

Psychological Egoism and Its Critics

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Psychological egoism is both implausible and poorly supported by argument, and it might very well be false—though I hasten to add that I don't think anyone has yet demonstrated that it is. (I should also quickly add that I mean only that the particular version of psychological egoism I will discuss in this paper is implausible, poorly supported and, perhaps, false, for I think other, more plausible, doctrines have equal claim to the description "psychological egoism.") Psychological egoism is implausible (the version I have in mind is), yes, but it is not implausible for all or even most of the reasons philosophers seem to think it is. When one reads a criticism of psychological egoism, one usually finds the author far from content to limit himself to one or two devastating points, so much the better to get past egoism in order to move on to more interesting matters in the study of motivation and morals; authors seem instead to relish the opportunity to count the ways in which psychological egoism is implausible and the arguments for it fallacious. Now rarely does it happen that each in a bucket of objections is as good as any other, and we should not expect that the bucket of objections to psychological egoism and arguments for it will be any different. But critics of psychological egoism tend, for whatever reason, not to bother distinguishing between the good and the bad in their hurry to inventory the bucket. As a result, some objections currently circulating are, I think, very bad indeed.

What we want, in the end, when doing philosophical psychology, is to construct a philosophically satisfactory and satisfying account of human action, or perhaps of intentional action. It seems to me that if, as part of our endeavor to construct that account, we are to reject one or another version of

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psychological egoism, we need to reject it for the right reasons. We need to be clear just why we think it false, and clear, moreover, just how good our grounds for thinking it false are. In section VI, I will present what I think is the best argument for the version of psychological egoism under consideration here, and explain why I think even that argument fails to go much distance toward establishing it. It turns out, though, I will caution, that defeating that argument means only that we are right to reject psychological egoism as extremely implausible; it does not entitle us to claim to have shown the thesis itself to be either confused and senseless or false. However, my main goal in this paper is neither to refute nor to defend psychological egoism, but rather to show how it, even in a very strong form, manages to survive a number of common objections both to itself and to arguments meant to support it.

I

The version of psychological egoism I will consider is defined by the thesis that all actions are self-regarding in intent. More fully, it is defined by the thesis that behind any action whatsoever, there lies one or more self-regarding motivations, one or more of which is the ultimate psychological cause of that action, the real reason the agent had for performing it. Another way of putting it is that no one ever intentionally performs an action except, ultimately, in order to realize some self-regarding end. Perhaps also part of psychological egoism, maybe as an implication of the main thesis, is the thesis that no one ever performs an action intending to come out, on balance, the worse for having performed it with regard to his or her self-regarding ends.

What is a self-regarding motivation? Certainly the desire for one's own pleasure, and the desire to avoid pain, are self-regarding motivations, but they are not the only ones. Among the others is the desire to be happy and the desire not to be unhappy, the desire to have power over others, the desire that others have particular opinions about one, the desire that they have particular feelings toward one, and the desire to get and keep property.¹

Self-regarding ends, we should note, correspond one-to-one to self-regarding motivations. One's own happiness, or that one is not unhappy, for instance, is a self-regarding end corresponding to the desire to be happy, or the desire not to be unhappy. One's having power over others is a self-regarding end corresponding to the desire to have power over others.

If the thesis of psychological egoism is true, it must always be the case that when Sally rubs her cat's belly, she rubs it not, or not only, in order that her cat be pleased. The desire that the cat be pleased might well have been one motivation

behind her action, but, since desiring that one's cat be pleased is an other-regarding motivation, it cannot have been Sally's ultimate or real motivation. Her ultimate or real motivation was a self-regarding one—the desire for her own pleasure, perhaps, or the desire to exercise power over her cat, or her desire that her cat like her. Sally, let us say, takes pleasure herself in bringing her cat pleasure, and she is aware of this. When her cat came into view, Sally formed, on the basis of her standing self-regarding motivation for her own pleasure and her awareness that pleasing her cat brings her pleasure, an other-regarding motivation, namely, the desire to please her cat. It is true, then, that the desire to please her cat lead her to rub her cat's belly; but ultimately the action of rubbing her cat's belly was in service of a self-regarding motivation, her desire for pleasure.

Sally's action, then, according to psychological egoism, was no less egoistic in origin and intent than was Martin's, when Martin demanded that everyone follow his rules or he would take his ball home, or than was John's, when John helped himself to two servings of ice cream knowing that someone else would thereby have to go without. Her action certainly produced more happy consequences all around than did either Martin's or John's, but that's only because Sally's own particular contingent psychological bent is to take pleasure in pleasing others, while Martin's bent is to gain power over others by controlling resources and John's is to pursue his own sensual pleasure mindless of how his pursuit affects others. Martin and John get their thrills in different ways, Sally in yet a third way. But all three are equally out, ultimately, in everything they do, to get their thrills.

II

Even at first blush, psychological egoism might well strike us as implausible. Already we might be constructing counterexamples to it. It is important, though, that our sense of its implausibility does not rest on our having slyly added something implausible to it, something not really an essential part of the position. I will begin my examination of objections to psychological egoism by considering three different ways in which this rather simple position regarding the springs of action tends to be elaborated. Each of these three different additional theses certainly has serious problems of its own. What we will notice here is that the problems in each of these elaborations of psychological egoism are just those, problems in claims and theses additional to psychological egoism, not problems in psychological egoism itself.

