CHAPTER 5

Psychological Egoism

But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded.

EDMUND BURKE, *REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE* (1790)

5.1. Is Unselfishness Possible?

Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish businessman who could have stayed safely at home, spent the closing days of World War II in Budapest. Wallenberg had volunteered to be sent there as part of Sweden's diplomatic mission after he heard reports about Hitler's "final solution to the Jewish problem." Once there, he successfully pressured the Hungarian government to stop the deportations to the concentration camps. When the Hungarian government was replaced by a Nazi puppet regime, and the deportations resumed, Wallenberg issued "Swedish Protective Passes" to thousands of Jews, insisting that they all had connections with Sweden and were under the protection of his government. He helped many individuals find places to hide. When they were rounded up, Wallenberg would stand between them and the Nazis, telling the Germans that they would have to shoot him first. At the very end of the war, when everything was chaos and the other diplomats were fleeing, Wallenberg stayed behind. He is credited with saving as many as 120,000 lives. When the war was over, he disappeared, and for a long time no one knew what had happened to him. Now it is believed that he was killed, not by the Germans but by the Soviet occupation forces. Wallenberg's story is more dramatic than most, but it is by no means unique. The Israeli government has documented 6,000 instances of Gentiles protecting

their Jewish neighbors during the Holocaust, and there are no doubt thousands more.

Morality demands that we be unselfish. *How* unselfish is a hard question. (Moral theories have been criticized both for requiring too much and for requiring too little.) Perhaps we are not required to be as heroic as Raoul Wallenberg, but still, we are expected to be attentive to other people's needs at least to some degree.

And people do help one another, in ways big and small. People do favors for one another. They build homeless shelters. They volunteer in hospitals. They donate organs and give blood. Mothers sacrifice for their children. Firefighters risk death to rescue people. Nuns spend their lives working among the poor. The list could go on and on. Many people give money to support worthy causes, when they could keep it for themselves. Peter Singer writes that one day

> my mail brought me the newsletter of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Australia's leading conservation lobby group. It included an article by the Foundation's fund-raising co-ordinator, in which he reported on a trip to thank a donor who had regularly sent donations of $1,000 or more. When he reached the address he thought something must be wrong; he was in front of a very modest suburban home. But there was no mistake: David Allsop, an employee of the state department of public works, donates 50 percent of his income to environmental causes.

These are remarkable stories, but should they be taken at face value? Are these people really as unselfish as they seem? In this chapter we will examine some arguments which say that, in fact, no one is ever really unselfish. This may seem absurd, considering the examples we have just listed. Nonetheless, there is a theory of human nature, once widely held among philosophers, psychologists, and economists, and still held by many ordinary people, that says we are not capable of being unselfish. According to this theory, known as Psychological Egoism, *every human action is motivated by self-interest.* We may believe ourselves to be noble and self-sacrificing, but that is only an illusion. In reality, we care only for ourselves.

Could Psychological Egoism possibly be true? Why have so many people believed it, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary?

5.2. The Strategy of Reinterpreting Motives

Everyone knows that people sometimes seem to act altruistically; but perhaps the "altruistic" explanations of behavior are too superficial—it may *seem* that people are unselfish, but if we look deeper we may find that something else is going on. Usually it is not hard to discover that the "unselfish" behavior is actually connected with some benefit for the person who does it.

According to some of Raoul Wallenberg's friends, before going to Hungary he was depressed and unhappy that his life didn't seem to be amounting to much. So he undertook deeds that would make him a heroic figure. His quest for a more significant life was spectacularly successful—here we are, more than a half-century after his death, talking about him. Mother Theresa, the nun who spent her life working among the poor in Calcutta, is often cited as a perfect example of unselfishness—but of course, Mother Theresa believed that she would be handsomely rewarded in heaven. (In fact, she did not have to wait that long for her reward; she was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.) As for David Allsop, who gives 50 percent of his income to support environmental causes, Singer notes that "David had previously worked as a campaigner himself, and said he found it deeply satisfying now to be able to provide the financial support for others to campaign."

