The Elements of Moral Philosophy

FOURTH EDITION

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conservative view of abortion. The Council of Vienne notwithstanding, it has held that view to this day.

Because the church did not traditionally regard abortion as a serious moral issue, Western law (which developed under the church's influence) did not traditionally treat abortion as a crime. Under the English common law, abortion was tolerated even if performed late in the pregnancy. In the United States, there were no laws prohibiting it until well into the 19th century. Thus when the U.S. Supreme Court declared the absolute prohibition of abortion to be unconstitutional in 1973, the Court was not overturning a long tradition of moral and legal opinion. It was only restoring a legal situation that had always existed until quite recently.

The purpose of reviewing this history is not to suggest that the contemporary church's position is wrong. For all that has been said here, its view may be right. I only want to make a point about the relation between religious authority and moral judgment. Church tradition, like Scripture, is reinterpreted by every generation to support its favored moral views. Abortion is just an example of this. We could just as easily have used shifting moral and religious views about slavery, or the status of women, or capital punishment, as our example. In each instance, people's moral convictions are not so much derived from their religion as superimposed on it.

The various arguments in this chapter point to a common conclusion. Right and wrong are not to be defined in terms of God's will; morality is a matter of reason and conscience, not religious faith; and in any case, religious considerations do not provide definitive solutions to the specific moral problems that confront us. Morality and religion are, in a word, different. Because this conclusion is contrary to conventional wisdom, it may strike some readers as antireligious. Therefore, it should be emphasized that this conclusion has not been reached by questioning the validity of religion. The arguments we have considered do not assume that Christianity or any other theological system is false; these arguments merely show that even if such a system is true, morality remains an independent matter.

CHAPTER 5

Psychological Egoism

But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded.
EDMUND BURKE, *REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE* (1790)

5.1. Is Unselfishness Possible?

Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish businessman who could have stayed safely at home, spent the closing days of World War II in Budapest. Wallenberg had volunteered to be sent there as part of Sweden's diplomatic mission after he heard reports about Hitler's "final solution to the Jewish problem." Once there, he successfully pressured the Hungarian government to stop the deportations to the concentration camps. When the Hungarian government was replaced by a Nazi puppet regime, and the deportations resumed, Wallenberg issued "Swedish Protective Passes" to thousands of Jews, insisting that they all had connections with Sweden and were under the protection of his government. He helped many individuals find places to hide. When they were rounded up, Wallenberg would stand between them and the Nazis, telling the Germans that they would have to shoot him first. At the very end of the war, when everything was chaos and the other diplomats were fleeing, Wallenberg stayed behind. He is credited with saving as many as 120,000 lives. When the war was over, he disappeared, and for a long time no one knew what had happened to him. Now it is believed that he was killed, not by the Germans but by the Soviet occupation forces. Wallenberg's story is more dramatic than most, but it is by no means unique. The Israeli government has documented 6,000 instances of Gentiles protecting

their Jewish neighbors during the Holocaust, and there are no doubt thousands more.

Morality demands that we be unselfish. *How* unselfish is a hard question. (Moral theories have been criticized both for requiring too much and for requiring too little.) Perhaps we are not required to be as heroic as Raoul Wallenberg, but still, we are expected to be attentive to other people's needs at least to some degree.

And people do help one another, in ways big and small. People do favors for one another. They build homeless shelters. They volunteer in hospitals. They donate organs and give blood. Mothers sacrifice for their children. Firefighters risk death to rescue people. Nuns spend their lives working among the poor. The list could go on and on. Many people give money to support worthy causes, when they could keep it for themselves. Peter Singer writes that one day

> my mail brought me the newsletter of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Australia's leading conservation lobby group. It included an article by the Foundation's fund-raising co-ordinator, in which he reported on a trip to thank a donor who had regularly sent donations of $1,000 or more. When he reached the address he thought something must be wrong; he was in front of a very modest suburban home. But there was no mistake: David Allsop, an employee of the state department of public works, donates 50 percent of his income to environmental causes.