(1) One sort of self-regarding motivation is the desire for one's own pleasure. Friends and foes alike of psychological

egoism are prone to imagine that, according to psychological egoism, the desire for one's own pleasure is identical to the desire to experience pleasure—the desire to experience, that is, a particular sort of intense sensation or frisson. Pleasure, conceived this way, is the sort of thing we might be privileged to experience occasionally when tasting a good wine or, more reliably, during orgasm; some of us find it now and then when listening to music or reading poetry. Chills shoot through our spines and the hairs on the backs of our necks stand up. To make this identification is to say that always what we are out to do when we are out to satisfy our desire for pleasure is to experience a frisson of pleasure.

Now a critic, who imagines that psychological egoism implies that the desire for one's own pleasure is identical to the desire to experience a frisson of pleasure, has at hand an easy and devastating objection to psychological egoism. Even at the best of times it's a rare moment in which we experience a frisson of pleasure, and the moment always passes quickly. Because moments of pleasure are rare, difficult to find or produce, and fleeting, it would be implausible to contend that whatever we do, we do it hoping to bring about such a moment. Too much of what we do is just too mundane to be in service to such an exalted end. In fact, it's implausible to hold that our object, even in pursuing such things beyond the mundane as wine, sex, music, or poetry, is always to experience a frisson of pleasure. Because psychological egoism implies such an implausible result, it too must be implausible. Its implausibility thereby exposed, the critic then proceeds to a diagnosis of where psychological egoism goes wrong. Psychological egoism, the critic remarks, neglects, or is insensitive to, the fact that usually the desire for pleasure is not at all the desire for an experience of pleasure, but is rather the desire to have a pleasant experience. Drinking wine with friends over an evening can be very pleasant—in the sense, that is, of being a very pleasant experience—and thereby it can satisfy an agent's desire for pleasure, even when that agent had no experience of pleasure that evening. We often take pleasure in our activities, even the mundane ones, the critic reminds us. That, on occasion, we might attempt to experience moments of pleasure through certain activities, should not blind us to the common run of our taking pleasure in what we do.²

But really it is no part of the unelaborated position of psychological egoism that always what we are after when we act on a desire for pleasure are experiences of pleasure, rather than that what we are usually after are pleasant experiences (pleasant experiences of our own, of course). The view that we are all gourmands or aesthetes in the realm of pleasure is, of course, consistent with psychological egoism, but it is not implied by it. The psychological egoist need not neglect, and—to

the extent he cares that his position is plausible—ought not be insensitive to, the distinction between an experience of pleasure and a pleasant experience. The desire for one's own pleasure, the psychological egoist can allow, includes the desire that one have pleasant experiences as well as the desire to experience frissons of pleasure, but is not identical to either alone. It is enough for the psychological egoist to advance his case that he note that the desire for one's own pleasure, however it manifests itself on particular occasions, is always a self-regarding motivation.

(2) Some critics of psychological egoism, and, again, even some partisans of it, understand it to be necessarily a monistic view of human motivation, a position according to which all our motivations or ends can ultimately be reduced to a single motivation or end, or anyway to a mere two or three. According to the version of monistic psychological egoism most favored by critics, in the end, anything that an agent does, that agent does because of, or in order to satisfy, his desire for pleasure, or in reaction to his fear of pain. (The idea that all motivations reduce to the desire for pleasure can be combined with the view that the desire for pleasure is always a desire to experience a frisson of pleasure, to yield an extremely implausible elaboration of psychological egoism.) Of course, the idea that all motivations are, at root, one, is entirely consistent with, and indeed implies, the unelaborated thesis of psychological egoism, that all ultimate motivations are self-regarding. That thesis itself, however, is independent of that idea; there is no implication the other way. Thus, the critics and partisans who understand psychological egoism as incorporating a monistic thesis about human motivation are mistaken about it. A partisan of psychological egoism who rejects the monistic view and holds instead the pluralistic view that types of ultimate motivations can be irreducibly many is no less a psychological egoist than is a partisan who holds the monistic view. The egoism of each consists only in the contention that all ultimate motivations, of whatever types, have the property of being self-regarding.

Pluralism about motivation has obvious advantages over monism. For one, the pluralistic view respects our feeling that motivations might conflict even at the deepest levels. According to pluralistic egoism, it can happen that one self-regarding motivation points the agent in one direction, while another self-regarding motivation points her in a different direction, creating conflict in the agent over what to do. Betty might satisfy her desire to get property by lying to Albert, but in lying to Albert she might risk losing her self-respect; and both her desire to get property and her fear of losing self-respect might, in this particular case, be ultimately, not in service of any other desires. For another, the pluralistic view respects

our feeling that not all agents care deeply about their own pleasure, at least relative to something else they do care deeply about, or about other people's opinions of them, or about some other self-regarding end on the list. The pluralistic egoist can happily allow that some agents do not possess, or at least do not possess in very strong form, self-regarding motivations of every variety on the list.

The point of these reflections is this: while monism about motivation is implausible, psychological egoism cannot be dismissed as implausible on the grounds that it incorporates monism about motivation. It cannot be so dismissed for the simple reason that it is not necessarily monistic. Indeed, psychological egoism is entirely compatible with pluralism about ultimate motivations.