So, "altruistic" behavior is in reality connected with such things as the desire to have a more significant life, the desire for public recognition, feelings of personal satisfaction, and the hope of heavenly reward. For any act of apparent altruism, we may be able to find a way to explain away the altruism and replace it with an explanation in terms of more self-centered motives. This technique of reinterpreting motives is perfectly general and may be repeated again and again.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) thought that Psychological Egoism was probably true, but he was not satisfied with such a piecemeal approach. It is not theoretically elegant to deal with each example separately, worrying first about Raoul Wallenberg, then Mother Theresa, then David Allsop, and on and on. If Psychological Egoism is true, we should be able to give a more comprehensive account of human motives, which would establish the theory once and for all. This is what Hobbes attempted to do. His method was to list general types of motives, concentrating

especially on the "altruistic" ones, and show how each could be understood in egoistic terms. Once this project was completed, he would have systematically eliminated altruism from our understanding of human nature. Here are two examples of Hobbes at work.

1. *Charity.* This is the most general motive that we ascribe to people when we think they are acting from a concern for others. The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes almost four columns to "charity." It is defined variously as "The Christian love of our fellowman" and "Benevolence to one's neighbors." But if such neighborly love does not really exist, charitable behavior must be understood in a radically different way. In his essay "On Human Nature," Hobbes describes it like this:

> There can be no greater argument to a man, of his own power, than to find himself able not only to accomplish his own desires, but also to assist other men in theirs: and this is that conception wherein consisteth charity.

Thus charity is a delight one takes in the demonstration of one's powers. The charitable man is demonstrating to himself, and to the world, that he is more resourceful than others: he cannot only take care of himself, he has enough left over for others who are not as capable as he is. In other words, he is just showing off his own superiority.

Of course Hobbes was aware that the charitable man may not *believe* he is doing this. But we are not the best judges of our own motivations. It is only natural that we would interpret our actions in a way that is flattering to us (that is no more than a psychological egoist would expect), and it is flattering to think that we are "unselfish." Hobbes's account aims to provide the *real* explanation of why we act as we do, not the superficial flattery that we naturally want to believe.

2. *Pity.* What is it to pity other people? We might think it is to sympathize with them, to feel unhappy about their misfortunes. And acting from this sympathy, we might try to help them. Hobbes thinks this is all right, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. The reason we are disturbed by other people's misfortunes is that we are reminded that the same thing might happen to *us.* "Pity," he says, "is imagination or fiction of future calamity to ourselves, proceeding from the sense of another man's calamity."

This account of pity turns out to be more powerful, from a theoretical point of view, than it first appears. It can explain very neatly some peculiar facts about the phenomenon. It can explain, for example, why we feel greater pity when a good person suffers than when an evil person suffers. Pity, in Hobbes's account, requires a sense of identification with the person suffering—I pity you when I imagine myself in your place. But because each of us thinks of himself or herself as a good person, we do not identify with those we think bad. Therefore, we do not pity the wicked in the same way we pity the good. Our feelings of pity vary directly with the virtue of the person suffering because our sense of identification varies in that way.

The strategy of reinterpreting motives is a persuasive method of reasoning; it has made a great many people feel that Psychological Egoism might be true. It especially appeals to a certain cynicism in us, a suspicion that people are not nearly as noble as they seem. But it is not a conclusive method of reasoning, for it cannot prove that Psychological Egoism is correct. The trouble is, it only shows that it is *possible* to interpret motives egoistically; it does nothing to show that the egoistic motives are deeper or truer than the altruistic explanations they are intended to replace. At most, the strategy shows that Psychological Egoism is possible. We still need arguments to show it is true.

