

SOME REFLECTIONS ON HOBBS, BUTLER, AND EGOISM

A basic distinction between 2 kinds of goals and motives:

1. A goal that you seek for the sake of another goal. (an “instrumental” goal or motive)
2. A goal that you seek for its own sake. (an “intrinsic” goal or motive)

For example, when Hobbes says in our Leviathan excerpt that in the state of nature people will invade and subdue others, this goal of subduing is not #2. It is not done for its own sake (e.g. because we just get off on subduing people), but in order to prevent them from attacking us in the future; so it is a goal of type #1.

When Hobbes says that “competition” and “diffidence” are two causes of quarrel, these are kinds of motives. In class I asked whether these, along with glory/reputation, are all the same intrinsic motive (only I didn’t use that word). What our discussion showed, I think, is that they are *instrumental* motives. We engage in competition not because we like competition for its own sake (according to Hobbes) but simply in order to get something we want that we recognize that others are trying to get also. We act out of diffidence not because we intrinsically fear others, but because we recognize that they want to get what we have, or what we want to get, and will harm us to do so. We act out of diffidence as an instrumental goal in order to protect ourselves.

Glory/reputation seems different, from our conversation. It seems to be something we seek for its own sake (according to Hobbes), not as a means to something else. So it seems intrinsic, not instrumental.

Butler criticizes a view that he attributes to Hobbes. The view seems to be that all action is motivated by a love of power or enjoyment of exercising it. We did not discuss whether this view is the same as the view in the Leviathan. But the intrinsic/instrumental distinction helps us see that it is not. For the Hobbes-according-to-Butler view is that we desire power for its own sake, not as a means to something else, such as protecting ourselves, our lives, or our possessions. We just like having and exercising power, independent of the goods it can bring us.

Butler introduces another important distinction:

1. Self-interest or self-love [sometimes he implies that self-love motivates you to seek your self-interest]: a desire for one’s own interest or happiness [in our passage he does not distinguish these two things]
2. particular passions, appetites, and affections, such as hunger, greed, lust, revenge

“Psychological egoism,” the view we are working up to, is sometimes formulated as the view that all human motives are ultimately, that is, intrinsically, ones of self-interest. That is, although we sometimes seek things that do not seem to be directly our self-interest, they are instrumentally our self-interest. For example, we might do

a favor for a powerful person in hopes that this person will bestow a greater favor on us in the future, rather than out of benevolence for that person (but we pretend it *is* benevolence). Psychological egoism allows for instrumental, non-egoistic aims and motives.

We can ask whether the 2 views of Hobbes we have read are examples of psychological egoism in this sense. Hobbes's view of the intrinsic motives in the state of nature [putting the 2 accounts together]—material gain, reputation/glory, and power (to which other motives are instrumental)—are all entities *for the self*, that is, for the person seeking them. And so you might say they are “egoistic.” But you might also look at it the way Butler does, in which case it is not so clear. You might desire that such-and-such person give you the value you place on yourself; but is it really in your interest to have that valuing from that person? You might think about it and think about what really makes you happy and what you really think is in your interest, and decide that reputation, especially as conferred by certain people known to you, is overrated as far as you yourself go. You might have a craving for it, but not see it as in your interest.

You might even feel that way about the material gain that Hobbes seems to think everyone in the state of nature would want. That is, you might not think it is in your interest, in this Butler sense. You might reflect on that and decide that you would be happier with a smaller amount of “stuff.” [In the state of nature, of course, that stuff is threatened, so you are forced to engage in both overaccumulation {because all of it is vulnerable} and preemptive aggression against others, even if you don't really want to.]

I am not saying this is right, only suggesting the way Butler looks at it. Of course he implies another, *different*, argument against psychological egoism, in footnote 4, and that is that we sometimes desire the good of others for their own sake. We desire it intrinsically. But putting the two points together, we can say that Butler thinks that self-interest is an important human motive, and an intrinsic one (not sought for the sake of something else), *but* that there are other intrinsic motives also, including negative ones, like greed.