(3) Perhaps the most common objection to psychological egoism is that, by declaring that all ultimate motivations and ends are selfish motivations or ends, it flies in the face of standard meanings of "selfish" and "unselfish," and thereby prevents us from drawing commonplace distinctions useful and even necessary to our evaluations of agents' actions. According to psychological egoism, this objection runs: Sally was selfish in rubbing her cat's belly, despite the fact that her action benefited her cat as well as Sally herself, and caused not the least bit of harm to anyone, through neither commission nor omission. Sally, on the egoist's conception of human action, was no less selfish even than Martin, whose action directly aimed to manipulate others against their wishes into conforming to his designs, or John, whose action, as he foresaw, left another person crying without any ice cream while he gorged himself. Sally, whether ultimately acting on a self-regarding motivation or not, did in any case act out of concern for another, out of her desire that that individual be pleased, while Martin and John were either unconcerned with others' feelings or well-being, or were actively hostile to others. Surely, the critic says, there is an important distinction to be drawn between Sally on the one side and Martin and John on the other, a distinction of profound evaluative or moral significance; thus, the critic concludes, since it denies the reality of this distinction, or robs us of the ability to draw it, psychological egoism is false.³

The critic who offers this objection has at the ready a diagnosis of the problem besetting psychological egoism. The psychological egoist, the critic adds, forgets that for an action to be selfish it must not only stem from a self-regarding motivation, but must also have certain bad consequences for the feelings or the well-being of others, consequences, moreover, that the agent intended or at least foresaw and toward which she is wrongly indifferent. Without both bad consequences and a particular set of attitudes toward them on the part of

the agent, an action, no matter how self-regarding in origin, cannot be selfish in the plain and useful sense of that word.

The problem with this objection and diagnosis, though, is that nowhere in simple psychological egoism is there any claim or implication that all actions are selfish actions. The thesis that all actions are ultimately in service of self-regarding motivations does not imply that all actions are selfish. (It might be accurate to say that it implies that all actions are selfish in origin and, thus, at least partly in intent or goal, but that is very different from saying that actions are all straightforwardly selfish.) Psychological egoists can happily avail themselves of the distinction between selfishness and unselfishness, and can take into account in their evaluations of actions and agents both the consequences of actions for the feelings or well-being of others and the intentions towards those consequences with which the actions were performed.

III

An objection perhaps only a little less popular than the previous three, but, unlike them, possessed of the merit of actually addressing the thesis of psychological egoism itself, begins with the following observation: We often do come to the assistance of others, sometimes at great cost to one or another of our self-regarding ends, and, moreover, often we take pleasure in assisting others. The last part of this observation might seem to support psychological egoism, as the egoist indeed is wont to assume it does, but really, says the critic, it lends no support to psychological egoism whatsoever. So far from supporting it, the critic continues, actually this observation is entirely inconsistent with egoism. That a person takes pleasure in assisting others, or finds satisfaction or contentment in doing so, speaks directly to the fact that that person's end in assisting them was their own, not his, well-being. The agent simply would not have taken pleasure in helping another except that he did truly care about that other's well-being. Now, that an agent's end in assisting others was their well-being, that his end was an other-regarding end, contradicts the egoistic thesis that an agent's end in assisting others must have been a self-regarding end. Therefore, the critic concludes, an observation the egoist is prepared to accept as accurate turns out, on inspection, to show that egoism is false.⁴

This objection to psychological egoism does not cut very deeply. The psychological egoist agrees that agents can directly take pleasure in assisting others. But this only means, the egoist says, that one can care both for others and for oneself. The objection doesn't bear on the issue whether an agent cares for another because, ultimately, he cares for himself, and caring for another is his means of caring for himself. It

doesn't bear on the issue whether the final reason the agent assisted the other was to realize a self-regarding end, perhaps that of not losing respect for himself. The agent in question, the egoist explains, because of whatever peculiarities of his physiology, his environment, and his training, has been constituted so as to take pleasure in helping others, or to suffer from self-loathing when he avoids helping others, and this makes him different from those who, because of their own peculiarities, have been so constituted as to be indifferent to the well-being of others. He is different in one respect from those who are indifferent to the well-being of others, in that he has generous other-regarding motivations while they do not. But it does not make him different from them in respect to the nature of his ultimate motivations.

IV

We have now examined four common objections to psychological egoism. We found the first three not to be objections to psychological egoism at all, but rather to have as their targets theses independent of psychological egoism but often confused with or added to it. These criticisms are successful against those theses, I think, but they leave psychological egoism itself untouched. We found the fourth objection unpersuasive, for it neglected the egoist's contention that other-regarding motivations, real though they are, are always in service to self-regarding motivations. If psychological egoism is, then, as I believe it is, implausible or false, it must be implausible or false for some reason apart from these four. To that reason we now turn.

Sally rubbed her cat's belly in order that her cat would be pleased. Clearly, the desire that a cat be pleased is an other-regarding motivation, for it contains no reference to any condition of the possessor of the desire. The psychological egoist can, of course, allow that other-regarding motivations both exist and are causally efficacious. Still, according to the psychological egoist, behind any other-regarding motivation that an agent acts on, there lies one or more self-regarding motivations, self-regarding motivations to which the other-regarding motivation is in service. Sally wanted that her cat be pleased, it is true, and she pleased her cat in order that her cat be pleased; but Sally, the egoist adds, wanted to please her cat not only in order that her cat be pleased, but also and ultimately in order that she herself be pleased.