These are remarkable stories, but should they be taken at face value? Are these people really as unselfish as they seem? In this chapter we will examine some arguments which say that, in fact, no one is ever really unselfish. This may seem absurd, considering the examples we have just listed. Nonetheless, there is a theory of human nature, once widely held among philosophers, psychologists, and economists, and still held by many ordinary people, that says we are not capable of being unselfish. According to this theory, known as Psychological Egoism, *every human action is motivated by self-interest.* We may believe ourselves to be noble and self-sacrificing, but that is only an illusion. In reality, we care only for ourselves.

Could Psychological Egoism possibly be true? Why have so many people believed it, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary?

5.2. The Strategy of Reinterpreting Motives

Everyone knows that people sometimes seem to act altruistically; but perhaps the "altruistic" explanations of behavior are too superficial—it may *seem* that people are unselfish, but if we look deeper we may find that something else is going on. Usually it is not hard to discover that the "unselfish" behavior is actually connected with some benefit for the person who does it.

According to some of Raoul Wallenberg's friends, before going to Hungary he was depressed and unhappy that his life didn't seem to be amounting to much. So he undertook deeds that would make him a heroic figure. His quest for a more significant life was spectacularly successful—here we are, more than a half-century after his death, talking about him. Mother Theresa, the nun who spent her life working among the poor in Calcutta, is often cited as a perfect example of unselfishness—but of course, Mother Theresa believed that she would be handsomely rewarded in heaven. (In fact, she did not have to wait that long for her reward; she was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.) As for David Allsop, who gives 50 percent of his income to support environmental causes, Singer notes that "David had previously worked as a campaigner himself, and said he found it deeply satisfying now to be able to provide the financial support for others to campaign."

So, "altruistic" behavior is in reality connected with such things as the desire to have a more significant life, the desire for public recognition, feelings of personal satisfaction, and the hope of heavenly reward. For any act of apparent altruism, we may be able to find a way to explain away the altruism and replace it with an explanation in terms of more self-centered motives. This technique of reinterpreting motives is perfectly general and may be repeated again and again.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) thought that Psychological Egoism was probably true, but he was not satisfied with such a piecemeal approach. It is not theoretically elegant to deal with each example separately, worrying first about Raoul Wallenberg, then Mother Theresa, then David Allsop, and on and on. If Psychological Egoism is true, we should be able to give a more comprehensive account of human motives, which would establish the theory once and for all. This is what Hobbes attempted to do. His method was to list general types of motives, concentrating

especially on the "altruistic" ones, and show how each could be understood in egoistic terms. Once this project was completed, he would have systematically eliminated altruism from our understanding of human nature. Here are two examples of Hobbes at work.

1. *Charity.* This is the most general motive that we ascribe to people when we think they are acting from a concern for others. The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes almost four columns to "charity." It is defined variously as "The Christian love of our fellowman" and "Benevolence to one's neighbors." But if such neighborly love does not really exist, charitable behavior must be understood in a radically different way. In his essay "On Human Nature," Hobbes describes it like this:

> There can be no greater argument to a man, of his own power, than to find himself able not only to accomplish his own desires, but also to assist other men in theirs: and this is that conception wherein consisteth charity.

Thus charity is a delight one takes in the demonstration of one's powers. The charitable man is demonstrating to himself, and to the world, that he is more resourceful than others: he cannot only take care of himself, he has enough left over for others who are not as capable as he is. In other words, he is just showing off his own superiority.

Of course Hobbes was aware that the charitable man may not *believe* he is doing this. But we are not the best judges of our own motivations. It is only natural that we would interpret our actions in a way that is flattering to us (that is no more than a psychological egoist would expect), and it is flattering to think that we are "unselfish." Hobbes's account aims to provide the *real* explanation of why we act as we do, not the superficial flattery that we naturally want to believe.

