

SOME BASIC DEFINITIONS ABOUT MOTIVATION AND “EGOISM”

A. Acts are motivated by motives. This can happen in two ways:

1. “single motive:” the agent is motivated to perform the act in question by a single motive
2. “combination motives:” the agent is motivated by more than one motive which work together to get her to perform the act in question. 2 different cases of this:
 - a. the agent would not perform the act unless all of these operative motives were actually present
 - b. although all of the motives are operative, one of them *by itself* would have been sufficient to get the agent to perform the act. (In this sense, the act is “overdetermined.”)

B. “beneficence:” act intended to benefit some person or being other than oneself

C. beneficence can be motivated by different motives. Some are:

1. “egoistic”: I benefit person X but the reason I do so is because I foresee and hope for some benefit to myself—such as X’s having promised to reward me handsomely if I help him, or in order to impress Y, who is impressed by generous acts. (In these cases, my beneficence is “instrumental” to my self-interest. For the meaning of this term, see handout “Some Reflections on Hobbes, Butler, and Egoism.”)
2. “altruistic”: a concern for another person or being for his or her own sake. [Psychological egoists deny that altruism in this sense exists.]
3. some combination of 1 and 2 [see A2]

D. “Psychological egoism” (in Rachels’s definition), is the view that every act is motivated ultimately, or intrinsically, by the self-interest of the agent. That is, the only thing human beings aim at intrinsically is their own self-interest. Everything else is aimed at only as a means to (instrumental to) their self-interest (or, to be more precise, at what people *take to be* their self-interest). [Rachels sometimes defines PE as the view that all of our motives are selfish. But as he himself points out on p. 71, this view adds an evaluative element that detracts from a pure theory of human nature; it says that we act out of self-interest and in doing so, *ignore the interests of others when we shouldn’t.*]

E. So “egoism” can refer to 3 different things:

- a. a philosophical doctrine or theory [D]
- b. a motive [see C1 above], that is, a certain psychological phenomenon
- c. a person (in turn, this can refer either to an adherent of the philosophical doctrine [D], or to a person whose motives are always egoistic, or are more egoistic than the average)

F. Basic structure of Rachels’s “Psychological Egoism” (PE) argument:

Arguments in favor of PE:

1. “greatest want”: we always act from our greatest want [there may be other, lesser wants that pull in a different direction], so that is what we regard our self-interest to be.

Counterarguments to this: (a) premise not true. (b) even if true, the content of a want makes it egoistic or not.

2. “Anticipation of feeling good or avoidance of feeling bad:” we only perform an act that we anticipate will make us feel good or avoid feeling bad and these feelings are our self-interest.

Counterarguments to this: (a) feeling good about helping others is not egoistic. (b) agent would not feel good about helping others unless she already cared about these other people. The object of her desire is not her satisfaction but the good of those she cares about.

Rachels also gives good examples of each of these arguments and counterarguments. But an example is (usually) not an argument, just an illustration of an argument.