5.3. Two Arguments in Favor of Psychological Egoism

Two general arguments have often been advanced in favor of Psychological Egoism. They are "general" arguments in the sense that each seeks to establish at a single stroke that all actions, and not merely some limited class of actions, are motivated by self-interest. As we will see, neither argument stands up very well under scrutiny.

The Argument That We Always Do What We Most Want to Do. If we describe one person's action as selfish and another person's action as unselfish, we are overlooking the crucial fact that in both cases, assuming the action is done voluntarily, *the person is merely doing what he most wants to do.* If Raoul Wallenberg chose to go to Budapest, and no one was coercing him, that only shows that he wanted to go there more than he wanted to remain in

Sweden—and why should he be praised for "unselfishness" when he was only doing what he most wanted to do? His action was dictated by his own desires, his own sense of what he most wanted. Thus he was not acting unselfishly. And since exactly the same may be said about any alleged act of altruism, we can conclude that Psychological Egoism must be true.

This argument has two primary flaws. First, it depends on the idea that people never voluntarily do anything except what they want to do. But this is plainly false. Sometimes we do things that we do not want to do, because they are a necessary means to an end that we want to achieve—for example, we don't want to go to the dentist, but we go anyway to avoid a toothache. This sort of case may, however, be regarded as consistent with the spirit of the argument, because the ends (such as avoiding the toothache) are wanted.

But there are also things that we do, not because we want to, or even because they are means to an end we want to achieve, but because we feel that we *ought* to do them. For example, someone may do something because she has promised to do it, and thus feels obligated, even though she does not want to do it. It is sometimes suggested that in such cases we do the action because, after all, we want to keep our promises. However, that is not true. If I have promised to do something but I do not want to do it, then it is simply false to say that I want to keep my promise. In such cases we feel a conflict precisely because we do *not* want to do what we feel obligated to do.

If our desires and our sense of obligation were always in harmony, it would be a happy world. Unfortunately, we enjoy no such good fortune. It is an all-too-common experience to be pulled in different directions by desire and obligation. For all we know, Wallenberg may have been like this: Perhaps he wanted to stay in Sweden, but he felt that he had to go to Budapest. In any case, it does not follow from the fact that he chose to go that he wanted to go.

The argument also has a second flaw. Suppose we were to concede, for the sake of argument, that we always act on our strongest desires. Even if this were granted, it would not follow that Wallenberg was acting selfishly or from self-interest. For if he wanted to help other people, even at great risk to himself, that is precisely what makes him *un*selfish. What else could unselfishness be, if not wanting to help others, even at some cost

to oneself? Another way to put the point is to say that the *object* of a desire determines whether it is selfish or not. The mere fact that you act on your own desires does not mean that you are acting selfishly; it depends on *what it is* that you desire. If you care only about your own welfare and give no thought for others, then you are selfish; but if you also want other people to be happy, and you act on *that* desire, then you are not selfish.

Therefore, this argument goes wrong in just about every way that an argument can go wrong: The premises are not true, and even if they were true, the conclusion would not follow from them.

The Argument That We Do What Makes Us Feel Good. The second general argument for Psychological Egoism appeals to the fact that so-called unselfish actions produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the person who does them. Acting "unselfishly" makes people feel good about themselves, and that is the real point of it.

According to a 19th-century newspaper, this argument was once advanced by Abraham Lincoln. The Springfield, Illinois *Monitor* reported that

> Mr. Lincoln once remarked to a fellow-passenger on an old-time mud coach that all men were prompted by selfishness in doing good. His fellow-passenger was antagonizing this position when they were passing over a corduroy bridge that spanned a slough. As they crossed this bridge they espied an old razor-backed sow on the bank making a terrible noise because her pigs had got into the slough and were in danger of drowning. As the old coach began to climb the hill, Mr. Lincoln called out, "Driver, can't you stop just a moment?" Then Mr. Lincoln jumped out, ran back, and lifted the little pigs out of the mud and water and placed them on the bank. When he returned, his companion remarked: "Now, Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?" "Why, bless your soul, Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see?"