2. *Pity.* What is it to pity other people? We might think it is to sympathize with them, to feel unhappy about their misfortunes. And acting from this sympathy, we might try to help them. Hobbes thinks this is all right, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. The reason we are disturbed by other people's misfortunes is that we are reminded that the same thing might happen to *us*. "Pity," he says, "is imagination or fiction of future calamity to ourselves, proceeding from the sense of another man's calamity."

This account of pity turns out to be more powerful, from a theoretical point of view, than it first appears. It can explain very neatly some peculiar facts about the phenomenon. It can explain, for example, why we feel greater pity when a good person suffers than when an evil person suffers. Pity, in Hobbes's account, requires a sense of identification with the person suffering—I pity you when I imagine myself in your place. But because each of us thinks of himself or herself as a good person, we do not identify with those we think bad. Therefore, we do not pity the wicked in the same way we pity the good. Our feelings of pity vary directly with the virtue of the person suffering because our sense of identification varies in that way.

The strategy of reinterpreting motives is a persuasive method of reasoning; it has made a great many people feel that Psychological Egoism might be true. It especially appeals to a certain cynicism in us, a suspicion that people are not nearly as noble as they seem. But it is not a conclusive method of reasoning, for it cannot prove that Psychological Egoism is correct. The trouble is, it only shows that it is *possible* to interpret motives egoistically; it does nothing to show that the egoistic motives are deeper or truer than the altruistic explanations they are intended to replace. At most, the strategy shows that Psychological Egoism is possible. We still need arguments to show it is true.

5.3. Two Arguments in Favor of Psychological Egoism

Two general arguments have often been advanced in favor of Psychological Egoism. They are "general" arguments in the sense that each seeks to establish at a single stroke that all actions, and not merely some limited class of actions, are motivated by self-interest. As we will see, neither argument stands up very well under scrutiny.

The Argument That We Always Do What We Most Want to Do. If we describe one person's action as selfish and another person's action as unselfish, we are overlooking the crucial fact that in both cases, assuming the action is done voluntarily, *the person is merely doing what he most wants to do.* If Raoul Wallenberg chose to go to Budapest, and no one was coercing him, that only shows that he wanted to go there more than he wanted to remain in

Sweden—and why should he be praised for "unselfishness" when he was only doing what he most wanted to do? His action was dictated by his own desires, his own sense of what he most wanted. Thus he was not acting unselfishly. And since exactly the same may be said about any alleged act of altruism, we can conclude that Psychological Egoism must be true.

This argument has two primary flaws. First, it depends on the idea that people never voluntarily do anything except what they want to do. But this is plainly false. Sometimes we do things that we do not want to do, because they are a necessary means to an end that we want to achieve—for example, we don't want to go to the dentist, but we go anyway to avoid a toothache. This sort of case may, however, be regarded as consistent with the spirit of the argument, because the ends (such as avoiding the toothache) are wanted.

But there are also things that we do, not because we want to, or even because they are means to an end we want to achieve, but because we feel that we *ought* to do them. For example, someone may do something because she has promised to do it, and thus feels obligated, even though she does not want to do it. It is sometimes suggested that in such cases we do the action because, after all, we want to keep our promises. However, that is not true. If I have promised to do something but I do not want to do it, then it is simply false to say that I want to keep my promise. In such cases we feel a conflict precisely because we do *not* want to do what we feel obligated to do.

If our desires and our sense of obligation were always in harmony, it would be a happy world. Unfortunately, we enjoy no such good fortune. It is an all-too-common experience to be pulled in different directions by desire and obligation. For all we know, Wallenberg may have been like this: Perhaps he wanted to stay in Sweden, but he felt that he had to go to Budapest. In any case, it does not follow from the fact that he chose to go that he wanted to go.

