

MISTAKEN INSTRUMENTALISM IN PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM AND *THE SELFISH GENE*

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The theories of Psychological Egoism and *the Selfish Gene* both rely on an instrumental process that fails to take account of how a motive or a trait can be a means to more than one end. Psychological egoism ignores the lived, felt experience of benevolence that is a necessary part of the means to an end process. The theory of the selfish gene ignores the fact that even though we only evolve benevolent traits if they serve our genetic fitness, these traits nevertheless simultaneously increase the fitness of other beings when we enact them. The means-to-an-end process can occur in both directions when we are motivated by benevolence, serving both ourselves, and others, at a psychological level, and at a genetic level. This is not an affirmation of the theories of psychological altruism and biological altruism however, but a kind of *mutualism* that guides human beings, before culture and upbringing have their influence upon us.

When we talk of something being a means to an end of something else, we think that we do a first thing only because it satisfies another, more primary aim. So, for instance, when we give money to a ticket seller at a train station, it is so that we can have a ticket. The ticket merely allows us to get on the train. The train merely allows us to get home. Yet we *experience* all of these actions as part of the means to an end process of getting home. It is a lived, felt, experienced process. Likewise, the debate over psychological egoism, and psychological altruism, as well as the debate over biological altruism, is centred on the means to an end process which underlies the experienced actions we perform when we are benevolent.

The theory of psychological egoism states that the motive to give is ultimately only a means to the end of serving self-interest. More strongly, it states that self-interest is not merely received as a consequence of benevolence, but is also always a conscious *motive*. Of course, when we are motivated towards benevolence, it may actually be a culturally or environmentally induced motive, and not a motive that serves our evolutionary fitness. We may do things for others, such as donate, help, and be considerate, which may all work against our ability to survive to reproduce, and to provide a good environment for our

offspring to develop well in. We may indeed be influenced by culture and upbringing to be benevolent in ways that do not serve our genes. The type of benevolence which enhances evolutionary fitness is that which serves us at the same time as serving others, and thereby serves our gene reproducing. Examples of such self-interested benefits include keeping us mentally healthy, building stronger relationships, reducing aggressive competition, receiving return benefits, and enhancing reputation. Psychological egoists theorize however that we are benevolent only because we already know, consciously, unconsciously, or instinctually, that we will benefit from it ourselves at some level, not necessarily at a fitness level. Psychological egoism states that the benevolent motive is ultimately a means to the single end of serving the self-interested motive, or "all human actions when properly understood can be said to be motivated by selfish desires" (Feinberg 1996: 497). The theory of the selfish gene meanwhile states that any trait for a motive to benefit others would only have evolved if it served our survival and reproduction (Dawkins 2006).

The Selfish Gene

Richard Dawkins in the first edition of *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 was careless at times with his language, firstly by using the term "selfish", which implies necessarily disregarding the interests of others, rather than a more neutral term such as the self-regarding gene, or a more inclusive term such as the mutualistic gene. Dawkins also absurdly stated "let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish". He and other evolutionary biologists have since refined their thoughts, after numerous attacks, so that recently, in the thirtieth anniversary of the publication, in 2006, Dawkins asked us to dismiss these words, and wished he had called the term "the cooperative gene" (Dawkins 2006: ix).

Yet co-operation for Dawkins still must ultimately be a means to the single purpose of serving the individual gene, to be able to say that a particular cooperative trait furthers our evolutionary fitness. We benefit others only because this leads to us living better, by developing reciprocal giving, mental and emotional health, reputation enhancement, stronger relationships, etc. By building self-esteem, better social relations, and a more stable social environment, it increases the chances of us finding and keeping a partner, and raising children in a way that allows them to pass our genes. However, for Dawkins, this process of co-operation exists by other-regard ultimately serving the self. Another person in turn is cooperative and generous to you, because you will behave in a way towards them that increases their fitness, by treating them better, helping them more, or increasing their internal wellbeing just by expressing happiness at their generosity.