Lincoln was a great man but, on this occasion at least, he was not a very good philosopher. His argument is vulnerable to the same sorts of objections as the previous one. Why should we

think, merely because someone derives satisfaction from helping others, that this makes him selfish? Isn't the unselfish person precisely the one who *does* derive satisfaction from helping others, whereas the selfish person does not? If Lincoln "got peace of mind" from rescuing the piglets, does this show him to be selfish or, on the contrary, doesn't it show him to be compassionate and good-hearted? (If a person was truly selfish, why should it bother him that others suffer, much less pigs?) Similarly, it is nothing more than sophistry to say that, because someone finds satisfaction in helping others, they are selfish. If we say this rapidly, while thinking about something else, perhaps it will sound all right; but if we speak slowly and pay attention to what we are saying, it sounds plain silly.

Moreover, suppose we ask *why* someone might derive satisfaction from helping others. Why should it make you feel good to contribute money to support a homeless shelter, when you could spend it on yourself instead? The answer must be, at least in part, that *you are the kind of person who cares about what happens to other people.* If you do not care what happens to them, then giving the money will seem like a waste, not a source of satisfaction. You'll feel more like a sucker than a saint.

There is a general lesson to be learned here, having to do with the nature of desire and its objects. We desire all sorts of things—money, a new car, to play chess, to get married, and so on—and because we desire these things, we may derive satisfaction from getting them. But the object of our desire is not the satisfaction—that is not what we are after. What we are after is simply the money, the car, the chess, or the marriage. It is the same with helping others. We must first want to help them before we can get any satisfaction out of it. The good feelings are a by-product; they are not what we are after. Thus, having those feelings is not a mark of selfishness.

5.4. Clearing Away Some Confusions

One of the most powerful theoretical motives is a desire for simplicity. When we set out to explain something, we would like to find as simple an explanation as possible. This is certainly true in the sciences—the simpler a scientific theory, the greater its appeal. Consider phenomena as diverse as planetary motion, the tides, and the way objects fall when released from a height.

These appear, at first, to be very different; and it would seem that we would need several different principles to explain them. Who would suspect that they could all be explained by a single simple principle? Yet the theory of gravity does just that. The theory's ability to bring diverse phenomena together under a single explanatory principle is one of its great virtues. It makes order out of chaos.

In the same way, when we think about human conduct, we would like to find one principle that explains everything. We want a single simple formula, if we can find one, that would unite the diverse phenomena of human behavior, in the way that simple formulas in physics bring together apparently diverse phenomena. Since it is obvious that self-regard is an overwhelmingly important factor in motivation, it is only natural to wonder whether all motivation might not be explained in terms of it. And so the idea of Psychological Egoism takes hold.

But the fundamental idea behind Psychological Egoism cannot even be expressed without falling into confusion; and once these confusions have been cleared away, the theory no longer seems plausible.

First, people tend to confuse *selfishness* with *self-interest.* When we think about it, these two are clearly not the same. If I see a physician when I am feeling poorly, I am acting in my own self-interest, but no one would think of calling me "selfish" on account of it. Similarly, brushing my teeth, working hard at my job, and obeying the law are all in my own interest, but none of these are examples of selfish conduct. Selfish behavior is behavior that ignores the interests of others, in circumstances in which their interests ought not to be ignored. Thus, eating a normal meal in normal circumstances is not selfish (although it is definitely in your self-interest); but you would be selfish if you hoarded food while others were starving.

A second confusion is between self-interested behavior and the pursuit of pleasure. We do lots of things because we enjoy them, but that does not mean we are acting from self-interest. The man who continues to smoke cigarettes even after learning about the connection between smoking and cancer is surely not acting from self-interest, not even by his own standards—self-interest would dictate that he quit smoking—and he is not acting altruistically either. He is, no doubt, smoking for the pleasure of it, but this only shows that undisciplined

pleasure seeking and acting from self-interest are different. Reflecting on this, Joseph Butler, the leading 18th-century critic of egoism, remarked: "The thing to be lamented is, not that men have so great regard to their own good or interest in the present world, for they have not enough."

