Further Reading

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See also ASSOCIATIONISM; BENTHAM, JEREMY; COOPER, THOMAS; HARTLEY, DAVID; HUTCHESON, FRANCIS; SMITH, ADAM; RELIGIOUS UTILITARIANISM.

PRINCIPLE OF UTILITY: See UTILITY.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Psychological Egoism, whose proponents include Epicurus, Hobbes, Spinoza, and (arguably) Bentham, and whose critics include Butler, Hume, and Sidgwick, is a doctrine about human nature, and specifically about human motivation. It says, roughly, that human beings are so constituted as to have only one ultimate end, namely, self-interest. It does not say that all human acts in fact promote the agent’s self-interest, for Psychological Egoists admit that humans can and do act against self-interest from time to time—through confusion, ignorance, mistake, weakness, or shortsightedness. One historically important species of Psychological Egoism is Psychological Hedonism, which holds that the ultimate end of all human action is the agent’s pleasure (or the cessation of pain). If Psychological Egoism is false, so is Psychological Hedonism; but the latter can be false even if the former is true (Broad, 1930, p. 180).

The main philosophical interest in Psychological Egoism is that it seems to pose a threat to normative ethical theory. For consider: If human beings cannot but pursue their own interests, how can they be expected to sacrifice or compromise those interests for the sake of others, as is required by, for example, utilitarianism? The philosophical question, precisely stated, is whether Psychological Egoism can be formulated in such a way as to be (1) informative (i.e. possibly false), (2) true, and (3) a threat to normative ethical theory. Some philosophers (e.g. Feinberg, 1971) claim that Psychological Egoism, in at least some of its versions, is uninformative; its proponents, they say, refuse to allow any empirical evidence to count against it. Others (e.g. Hospers, 1961) admit that there are informative versions of Psychological Egoism, but insist that they are false (the usual strategy of these philosophers is to describe cases in which the agent has an ultimate end other than self-interest). Still others (e.g. Broad, 1952 and Kavka, 1986) admit that there are informative and true versions of Psychological Egoism, but deny that they are a threat to normative ethical theory. Kavka’s “predominant egoism,” which he attributes to Hobbes, is weaker than Psychological Egoism; it says that “self-interested motives tend to take precedence over non-self-interested motives in determining human actions” (Kavka, p. 64, emphasis added). Since it is possible, in this view, to act from a non-self-interested motive, there is no absurdity in advocating benevolent (or even altruistic) action. Predominant egoism purchases truth at the cost of universality, whereas psychological egoism purchases universality at the cost of truth.

Psychological Egoism is not to be confused with Ethical Egoism, which, like utilitarianism,
Kantianism, and contractarianism, is a normative ethical theory. Ethical Egoism asserts that an act is right if and only if it maximizes (or at least promotes) the agent's self-interest. The two theories are connected in that Psychological Egoism, when conjoined with the “ought-implies-can” principle, seems to provide rational support for Ethical Egoism. The argument goes as follows: It is psychologically impossible for a person to act against self-interest; therefore, given that “ought” implies “can,” he or she cannot be obligated to act against self-interest.

The argument, however, does not support ethical egoism. Just as there would be no point in advocating utilitarianism if it were psychologically impossible for agents to conform to its dictates, there would be no point in advocating Ethical Egoism if it were psychologically necessary for agents to conform to its dictates. If I endorse Ethical Egoism, I imply that my interlocutor might fail to conform to it; but this, according to Psychological Egoism, is not the case. It is a presupposition of normative ethical theory that agents be capable both of acting contrary to self-interest and of acting in conformity with self-interest. When this presupposition fails, as it would if Psychological Egoism were true, normative ethical theory becomes not false but pointless. The threat posed by Psychological Egoism is therefore not to the truth of any normative ethical theory (such as utilitarianism), but to the point of endorsing a normative ethical theory. Since most moral philosophers believe that there is a point to normative theorizing, they are committed, logically, to rejecting Psychological Egoism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Further Reading


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See also BENEVOLENCE; BENTHAM, JEREMY; BUTLER, JOSEPH; EPICUREANISM; ETHICAL EGOISM; HEDONISM; HOBBES, THOMAS; INTEREST; MOTIVES (MOTIVATION); SIDGWICK, HENRY.

PSYCHOLOGY

The field of psychology is relevant to utilitarianism in at least four ways. First, in practical applications of utilitarian theory, it helps in the measurement of utility, as well as prediction of behaviour. Second, it can help to explain why utilitarian ideas are often resisted. Third, the field of experimental philosophy has adopted the methods of experimental psychology. Fourth, it provides explanations of the motivation to behave consistently with any moral theory.

When utilitarian theory is applied to policy or to individual decisions, it is often