Psychological egoism is false, then, we can see, if it is possible for an agent to be stirred to action by an other-regarding motivation when that other-regarding motivation is not itself in service to a self-regarding motivation, when the agent does not intend by acting on her other-regarding desire ultimately to satisfy some self-regarding desire. Psychological egoism is

false, that is, if it is possible for Sally to be stirred to rub her cat's belly out of her desire that her cat be pleased, when her desire that her cat be pleased is her ultimate desire in the case. But why shouldn't it be possible for Sally to rub her cat's belly intending only that her cat be pleased, and not intending also, that is, to please her cat in order that she herself be pleased? There's no reason at all in the world it shouldn't be possible, we might very well think.

That it is indeed possible for an agent to act out of an other-regarding motivation without thereby acting out of a self-regarding motivation seems borne out both by introspection in our own case and by our everyday observations of others. It sometimes seems to us, on those rare occasions when we bother to pay close attention to the motivations behind our actions, or to the ends we intend to realize through them, that we are acting even though we have not drawn on a self-regarding motivation to set ourselves going, and even though we are not intending to realize some self-regarding end. It also sometimes seems to us that others are doing the same, that others have not taken a first push from a self-regarding motivation, that others are not seeking to realize self-regarding ends through their actions. This appearance is strongest when we judge that the agent, in acting as he has, has frustrated his ability to realize a self-regarding end, and when we deem it unlikely that he was unaware that he would frustrate that ability. By giving much of her money to charity, for instance, Betty frustrated her ability to get and keep a writing table as well as minimized her opportunities to take pleasure in travel. Now Betty, we know, very much wants a good writing table and loves to travel; no doubt she was aware her actions would have the consequence of preventing her from getting a good table and doing much traveling. She seems to have bestowed her gift solely out of a desire that others be clothed and fed, and that they come to possess the resources needed to make their way in the world both in dignity and in hope of happiness. That Betty did what she did both for the reasons she had and mindful of the consequences to herself of doing it, looks for all the world to us to tell strongly against the thesis that always, ultimately, an agent's motivation in acting is self-regarding. So do examples of physicians who seek out victims of infectious diseases, knowing that they are putting themselves at high risk of infection, or soldiers who put themselves in harm's way in order to protect their comrades. We could, no doubt, continue to cite or imagine examples of people who look to be acting to secure other-regarding ends without thereby trying to secure self-regarding ends. In face of such examples, psychological egoism appears extremely implausible indeed. That we can construct such examples seems to me a very good reason for rejecting psychological egoism as implausible.⁵

V

We sought in the previous section to indicate just how implausible psychological egoism is by piling up examples of actions seeming to stem from other-regarding motivations only. Of course, the advocate of psychological egoism has a quick rejoinder to our efforts. He doubts that we have looked deeply enough into ourselves, or with a clear enough eye at others. Betty, he notes, might well have donated her money ultimately out of a desire for self-respect, and thus because of a self-regarding motivation, or else in order to manifest her power to benefit others, another self-regarding motivation—even as she knew that donating money would curtail her opportunities for tables and travel. Maybe she worried that she wouldn't be able to live with herself had she gone traveling on money she knew could feed and clothe people who would otherwise die. No matter how we alter the example, no matter what we stipulate about Betty and her desires and ends (short of plainly stipulating that she had no self-regarding motivation in doing what she did, which, of course, would be to beg the question), the psychological egoist can respond with the claim that, still, Betty might have done what she did out of a self-regarding motivation. If we say that Betty was unaware of any self-regarding motivation behind her act, or that we are often unaware of any in our own case, the psychological egoist can say that Betty's and our self-regarding motivation resided deep down in her or our unconscious mind, that her and our ultimate motivation was one that she or we had disowned and repressed. The psychological egoist seems always to be able to reinterpret our proffered counter-examples, always able to say that, for all we know, Sally and Betty and we ourselves could yet have been acting, ultimately, on self-regarding motivations.

A complaint that critics of psychological egoism make here is that the psychological egoist who goes this route, especially the one who appeals to unconscious motivations, has rendered his position unfalsifiable in principle. No situation or event we could observe or imagine tells against it, nothing could count as evidence decisively at odds with it. Psychological egoism presents itself as an empirical hypothesis about a range of the world's phenomena, an empirical hypothesis about motivations for action, but yet, as it happens, it answers to no possible empirical evidence at all. It appears at first to gain evidential support from those actions we can agree serve self-regarding motivations; but this appearance is deceiving, for really psychological egoism is consistent with all conceivable turns of event, and thus no turn of event constitutes evidence either for or against it. Therefore, these critics contend, because it is unfalsifiable, it is unempirical; moreover, because it is unempirical, it is to be rejected as idle or meaningless.⁶

Certainly it is true that psychological egoism is at least not directly falsifiable. Any agent and action we describe, so long as we do not cheat by including in our description the flat statement that no self-regarding motivations are present, will be consistent with the claim that a self-regarding motivation was present and operating. But this is not the fatal flaw in psychological egoism so many critics think it is. Two routes of egress present themselves to the psychological egoist. The first is to deny that psychological egoism is properly considered an empirical thesis. The psychological egoist can instead maintain that it is a thesis about the concept or transcendental nature of motivation, either an analytic claim based on an appreciation of the concepts we use in describing and explaining actions, or a synthetic claim we have good a priori ground for accepting. The second is to argue that while psychological egoism is not directly falsifiable, it is nonetheless indirectly falsifiable, and thus a respectable, though high-level, empirical hypothesis after all. The second route is the more promising one, I think, but we should begin by pursuing the psychological egoist who thinks to escape via the first route.