Taken together, the last two paragraphs show that (a) it is false that all actions are selfish and (b) it is false that all actions are done from self-interest. When we brush our teeth, at least in normal circumstances, we are not acting selfishly; therefore, not all actions are selfish. And when we smoke cigarettes, we are not acting out of self-interest; therefore, not all actions are done from self-interest. It is worth noting that these two points do not depend on examples of altruism; even if there were no such thing as altruistic behavior, Psychological Egoism would still be false.

A third confusion is the common but false assumption that a concern for one's own welfare is incompatible with any genuine concern for others. Since it is obvious that everyone (or very nearly everyone) desires his or her own well-being, it might be thought that no one can really be concerned for the well-being of others. But this is a false dichotomy. There is no inconsistency in desiring that everyone, including oneself *and* others, be happy. To be sure, our interests may sometimes come into conflict with other people's interests, and then we may have to make hard choices. But even in these cases we sometimes opt for the interests of others, especially when the others are our friends and family. More importantly, however, life is not always like this. Sometimes we are able to help others at little or no cost to ourselves. In those circumstances, not even the strongest self-regard need prevent us from acting generously.

Once these confusions are cleared away, there seems little reason to think Psychological Egoism is a plausible theory. On the contrary, it seems decidedly implausible. If we observe people's behavior with an open mind, we find that much of it is motivated by self-regard, but by no means all of it. There may indeed be one simple formula, as yet undiscovered, that would explain all of human behavior, but Psychological Egoism is not it.

5.5. The Deepest Error in Psychological Egoism

The preceding discussion may seem relentlessly negative. If Psychological Egoism is so obviously confused, you may ask, and if

there are no plausible arguments for it, why have so many intelligent people been attracted to it? It is a fair question. Part of the answer is the almost irresistible urge toward theoretical simplicity. Another part is the attraction of what appears to be a hardheaded, deflationary attitude toward human pretensions. But there is a deeper reason: Psychological Egoism has been accepted by many people because they see it as *irrefutable.* And in a certain sense, they are right. Yet in another sense, the theory's immunity from refutation is its deepest flaw.

To explain, let me tell a (true) story that might appear to be far from our subject. A few years ago a group of investigators led by Dr. David Rosenham, a professor of psychology and law at Stanford University, had themselves admitted as patients to various mental hospitals. The hospital staffs did not know there was anything special about them; they thought the investigators were ordinary patients. The investigators wanted to see how they would be treated.

The investigators were perfectly normal, whatever that means, but their very presence in the hospitals created the assumption that they were mentally disturbed. Although they behaved normally—they did nothing to feign illness—they soon discovered that everything they did was interpreted as a sign of whatever mental problem was listed on their admission forms. When some of them were found to be taking notes, entries were made in their records such as "patient engages in writing behavior." During one interview, one "patient" confessed that although he was closer to his mother as a small child, he became more attached to his father as he grew older—a normal turn of events. But this was taken as evidence of "unstable relationships in childhood." Even their protestations of normalcy were turned against them. One of the real patients warned them: "Never tell a doctor that you're well. He won't believe you. That's called a 'flight into health.' Tell him you're still sick, but you're feeling a lot better. That's called insight."

No one on the hospital staffs caught on to the hoax. The real patients, however, saw through it. One of them told an investigator, "You're not crazy. You're checking up on the hospital." And so he was.

Why did the doctors not catch on? The experiment revealed something about the power of a controlling assumption: *Once a hypothesis is accepted, everything can be interpreted to support it.*

Once it became the controlling assumption that the fake patients were mentally disturbed, it did not matter how they behaved. Whatever they did would be construed to fit the assumption. But the "success" of this technique did not prove the hypothesis was true. If anything, it was a sign that something had gone wrong.

