flows out of him and that he can heal anyone who believes. Whenever anyone is not healed, John of God claims that this is because they just did not trust in him (regardless of whether they say they do). This does not thereby make the proposition “John of God can heal anyone who believes he can” non-falsifiable. It is weakly falsifiable in that we can imagine cases where it would be unreasonable to believe this, such as his most devout followers never getting healed. We can also imagine cases where it is reasonable to believe, such as if he heals everyone who believes he can. PA is similarly weakly falsifiable. If everyone acted apparently selfishly all the time, this observation would make PA much less plausible, even if a few die-hards insisted it could still be true. Similarly, if everyone was nicey nice and apparently selfless on all occasions, which is certainly conceivable, then PE would be less plausible. Either of the above two scenarios would make Moderate Altruism less plausible. Anyone can hold tight to an empirical claim and interpret any empirical data so as to be consistent with any observations. So, PA is only non-falsifiable if *every* empirical claim is non-falsifiable. But every empirical claim is not non-falsifiable. So, PA is falsifiable.⁷

Lastly, although I have already addressed these kinds of concerns, perhaps I should show that there is one more response to this kind of table-pounding objection from my most recalcitrant readers. “PA is just crazy. There are obvious cases of

⁷ I am especially grateful to (Jim Stone) for helpful comments on the points regarding falsifiability.

egoistic actions. Suppose that a soldier pushes another soldier on top of a live grenade in order to save his skin (this example is from Shaver 2010). How does the agent see this as good for others?”

The response to this is as easy as it is plausible. These cases of putative selfish or self-interested action are cases where one merely identifies others with oneself, or regards oneself in an outward-looking way. So, in these cases, what is actually occurring is that one projects others on to oneself and so, by benefiting oneself, one perceives oneself as benefiting others. (c.f. Nietzsche’s *The Dawn*, section 133) Of course, the agent may be mistaken, but it is no part of PA that people’s assessments of personal boundaries (i.e., the notion of where they end and others begin) will be accurate.

As I hope to have shown, PA is better than its rivals. PA is tied with PE with regards to parsimony. Both explain motivation in only one way. But, PA is superior in that it solves the duty/self-interest dilemma in a way that preserves more (i.e., some) of commonsense morality. PA is better than MA in that it streamlines motivation so that it is consistent in its direction, and does not muddy the waters by needing to postulate ultimate self-interest in addition to ultimate other-interest. Since the case for Psychological Altruism is so strong, I propose that we accept it and reject inferior accounts such as Egoism and Moderate Altruism. I have heard that others are working on, or have worked on, similar arguments for Psychological Egoism. If so, and these arguments are of equal or similar strength as those of Psychological Altruism, then that would be a bombshell, as it would show that there is a stalemate between PA and the absurd position that people always act selfishly or in their self-interest!⁸

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