The argument also has a second flaw. Suppose we were to concede, for the sake of argument, that we always act on our strongest desires. Even if this were granted, it would not follow that Wallenberg was acting selfishly or from self-interest. For if he wanted to help other people, even at great risk to himself, that is precisely what makes him *un*selfish. What else could unselfishness be, if not wanting to help others, even at some cost

to oneself? Another way to put the point is to say that the *object* of a desire determines whether it is selfish or not. The mere fact that you act on your own desires does not mean that you are acting selfishly; it depends on *what it is* that you desire. If you care only about your own welfare and give no thought for others, then you are selfish; but if you also want other people to be happy, and you act on *that* desire, then you are not selfish.

Therefore, this argument goes wrong in just about every way that an argument can go wrong: The premises are not true, and even if they were true, the conclusion would not follow from them.

The Argument That We Do What Makes Us Feel Good. The second general argument for Psychological Egoism appeals to the fact that so-called unselfish actions produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the person who does them. Acting "unselfishly" makes people feel good about themselves, and that is the real point of it.

According to a 19th-century newspaper, this argument was once advanced by Abraham Lincoln. The Springfield, Illinois *Monitor* reported that

> Mr. Lincoln once remarked to a fellow-passenger on an old-time mud coach that all men were prompted by selfishness in doing good. His fellow-passenger was antagonizing this position when they were passing over a corduroy bridge that spanned a slough. As they crossed this bridge they espied an old razor-backed sow on the bank making a terrible noise because her pigs had got into the slough and were in danger of drowning. As the old coach began to climb the hill, Mr. Lincoln called out, "Driver, can't you stop just a moment?" Then Mr. Lincoln jumped out, ran back, and lifted the little pigs out of the mud and water and placed them on the bank. When he returned, his companion remarked: "Now, Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?" "Why, bless your soul, Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see?"

Lincoln was a great man but, on this occasion at least, he was not a very good philosopher. His argument is vulnerable to the same sorts of objections as the previous one. Why should we

think, merely because someone derives satisfaction from helping others, that this makes him selfish? Isn't the unselfish person precisely the one who *does* derive satisfaction from helping others, whereas the selfish person does not? If Lincoln "got peace of mind" from rescuing the piglets, does this show him to be selfish or, on the contrary, doesn't it show him to be compassionate and good-hearted? (If a person was truly selfish, why should it bother him that others suffer, much less pigs?) Similarly, it is nothing more than sophistry to say that, because someone finds satisfaction in helping others, they are selfish. If we say this rapidly, while thinking about something else, perhaps it will sound all right; but if we speak slowly and pay attention to what we are saying, it sounds plain silly.

Moreover, suppose we ask *why* someone might derive satisfaction from helping others. Why should it make you feel good to contribute money to support a homeless shelter, when you could spend it on yourself instead? The answer must be, at least in part, that *you are the kind of person who cares about what happens to other people.* If you do not care what happens to them, then giving the money will seem like a waste, not a source of satisfaction. You'll feel more like a sucker than a saint.

There is a general lesson to be learned here, having to do with the nature of desire and its objects. We desire all sorts of things—money, a new car, to play chess, to get married, and so on—and because we desire these things, we may derive satisfaction from getting them. But the object of our desire is not the satisfaction—that is not what we are after. What we are after is simply the money, the car, the chess, or the marriage. It is the same with helping others. We must first want to help them before we can get any satisfaction out of it. The good feelings are a by-product; they are not what we are after. Thus, having those feelings is not a mark of selfishness.

5.4. Clearing Away Some Confusions

One of the most powerful theoretical motives is a desire for simplicity. When we set out to explain something, we would like to find as simple an explanation as possible. This is certainly true in the sciences—the simpler a scientific theory, the greater its appeal. Consider phenomena as diverse as planetary motion, the tides, and the way objects fall when released from a height.

These appear, at first, to be very different; and it would seem that we would need several different principles to explain them. Who would suspect that they could all be explained by a single simple principle? Yet the theory of gravity does just that. The theory's ability to bring diverse phenomena together under a single explanatory principle is one of its great virtues. It makes order out of chaos.