Psychological Egoism

So the means to an end process in the selfish gene suggests that we only develop traits in our genes (genotypes), expressed as traits or motives (phenotypes) which benefit others, when those motives are specifically a means to benefit the gene's survival. The means-to-an-end process in psychological egoism however states that we are only motivated to benefit others when it benefits ourselves. Psychological egoism pays no reference to the gene having to benefit from motivated benevolence.

There have been many challenges to the claim that we always benefit in some way from benevolence, and many more sophisticated challenges to the stronger concept that we are always *motivated* to benefit from giving to others. The more sophisticated arguments against psychological egoism address the challenge of respectable self-regarding benefits, such as good feelings, increased self esteem, mental and physical health, strengthening relationships,

reducing competition, keeping moral standards, etc (Broad 1971, Feinberg 1996). However, even when these claims are addressed, it has always been difficult to say whether we can ever be without any considerations at all of self-interest, of a good feeling, relief from guilt, reputation, etc. Psychological egoism merely states that there is *some* degree of self-interest sought, perhaps a single small motive, either at the moment of benevolence, or pre-reflected.

To take an extreme example, if we sacrifice our lives for the sake of others, any self-interest we feel at the time would be greatly outweighed by the benefit bestowed on others and by our loss of life. Nevertheless, psychological egoism allows for this benefit to others to be far greater than the benefit to oneself, and for harm to oneself to be far greater than the benefit we receive in ourselves. Many critics of psychological egoism forget that the theory is not trying to say that the benefit sought to oneself is greater the benevolence one is trying to bestow. Perhaps these philosophers are reacting with passion to the inhumanity implied by the theory. But taken at its more modest meaning, having a smaller motive of self-interest whenever we act benevolent is not such an inhuman idea. If we sacrifice our life for someone, by jumping in front of a car for our child, or by jumping on a hand grenade in a crowded army barracks, we can be relieved of any unbearable future guilt or shame (Shaver 2002).

What is inhumane however about the theory of psychological egoism is that the benevolent motive is said to ultimately be *ONLY* serving the self-interested motive, even when the self-interest is extremely minimal. In such extreme instances that I have just mentioned, such as suicide, a psychological egoist can say that we intuitively know we would never have been able to live with the shame of not doing helping. They might even cite our evolutionary drives that make us motivated to lay down our life for those who carry our genes, or who can defend the community which has people with our genes in it.

Without trying to definitively dismiss the possibility of altruism, or psychological altruism, what I am contending here is that one can admit the possibility of benevolence always accompanying a self-interested motive, without saying that the benevolent motive is *only* serving self-interest. To do this, one must examine closer this means to an end process. When I have a motive of B (benevolent motive), and acknowledge the possibility of it always serving A, myself, nevertheless, B may also be serving another person, C. So when we say something is a means to the end of something else, the first thing surely can be a means to two separate ends? The benevolent motive in fact is potentially a means to many different ends. One of those ends is self-interest, while another of those ends is the interest of others.

It is not a matter of dismissing psychological egoism by recognizing occasions where the self-sacrifice outweighs the self-interested benefit aimed at, such as what Broad asserted: "Some persons, at some times, are *strongly* influenced by other-regarding motives which cannot *plausibly* be held to be stimulated by a self-referential status" (Broad 1971: 259). It is any kind of experienced, felt, and genuine giving motive, which serves both self-interest and another person, which invalidates the theory of psychological egoism. I shall explain further.

The Lived, Felt Experience of Benevolence

Heidegger told us that philosophy tends to forget the central matter in our philosophical deliberations, which is our *Being*, or our lived and experienced state of existing. This phenomenological approach tells us that the process of benevolence is one we live and experience ourselves (Heidegger 2002). We cannot help but feel a genuine motive of giving. So whilst our genuine giving motive may be argued to always accompany and serve a self-interested motive, nevertheless, it cannot be *reduced* to the self-interested motive. We do not use the benevolent motive like we use a screwdriver to fix a hinge; we experience the motive

of giving, just as we experience the giving act itself. We can also experience the motive of self-interest as a good feeling, or perhaps we may only fleetingly recall it. It needn't matter, for we certainly can experience the feeling of wanting to be benevolent, and of being benevolent. Whether those acts and motives always additionally serve self-interest, does not take away the experience of giving. When we genuinely give to another, and it is not out of deceit or manipulation, or out of professional duty, but is when we really want to observe another benefiting from it, then we experience the benevolence. The feeling of benevolence itself cannot be reduced into a single means to an end process of self-interest. The benevolent motive is lived, felt, and can become a means to two different ends, of self-interest, and benefiting the other person.