(1) One argument a psychological egoist can employ meaning to demonstrate the analytic nature of his thesis is this: 1. To do something intentionally is to have a reason for doing it. 2. Whatever one's reason for doing something is, that reason is one's own reason for doing it. 3. To do something for one's own reason is to act out of one's understanding of one's own best interest. 4. To act out of one's understanding of one's own best interest is to act on the basis of a self-regarding motivation. Therefore: 5. To do something intentionally is to act on the basis of a self-regarding motivation. The first two, perhaps even three, premises of this argument are unassailable. The main trouble with the argument, I think, is that premise 4 is false.

If we are to count 3 as true, if, that is, we are to allow that to do something for one's own reason is to act out of one's understanding of one's own best interest, then the idea of what it is to act out of one's understanding of one's own best interest must not in 3 be taken in a certain common way. It must not be taken in the way that contrasts one's own best interests with another's best interests or with the general interest. On this way of conceiving of one's own best interests, what is in one's own best interests can be specified through a list, much as self-regarding motivations or ends can be, and this list necessarily excludes one's interests in other people's well-being or in the community's good. (A list of things in one's own best interest, for any one at all, will include health, happiness, security, and so on.) The concept of one's own best interests is not to be taken in this common way, for one's own reason to act could very well be that someone else will benefit

from one's act. If 3 is to be true, we must understand "one's own best interest" in the widest sense of that phrase, such that acting in order to benefit another can very well be to act in one's own best interest. Acting to benefit another will be to act in one's own best interest, that is, just so long as benefiting another is, for the agent at the time she acts, what she most wants to do, the desire that the other reap a benefit being her strongest motivation. (In this sense we fail to act in our own best interests not when we give up health or happiness in favor of assisting others, but only when we act against our own best judgement, only when we display weakness of will. Actions that are intended to benefit others can be just as weak willed as actions directly intended to benefit the agent of them herself.) Again, if we do not understand "one's own best interest" in 3 in this wide sense, then, so far from being analytically true, a piece of conceptual explication, 3 will be just plainly false.

However, to understand 3 in such a way as to make it true is immediately either to render 4 false or to equivocate on the phrase 4 shares with 3. Recall premise 4 is the claim that to act out of one's understanding of one's own best interest is to act on the basis of a self-regarding motivation. Now if we make 4 true by offering as the meaning of the phrase it shares with 3 a list that corresponds to our list of self-regarding motivations, then we are employing that phrase to mean something different from what it meant earlier, and the argument commits the fallacy of equivocation. Let us hold, then, that to act out of one's understanding of one's own best interests is just to act on the reason that one judges to be one's best reason for acting. Now 4 is plainly false. What one understands to be one's best reason for acting might very well be one's desire that someone else receive a benefit, and that desire is not itself a self-regarding motivation. Well, the psychological egoist can interject, that other-regarding motivation might ultimately be in service of some self-regarding motivation. True, but in order to justify the claim that all of them are, we need to draw on the thesis that to do something intentionally is to act on the basis of a self-regarding motivation, and this is just the thesis the argument is meant to establish. The advocate of psychological egoism must agree that he cannot smuggle his conclusion into the premises of his argument to that conclusion, and, therefore, that this particular attempt to defend psychological egoism as a piece of conceptual analysis has failed.

(2) Another argument with an *a priori* cast to it for the thesis that no one ever intentionally performs an action except, ultimately, in order to realize some self-regarding end, is this: 1. Ascribing self-regarding motivations to agents enables us to understand how the other-regarding ends they seek to realize through their actions can make practical claims on those

agents; it enables us to see what in their other-regarding ends appeals to them; it enables us to see how their other-regarding motivations can motivate their actions. 2. Unless we ascribe self-regarding motivations to agents, self-regarding motivations that are the ultimate reasons for their actions, we cannot see what in their other-regarding ends appeals to them, we cannot see how their other-regarding motivations can motivate their actions. 3. Unless we can see what in their other-regarding ends appeals to them, we cannot understand what they are doing. These premises support the intermediate conclusion: 4. It is a necessary condition of our understanding agents and their actions that we ascribe to them self-regarding motivations, motivations that are the ultimate reasons for their actions. Now let us add the contention: 5. No agent's actions could in principle escape our understanding. Together with 4, this contention yields the egoistic conclusion that: 6. No one ever intentionally performs an action except, ultimately, in order to realize some self-regarding end.

The final egoistic conclusion here seems to emerge from this argument as a synthetic claim established on *a priori* grounds, having the status of a constitutive principle of our understanding of agents and their actions. The argument has much to recommend it, I think. But, finally, at least two of its premises are no less controversial than its conclusion, maybe even more. Premises 2 and 3 cannot be accepted without further argument. We need some reason to think that ascribing self-regarding motivations to others is the only way we can come to understand why their other-regarding ends appeal to them. And we need some reason to think getting an agent's reasons right might not suffice to enable us to understand what he is doing; we need some reason to think we might also need to know his reasons for having those reasons. These two premises also raise the serious question what is it about her self-regarding motivations that enables us to understand how that agent's ends appeal to her, and why other-regarding motivations lack this feature. Until these matters are resolved in the egoist's favor, we have no reason to think that the thesis of psychological egoism, though not an empirical thesis, nonetheless captures a truth about the transcendental nature of motivation.