In the same way, when we think about human conduct, we would like to find one principle that explains everything. We want a single simple formula, if we can find one, that would unite the diverse phenomena of human behavior, in the way that simple formulas in physics bring together apparently diverse phenomena. Since it is obvious that self-regard is an overwhelmingly important factor in motivation, it is only natural to wonder whether all motivation might not be explained in terms of it. And so the idea of Psychological Egoism takes hold.

But the fundamental idea behind Psychological Egoism cannot even be expressed without falling into confusion; and once these confusions have been cleared away, the theory no longer seems plausible.

First, people tend to confuse *selfishness* with *self-interest.* When we think about it, these two are clearly not the same. If I see a physician when I am feeling poorly, I am acting in my own self-interest, but no one would think of calling me "selfish" on account of it. Similarly, brushing my teeth, working hard at my job, and obeying the law are all in my own interest, but none of these are examples of selfish conduct. Selfish behavior is behavior that ignores the interests of others, in circumstances in which their interests ought not to be ignored. Thus, eating a normal meal in normal circumstances is not selfish (although it is definitely in your self-interest); but you would be selfish if you hoarded food while others were starving.

A second confusion is between self-interested behavior and the pursuit of pleasure. We do lots of things because we enjoy them, but that does not mean we are acting from self-interest. The man who continues to smoke cigarettes even after learning about the connection between smoking and cancer is surely not acting from self-interest, not even by his own standards—self-interest would dictate that he quit smoking—and he is not acting altruistically either. He is, no doubt, smoking for the pleasure of it, but this only shows that undisciplined

pleasure seeking and acting from self-interest are different. Reflecting on this, Joseph Butler, the leading 18th-century critic of egoism, remarked: "The thing to be lamented is, not that men have so great regard to their own good or interest in the present world, for they have not enough."

Taken together, the last two paragraphs show that (a) it is false that all actions are selfish and (b) it is false that all actions are done from self-interest. When we brush our teeth, at least in normal circumstances, we are not acting selfishly; therefore, not all actions are selfish. And when we smoke cigarettes, we are not acting out of self-interest; therefore, not all actions are done from self-interest. It is worth noting that these two points do not depend on examples of altruism; even if there were no such thing as altruistic behavior, Psychological Egoism would still be false.

A third confusion is the common but false assumption that a concern for one's own welfare is incompatible with any genuine concern for others. Since it is obvious that everyone (or very nearly everyone) desires his or her own well-being, it might be thought that no one can really be concerned for the well-being of others. But this is a false dichotomy. There is no inconsistency in desiring that everyone, including oneself *and* others, be happy. To be sure, our interests may sometimes come into conflict with other people's interests, and then we may have to make hard choices. But even in these cases we sometimes opt for the interests of others, especially when the others are our friends and family. More importantly, however, life is not always like this. Sometimes we are able to help others at little or no cost to ourselves. In those circumstances, not even the strongest self-regard need prevent us from acting generously.

Once these confusions are cleared away, there seems little reason to think Psychological Egoism is a plausible theory. On the contrary, it seems decidedly implausible. If we observe people's behavior with an open mind, we find that much of it is motivated by self-regard, but by no means all of it. There may indeed be one simple formula, as yet undiscovered, that would explain all of human behavior, but Psychological Egoism is not it.

5.5. The Deepest Error in Psychological Egoism

The preceding discussion may seem relentlessly negative. If Psychological Egoism is so obviously confused, you may ask, and if there are no plausible arguments for it, why have so many intelligent people been attracted to it? It is a fair question. Part of the answer is the almost irresistible urge toward theoretical simplicity. Another part is the attraction of what appears to be a hardheaded, deflationary attitude toward human pretensions. But there is a deeper reason: Psychological Egoism has been accepted by many people because they see it as *irrefutable*. And in a certain sense, they are right. Yet in another sense, the theory's immunity from refutation is its deepest flaw.