The hypothesis that the fake patients were mentally disturbed was faulty because it was *untestable.* If a hypothesis purports to say something factual about the world, then there must be some imaginable conditions that could verify it and some that could conceivably refute it. Otherwise, it is meaningless. If the hypothesis is that all swans are white, for example, we may look at swans to see if any are green or blue or some other color. And although we do not find any green or blue swans, we know *what it would be like* to find some. Our conclusion should rest on the results of these observations. (In fact, there are some black swans, so this hypothesis is false.) Again, suppose someone says "Shaquille O'Neal can't get into my Volkswagen." We know what this means, because we can imagine the circumstances that would make it true and the circumstances that would make it false. To test the statement, we take the car to Mr. O'Neal, invite him to step inside, and see what happens. If it turns out one way, the statement is true; if it turns out the other way, the statement is false.

It should have been possible for the doctors to examine the fake patients, look at the results, and say: "Wait a minute, there's nothing wrong with these people." (Remember, the fake patients behaved normally; they did not fake any psychiatric symptoms.) But the doctors were not operating in that way. For them, *nothing was allowed to count against the hypothesis that the "patients" were ill.*

Psychological Egoism is involved in the same error. Once it becomes the controlling assumption that all behavior is self-interested, everything that happens can be interpreted to fit this assumption. But so what? If there is no conceivable pattern of action or motivation that would count against the theory—if we cannot even imagine what an unselfish act would be like—then the theory is empty.

There is, of course, a way around this problem, both for the doctors and for Psychological Egoism. The doctors could have identified some reasonable way of distinguishing between

mentally healthy people and mentally ill people; then they could have observed the fake patients to see which category they belonged in. Similarly, anyone who is tempted to believe Psychological Egoism is true could identify some reasonable way to distinguish self-regarding behavior from nonself-regarding behavior and then look at how people actually behave and see what categories their actions fall into. Of course, anyone who did this would see that people are motivated in all sorts of ways. People act from greed, anger, lust, love, and hate. They do things because they are frightened, jealous, curious, happy, worried, and inspired. They are sometimes selfish and sometimes generous. Sometimes, like Raoul Wallenberg, they are even heroic. In the face of all this, the thought that there is but a single motive cannot be sustained. If Psychological Egoism is held in a form that is testable, the results of the test will be that the theory is false.

CHAPTER 6

Ethical Egoism

The achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose.

AYN RAND, *THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS* (1961)

6.1. Is There a Duty to Help Starving People?

Each year millions of people die of malnutrition and related health problems. A common pattern among children in poor countries is death from dehydration caused by diarrhea brought on by malnutrition. The executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has estimated that about 15,000 children die in this way every day. That comes to 5,475,000 children annually. If we add those who die from other preventable causes, the number goes over 10 million. Even if this estimate is too high, the number that die is staggering.

For those of us in the affluent countries, this poses an acute problem. We spend money on ourselves, not only for the necessities of life but for countless luxuries—for fine automobiles, fancy clothes, stereos, sports, movies, and so on. In our country, even people with modest incomes enjoy such things. The problem is that we could forgo our luxuries and give the money for famine relief instead. The fact that we don't suggests that we regard our luxuries as more important than their lives.

Why do we allow people to starve when we could save them? Few of us actually believe our luxuries are that important. Most of us, if asked the question directly, would probably be a bit embarrassed, and we would say that we probably should do more to help. The explanation of why we do not is, at least in part, that we hardly ever think of the problem. Living our own comfortable lives, we are insulated from it. The starving people are dying at some distance from us; we do not see them and we

can avoid even thinking of them. When we do think of them, it is only abstractly, as statistics. Unfortunately for the hungry, statistics do not have much power to move us.

We respond differently when there is a "crisis," when a great mass of people in one place are starving, as in Ethiopia in 1984 or Somalia in 1992. Then, it is front-page news and relief efforts are mobilized. But when the needy are scattered, the situation does not seem so pressing. The 5,475,000 children are unfortunate that they are not all gathered in, say, Chicago.