Even if a psychological egoist is determined to fixate only upon self-interest during an encounter, the presence of suffering on the other person elicits the motives the psychological egoist must experience, which includes experiencing the need to alleviate one's own suffering at seeing another suffer, and also the felt experience of wanting to alleviate the other's suffering for their own sake. Perhaps the psychological egoist could manage to experience the self-serving motive in a more lasting manner than others could, because of his determined efforts to prove his theory correct; yet he nonetheless becomes internally engulfed by his felt intention to help.

Furthermore, psychological egoism is not merely making a *logical* claim about human motives, irrelevant of any empirical facts, or irrelevant of lived experience, but instead is an actual claim about motives themselves. This is contained in the statement of psychological egoism itself, which makes claims about how many motives we ultimately have. Psychological egoism states that the "motive", which is something conceptualised in philosophy as a reason, can *only* be a means to another motive, despite the phenomenological experience of it. Benevolent motives in fact are *lived* processes.

The giving motive is not self-deception. This is a little different argument from Feinberg's refutation of psychological egoism, that the pleasure we seek to obtain from benevolence "presupposes that we desired something else - something other than our own pleasure - as an end in itself" (Feinberg 1996: 500). The point rather is that the "desiring something else" of the benevolent motive, is often experienced and felt, and so is not *only* a process, and is not self-delusion.

Two-way Instrumentalism

When we come to the theory of the selfish gene, an evolved benevolent trait or motive must benefit another being in a way that increases one's own fitness. We evolve genotypes for particular kinds of benevolence which show themselves as phenotypes, in the shape of motives for helping, caring, or considerateness. I have established that these motives are a means to simultaneous ends of both self-interest and other-regard. So evolution evolves motives to benefit both ourselves and others, as that leads to our own fitness being enhanced (through good feelings, health, relationships, etc). Selfish gene theorists, whilst not affirming psychological egoism, nor rejecting the irreducible felt experience of giving, nevertheless will say that there still is a single means to an end process occurring, though a different process from the fallacious psychological egoism means to an end process. They say we are motivated to benefit others for the purpose of benefiting oneself, which benefits our genetic fitness. So the means to an end process works by way of: a motive to benefit others – benefiting others – benefiting self – benefiting our own fitness. It appears to result in a single means to an end process.

But there is another way of looking at the process. We experience the motive to benefit ourselves from being benevolent to others because our self-interested motive serves the direct

purpose of making us act benevolent towards them. We would not act benevolent unless we had that self-interested motive, so the self-interested motive is a means to an end of producing a benevolent motive, and a benevolent act. In this light we can say that people are designed with motives to benefit ourselves from benevolent acts, for the express purpose of actually making us benevolent! Self-interest is a means to the end of benevolence. This will startle many readers, who might react as many evolutionary biologists would, and say, "ah yes, alright, both self and the other are being served at a motivational, behavioural, level, but the whole combined process is only designed to further the individual gene". That is, a motive of self-interest makes us benefit another, and a motive of benevolence, makes us benefit ourselves, at the same, and with the means to an end process flowing in both directions, but the ultimate purpose of the combined process is to further ones survival and fitness. Irrelevant of how much I benefit another whilst benefiting myself, if I experience an evolved motive, rather than a culturally or environmental developed motive, then the mutual benefit is designed to serve only my own fitness.