(3) The idea we have just considered, that the constitutive principles governing inquiry into some range of phenomena are ultimately transcendental and, thus, to be justified on *a priori* grounds, is an idea that has fallen on hard times. Nowadays, philosophers are apt to think of such principles as merely the most general or abstract claims or theses within a body of lore about that range of phenomena. These principles or theses, philosophers these days are inclined to think, do not hover above all empirical theories as a transcendental condi-

tion of their meaningfulness or applicability, but instead reside deep within particular theories. As the most general or abstract claims within a body of lore or a theory, these principles or theses might well be too general or abstract ever to be falsified directly by evidence; but that does not mean that they are entirely immune to falsification. Rather, acceptance of any such principle or thesis is reasonable to the extent, first, that that principle or thesis plays an important organizing role within an empirical theory, and, second, that the empirical theory within which it is found works well to enable us to predict and control the phenomena it purports to describe and explain.

The psychological egoist can find in these reflections, I think, a solid response to the charge that egoism is unfalsifiable and, thus, not empirical. While the thesis of psychological egoism is not falsifiable through direct confrontation with individual pieces of evidence that speak against it, it is nonetheless falsifiable. Its fortunes depend on the fortunes of the large theory of behavior of which it is a part. If inquirers using a large theory incorporating psychological egoism frequently meet with failure in their attempts to predict, control, and understand behavior, then we have good reason to think that something is amiss with the generalities and organizing principles within that theory, one of which is the thesis of psychological egoism. On the other hand, if inquirers frequently meet with success, then we have good reason to think the generalities and organizing principles, including psychological egoism, are acceptable. In the case of most, if not all, well-developed empirical theories, though, the question whether the theory is acceptable is a comparative question, really the question whether the one theory is more or less acceptable than some other theory. To answer it we need to take at least two different theories, and try to judge which of them meets with the most success, which of them affords us the better understanding of the range of phenomena both address. The question for psychological egoism, then, is whether those general theories of behavior that incorporate it as an essential part do better than those theories in which it plays no role.

Can the psychological egoist, then, now vindicate his thesis by pointing to the success of large theories of behavior that incorporate it? Probably not, at least not today. Perhaps most theories of behavior currently to be found in intentional psychology and the social sciences incorporate the thesis of psychological egoism, but it is not clear that any of these theories are meeting with enough success for anyone to feel confident about the principles guiding them or the generalizations they offer. It might even be the case that psychological egoism is not really an essential part of these theories, but comes into them through the prejudices or faulty common sense of re-

searchers. But whether psychological egoism actually is borne out by empirical evidence is not the issue with which we are here concerned. Our concern is merely with the question whether psychological egoism is at all an empirical thesis, not with the question whether it turns out in the end to be a good empirical thesis. The objection that psychological egoism is not falsifiable has, I think, to be dismissed. Psychological egoism, it is true, is not directly falsifiable by one or another piece of evidence, but direct falsification is not the only way in which a claim can be falsified.⁷ Psychological egoism is indirectly falsifiable in that as predictions made by the theory in which it is found are themselves directly falsified, it itself becomes more and more suspect. But that it is indirectly falsifiable is enough to make it a respectably empirical hypothesis or claim.

Our results in this section are, it is plain to see, inconclusive, at least if our goal is either to defend or to refute psychological egoism. We have certainly uncovered serious issues for the psychological egoist to address, but we cannot conclude that he will be unable to address them satisfactorily. The general objection we canvassed was that psychological egoism is unfalsifiable and, thus, not an empirical thesis; therefore, because it is not an empirical thesis, it is to be rejected as empty or meaningless. We looked first at the idea that though it is unfalsifiable, that is precisely because it is not, and does not pretend to be, an empirical thesis; rather, it is, and is to be appreciated as, a conceptual or transcendental thesis, in either case one to be established on a priori grounds. We are in fact able to say definitely that the argument we examined meant to show it to be a conceptual thesis is irreparably fallacious, and that no other better argument seems to be in the offing. If offered as a piece of conceptual analysis, then, we are entitled to declare it false. But the argument we examined meant to show it to be a synthetic thesis justified on a priori grounds, a transcendental constitutive principle of our understanding of actions and agency, fails only because two or three of its premises themselves stand in need of argument. We did discover reasons for rejecting one or more of these premises, but none of these reasons comes close to demonstrating that it is false. We looked second at the idea that though psychological egoism is an empirical thesis, really, after all, it is empirically falsifiable. The egoist's contention here is that it is a mistake to think it is directly falsifiable; it is, instead, indirectly falsifiable. Its fortunes are tied to the general empirical theories it informs and guides. If a theory of behavior incorporates the thesis of psychological egoism, then that thesis tends to be falsified to the extent that the theory as a whole fails to enable its users to predict and control phenomena. Is there, then, somewhere out there, a large theory of behavior, one that

does not incorporate the thesis of psychological egoism, that does a better job of yielding predictions and facilitating control of phenomena than do any large theories that do incorporate psychological egoism? The advocate of psychological egoism bets that there isn't, the critic bets that there is or will be, but right now no one knows. In any case, we now know that the general objection that psychological egoism is to be rejected as unfalsifiable can itself be dismissed.