To explain, let me tell a (true) story that might appear to be far from our subject. A few years ago a group of investigators led by Dr. David Rosenham, a professor of psychology and law at Stanford University, had themselves admitted as patients to various mental hospitals. The hospital staffs did not know there was anything special about them; they thought the investigators were ordinary patients. The investigators wanted to see how they would be treated.

The investigators were perfectly normal, whatever that means, but their very presence in the hospitals created the assumption that they were mentally disturbed. Although they behaved normally—they did nothing to feign illness—they soon discovered that everything they did was interpreted as a sign of whatever mental problem was listed on their admission forms. When some of them were found to be taking notes, entries were made in their records such as "patient engages in writing behavior." During one interview, one "patient" confessed that although he was closer to his mother as a small child, he became more attached to his father as he grew older—a normal turn of events. But this was taken as evidence of "unstable relationships in childhood." Even their protestations of normalcy were turned against them. One of the real patients warned them: "Never tell a doctor that you're well. He won't believe you. That's called a 'flight into health.' Tell him you're still sick, but you're feeling a lot better. That's called insight."

No one on the hospital staffs caught on to the hoax. The real patients, however, saw through it. One of them told an investigator, "You're not crazy. You're checking up on the hospital." And so he was.

Why did the doctors not catch on? The experiment revealed something about the power of a controlling assumption: *Once a hypothesis is accepted, everything can be interpreted to support it.*

Once it became the controlling assumption that the fake patients were mentally disturbed, it did not matter how they behaved. Whatever they did would be construed to fit the assumption. But the "success" of this technique did not prove the hypothesis was true. If anything, it was a sign that something had gone wrong.

The hypothesis that the fake patients were mentally disturbed was faulty because it was *untestable*. If a hypothesis purports to say something factual about the world, then there must be some imaginable conditions that could verify it and some that could conceivably refute it. Otherwise, it is meaningless. If the hypothesis is that all swans are white, for example, we may look at swans to see if any are green or blue or some other color. And although we do not find any green or blue swans, we know *what it would be like* to find some. Our conclusion should rest on the results of these observations. (In fact, there are some black swans, so this hypothesis is false.) Again, suppose someone says "Shaquille O'Neal can't get into my Volkswagen." We know what this means, because we can imagine the circumstances that would make it true and the circumstances that would make it false. To test the statement, we take the car to Mr. O'Neal, invite him to step inside, and see what happens. If it turns out one way, the statement is true; if it turns out the other way, the statement is false.

It should have been possible for the doctors to examine the fake patients, look at the results, and say: "Wait a minute, there's nothing wrong with these people." (Remember, the fake patients behaved normally; they did not fake any psychiatric symptoms.) But the doctors were not operating in that way. For them, *nothing was allowed to count against the hypothesis that the "patients" were ill.*

Psychological Egoism is involved in the same error. Once it becomes the controlling assumption that all behavior is self-interested, everything that happens can be interpreted to fit this assumption. But so what? If there is no conceivable pattern of action or motivation that would count against the theory—if we cannot even imagine what an unselfish act would be like—then the theory is empty.

There is, of course, a way around this problem, both for the doctors and for Psychological Egoism. The doctors could have identified some reasonable way of distinguishing between

mentally healthy people and mentally ill people; then they could have observed the fake patients to see which category they belonged in. Similarly, anyone who is tempted to believe Psychological Egoism is true could identify some reasonable way to distinguish self-regarding behavior from nonself-regarding behavior and then look at how people actually behave and see what categories their actions fall into. Of course, anyone who did this would see that people are motivated in all sorts of ways. People act from greed, anger, lust, love, and hate. They do things because they are frightened, jealous, curious, happy, worried, and inspired. They are sometimes selfish and sometimes generous. Sometimes, like Raoul Wallenberg, they are even heroic. In the face of all this, the thought that there is but a single motive cannot be sustained. If Psychological Egoism is held in a form that is testable, the results of the test will be that the theory is false.