But again, I ask the reader to take a step back, see the bigger picture, and think in what manner the means to an end process is flowing, at the motivational and behavioural level, and also at the genetic level. When we benefit another, irrelevant of how much we are benefiting from it ourselves at a genetic fitness level, are we not also increasing the fitness of the other person at the same time? In fact, is it ever possible to genuinely want to see another truly benefit, to also want to benefit from it ourselves, for our fitness to benefit from it, and for that other person to also not benefit, psychologically, materially, emotionally, and in their own evolutionarily fitness? When we are benevolent in a way that increases our own fitness, it seems, at least most of the time, to increase another's fitness too. We are not genuinely benevolent in a way that increases our fitness without at the same time increasing the fitness of the other. In fact, we could ask now in what way does this means to an end process work at

the genetic level? It seems just as plausible to say, from the bigger picture, that increasing the fitness of our own genes, through acting benevolent to others, is a means to the end of promoting the fitness of others.

What can we say of the “selfish gene” then? Our genes should be more correctly called the “mutualistic gene”, to use a term from the landmark work of Kropotkin, “Mutual Aid” (Kropotkin 1903). Furthermore, while benevolence includes actively giving and helping, it also involves *passive* benevolence, such as considerateness and being careful not to hurt others when pursuing our own goals. So traits and motives that harm others selfishly, cruelly, unnecessarily, and not for self-defence or to help another learn, must therefore be only environmentally and culturally developed, since traits that damage co-operation will damage our own individual fitness as well. We could not even call our genes “the sometime selfish, sometimes mutualistic genes”, because our genes are designed to be *always* “mutualistic genes”. Just as when we sacrifice ourselves for others benefit in way that that causes us more harm than good, and we say that this harmful behaviour was not evolved for but merely environmentally learned, we can also say that whenever we pursue self-interest in way that harms others unnecessarily, that it too was not a trait evolved for. Selfishness does not increase our fitness over the long term, only a self-interest that is *considerate* of others increases our evolutionary fitness (and their evolutionary fitness too).

This applies at in-group level as well as out-group level. A trait to help strangers allows us to feel good internally, and perhaps lessens the likelihood of the stranger becoming a criminal burden on our society, and thereby increases the fitness of them. Of course, this benevolence implies a careful choosing of who we are benevolent to. We would like to help innocent starving people, but we are not as inclined to help abusive people who are repeat offenders, who if we increased their fitness by being benevolent towards, could lead to more abusive types evolving in the future, which would lower our evolutionary fitness.

So it seems that psychological and biologically we are not programmed to be selfish beings, nor altruistic beings, but mutualistic ones. The means-to-an-end process involved when we are motivated by genuine benevolence is flowing in both directions, to self, to other, and at a behavioural level, and at a genetic level, and is not reducible to either one. The lived means-to-an-end process of self-regard and other-regard operates in both directions simultaneously. However, if the reader does not agree with all of my conclusions, perhaps at least they will have reconsidered the instrumentalism within the theories of psychological egoism and conventional evolutionary biology.

Summary

These are the steps of my argument:

1. A motive can be means to more than one end.
2. A benevolent motive is a means to an end of self-interest.
3. A genuinely benevolent motive to see another benefit is felt, and so cannot be reduced to *only* being a means to an end process of self-interest.
4. Any self-interested motive we have to genuinely benefit another is a means to an end of benefiting another.
5. Genuinely felt benevolent motives to see another benefit are a means to benefit both ourselves, and benefit others.
6. Motives are an active expression of a trait, and thus are a phenotype that expresses the coding of a genotype.

7. Our encoded benevolent tendencies are evolved as a means to increase our own evolutionary fitness.
8. Our encoded benevolent tendencies are evolved as a means to increase the fitness of other beings.
9. Benevolent motives are encoded to benefit the fitness of the being we are aiding, at the same time as benefiting our own fitness.
10. Encoded, evolved, benevolent motives (as opposed to environmentally developed motives), are not designed to reduce our own fitness for the sake of increasing another's fitness, which is the theory known as biological altruism. They are evolved to increase our own fitness.
11. Selfish motives that unnecessarily harm others must be environmentally developed too, rather than encoded to increase our own fitness, as they prevent the self-interest we would receive from being considerate of others, such as internal feelings of wellbeing, and reciprocal considerateness.
12. Out-group benevolence can be genetically encoded, just as in-group benevolence is.
13. Humanity is guided by mutualistic genes, which influence our motives before upbringing and environment influence us, propelling us towards benevolence and considerateness, for our own sake, and for the sake of other people, psychologically and genetically.

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