VI

The egoist made an excellent point in section IV, a point that we who reject psychological egoism would do well not to deny. We must always be at least a little unsure about what another's, and even our own, ultimate motivation is. Nonetheless, we do have a satisfactory response to the conclusion that the egoist would draw from this point. That the ultimate motivation for some action might be a self-regarding one does not by itself mean that the ultimate reason for that action in fact is a self-regarding one. We can accept the point that any action might be in the service of a self-regarding motivation without ceasing to think it implausible that all actions are in the service of self-regarding motivations. At any rate, we can accept the egoist's point without changing our minds that psychological egoism is implausible—unless, of course, the egoist has a good argument to the conclusion that all actions are performed in the service of self-regarding motivations.

We examined two such arguments in the previous section, section V. We found we could dismiss the first out of hand, and that we had good reasons for not accepting the second. There's at least one more argument that we should examine. The very best argument for the thesis of psychological egoism that I am aware of is the following. 1. Whenever we act, we act in order to satisfy a desire. 2. Whenever we succeed in satisfying a desire, we experience a frisson of pleasure or a feeling of satisfaction, or otherwise realize some self-regarding end. Together, this argument runs, these premises support the conclusion: 3. Whenever we act, we act in order to experience a frisson of pleasure, or a feeling of satisfaction, or otherwise to realize some self-regarding end. The argument is meant to show that all actions must be in the service of self-regarding motivations; of course, if all must have this characteristic, then all in fact do have it.

The first premise enjoys wide support among philosophers.⁸ Some do reject it, but for most it seems merely to capture a necessary condition of intentional action. What distinguishes actions from mere motions is that those motions that are actions are caused by reasons, and reasons for acting incorporate motivations, desires. If no part of the cause of a motion was a

desire, then the motion was not an action. All this seems to be just native belief philosophically clarified and arranged. To reject this premise, one has to argue that a cognitive state, such as a belief, can, by itself, independently of pre-existing motivations, generate in an agent a motivation to perform an action of some type. One has to argue, that certain beliefs can all by themselves be, for the agent who has them, reasons for acting in a particular way.⁹ The second premise is rather more controversial, but in any case not obviously unacceptable.¹⁰ (I myself think a very good argument can be given for it.) Issues regarding the individual premises aside, however, the real problem with the argument is that the premises supply only very weak support to the conclusion.

Let us suppose that, along with the first, the second premise of this argument is true, that whenever we satisfy a desire we in fact do realize some self-regarding end we have. We cannot assume or conclude, simply on the basis of this premise, that our goal in satisfying a desire must have been to realize the self-regarding end we did realize. Even if each time as a consequence of satisfying a desire we do in fact realize some self-regarding end, we cannot conclude that we acted in order to realize that self-regarding end. That we realized some self-regarding end might well be, in any particular case of action, simply an unintended consequence of our action, not an intended one. Whenever Sally bakes a potato, something she often intentionally does, she creates an aerosol of millions of potato molecules that infuses the air in her kitchen. Sally is quite aware before she bakes a potato that her action will have the consequence of sending an aroma through her kitchen; indeed, she is usually quite happy that it will have this consequence, for she enjoys the smell of baking potato. Still, though both aware and welcoming of this consequence, Sally has never to this date baked a potato in order to savor the smell. Many people, it would seem, are like Sally in this regard. They foresee and welcome certain self-regarding consequences of their actions, and yet they did not act in order to realize those consequences. Some people enjoy being seen in the company of physically attractive people, and maybe on occasion even anticipate having this pleasure, but not all of these people choose their associates for their physical attractiveness, let alone seek them out in order to be seen with them. Other people enjoy the feeling of being in control when they lead a seminar, but few take on the role of seminar leader in order to enjoy that feeling. To assume that because one realizes some end through one's action, one has performed that action in order to realize that end would seem to be to commit a post hoc, ergo prompter hoc fallacy.¹¹ For this reason, then, we can conclude that even the best argument for psychological egoism goes little distance toward establishing it.

VII

Psychological egoism is false, we decided earlier, if it is possible for an agent to perform an action without intending through that action to realize some self-regarding end. We then noted that the many everyday examples of people acting to benefit others that quickly come to mind in response to the egoist's contention seem to render that contention implausible. We accepted that, in any particular case of an action, however other-regarding and motivated that action looks, for all we really can know it could have been performed in service of a self-regarding motivation. But this fact, we saw, goes no distance toward establishing that all other-regarding actions have self-regarding motivations. To that point in our discussion, then, our examples of other-regarding actions justified us in rejecting psychological egoism as implausible, at least until we were made aware of an argument that what might be the case with any action really was the case with all actions. In face of such an argument we would have to put our examples aside, and undertake to evaluate it. We have in the course of our discussions examined three such arguments, and we found each to be wanting. It turns out that even if we grant that whenever we satisfy a desire we realize a self-regarding end, we are still left without a compelling reason for thinking that whenever we seek to satisfy a desire, we do so in order to realize a self-regarding end. None of this, of course, is sufficient to demonstrate that psychological egoism is false. What we can conclude here, though, is that since it is both implausible and lacking compelling support, we are entirely justified in thinking psychological egoism false.

What I hope I have shown along the way to this conclusion, though, is, I think, just as important as that conclusion itself. What I hope I have shown along the way is that the version of psychological egoism we have considered here, strong though it is, does not succumb to many of the most common objections critics level against it. The thesis that no one ever intentionally performs an action except, ultimately, in order to realize some self-regarding end cannot be dismissed as resting on a misunderstanding of the desire for pleasure, or on a monistic view of human motivation, or on an untenable notion of selfishness. It cannot be dismissed on the grounds that we do often act on other-regarding motivations. It cannot be dismissed as meaningless or unempirical on the grounds that it is unfalsifiable. That it cannot be dismissed on any of these grounds is, I think, a significant result, one of general interest to philosophical psychology. Indeed, it seems to me that by understanding both where the version of psychological egoism we have considered is vulnerable to criticism and where it isn't, we have brought ourselves into a good position from

which to try to construct other philosophical theses about the springs of action, theses that draw on egoism's strengths while avoiding its weaknesses.

Suppose, for instance, that we were to construct a different account of the springs of action by replacing the phrase "in order to realize some self-regarding end" in the strong thesis of psychological egoism with the phrase "in expectation of realizing some self-regarding end." The thesis we would get is the following: No one ever performs an action except, ultimately, in expectation of realizing some self-regarding end. This, I think, is a thesis entitled to the designation psychological egoism, the thesis of a version of egoism perhaps best described as weak psychological egoism. Weak psychological egoism clearly escapes all the objections the strong psychological egoism we considered in this paper escapes. Moreover, unlike strong psychological egoism, weak psychological egoism does not imply the implausible idea that we never act out of other-regarding motivations alone. Further, no argument for it need fallaciously move from the contention that we always, when successful in our actions, realize some self-regarding end, to the conclusion that we always act in order to realize some self-regarding end—the move that, as we saw in section V, vitiated the best argument for strong psychological egoism. We have, then, in weak psychological egoism a thesis that retains the attractive hardheadedness of strong psychological egoism, but dispenses with the bloody-mindedness that, in the end, makes it implausible. It is, then, a thesis that would repay close consideration.

My own view is that there is at least one very good positive argument in favor of the thesis of weak psychological egoism. But that is a topic for another time.¹²

NOTES

¹ C. D. Broad includes a helpful list of self-regarding motivations in his essay "Egoism as a Theory of Human Motives," *Ethics and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 219–220.

² Joel Feinberg makes this objection. Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," in Joel Feinberg, ed., *Reason and Responsibility* Seventh Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 494–495 (section #12, "Pleasure as Sensation").

³ Critics who raise this objection include: E. J. Bond, *Ethics and Human Well-Being* (London: Blackwell, 1996), 8–9; Feinberg, 491; John Hospers, *Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics* Shorter Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 144–145; James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 67.

⁴ Both Feinberg (492) and Rachels (67–69) make this objection, and both draw on the same anecdote in which Lincoln rescues some piglets, claiming to do so in order to preserve his peace of mind.

⁵ Almost all critics seek to make psychological egoism seem implausible by employing the tactic of presenting examples of what, at least at first, look to be actions stemming entirely from other-regarding motivations. Broad gives three examples, a man who provides for others in his will (224–225), a man who subscribes anonymously to a charity (225–226), and a man who devotes his life to working among lepers (226–228). Feinberg mentions Russian soldiers during the siege of Stalingrad and Christian martyrs (495). Bond's examples are found on 11 & 15, Hospers's on 150–151, and Rachels's on 63.

⁶ Bond, 11–13; Feinberg, 497; Hospers, 149–151; Rachels, 72–74.

⁷ Michael Anthony Slote, however, does argue that psychological egoism is directly falsifiable by empirical evidence, or at least that it is as close to directly falsifiable as is any interesting general psychological hypothesis. He contends that experiments in the psychology of learning can furnish relatively clear evidence for or against the specific egoistic thesis that no actions are unselfish. Slote's main point, of course, is that this thesis is empirically respectable, even if it turns out to be false, but he goes on to say that the balance of evidence so far is in favor of egoism. Slote might be right about all of this, but the thesis he discusses, the thesis, again, that no actions are unselfish, is significantly different from the stronger egoistic thesis under consideration in this paper, the thesis that all actions are motivated by self-regarding desires. An action might well be non-unselfish in some important respect while yet motivated entirely by other-regarding desires. The thesis Slote defends as directly falsifiable is closer to the thesis I present in section VII under the name weak psychological egoism. Michael Anthony Slote, "An Empirical Basis for Psychological Egoism," *Journal of Philosophy* LXI, 18 (Oct. 1964), 530–537.

⁸ Feinberg calls it a tautology (491).

⁹ Rachels thinks that this premise is false. He holds that we are not necessarily doing what we want to do or attempting to satisfy a desire when we are acting out of a sense of obligation (66–67). Philosophers who have argued at length against this premise include John McDowell, "Might there be external reasons?" *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams*, J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68–85, and Thomas Nagel, "Value," Chapter VIII of *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 138–163.

¹⁰ Feinberg, however, calls it a truism (490).

¹¹ Bond, 14–16; Feinberg, 492.

¹² I thank Stephen Haller for comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and the Brandon University Philosophy Society for the opportunity to discuss these ideas at a colloquium.