But leaving aside the question of why we behave as we do, what is our duty? What *should* we do? We might think of this as the "commonsense" view of the matter: Morality requires that we balance our own interests against the interests of others. It is understandable, of course, that we look out for our own interests, and no one can be faulted for attending to their own basic needs. But at the same time the needs of others are also important, and when we can help others—especially at little cost to ourselves—we should do so. So, if you have an extra 10 dollars, and giving it to a famine-relief agency would help to save the life of a child, then commonsense morality would say that you should give the money.

This way of thinking involves a general assumption about our moral duties: It is assumed that we have moral duties to other people, and not merely duties that we create, such as by making a promise or incurring a debt. We have "natural" duties to others *simply because they are people who could be helped or harmed by what we do.* If a certain action would benefit (or harm) other people, then that is a reason why we should (or should not) do that action. The commonsense assumption is that other people's interests *count,* for their own sakes, from a moral point of view.

But one person's common sense is another person's naive platitude. Some thinkers have maintained that, in fact, we have no "natural" duties to other people. Ethical Egoism is the idea that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. It is different from Psychological Egoism, which is a theory of human nature concerned with how people *do* behave. Psychological Egoism says that people do in fact always pursue their own interests. Ethical Egoism, by contrast, is a normative theory—that is, a theory about how we *ought* to behave. Regardless of how we do behave, Ethical Egoism says that our only duty is to do what is best for ourselves.

It is a challenging theory. It contradicts some of our deepest moral beliefs—beliefs held by most of us, at any rate—and it is not easy to refute. We will examine the most important arguments for and against it. If it turns out to be true, then of course that is immensely important. But even if it turns out to be false, there is still much to be learned from examining it, for we may gain some insight into the reasons why we *do* have obligations to other people.

But before looking at the arguments, we should be a little clearer about exactly what this theory says and what it does not say. In the first place, Ethical Egoism does not say that one should promote one's own interests *as well as* the interests of others. That would be an ordinary, commonsensical view. Ethical Egoism is the radical view that one's *only* duty is to promote one's own interests. According to Ethical Egoism, there is only one ultimate principle of conduct, the principle of self-interest, and this principle sums up all of one's natural duties and obligations.

However, Ethical Egoism does not say that you should *avoid* actions that help others. It may happen in many instances that your interests coincide with the interests of others, so that in helping yourself you will be helping them willy-nilly. Or it may happen that aiding others is an effective means for creating some benefit for yourself. Ethical Egoism does not forbid such actions; in fact, it may recommend them. The theory insists only that in such cases the benefit to others is not what makes the act right. What makes the act right is, rather, the fact that it is to one's own advantage.

Finally, Ethical Egoism does not imply that in pursuing one's interests one ought always to do what one wants to do, or what gives one the most pleasure in the short run. Someone may want to drink a lot or smoke cigarettes or take drugs or waste his best years at the racetrack. Ethical Egoism would frown on all this, regardless of the momentary pleasure it brings. Ethical Egoism says that a person ought to do what really is in his or her own best interests, over the long run. It endorses selfishness, but it doesn't endorse foolishness.

6.2. Three Arguments in Favor of Ethical Egoism

What arguments can be advanced to support this doctrine? Unfortunately, the theory is asserted more often than it is argued

for—many of its supporters apparently think its truth is self-evident, so that arguments are not needed. When it is argued for, three lines of reasoning are most commonly used.

The Argument That Altruism Is Self-Defeating. The first argument has several variations, each suggesting the same general point:

- Each of us is intimately familiar with our own individual wants and needs. Moreover, each of us is uniquely placed to pursue those wants and needs effectively. At the same time, we know the desires and needs of other people only imperfectly, and we are not well situated to pursue them. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that if we set out to be "our brother's keeper," we would often bungle the job and end up doing more harm than good.
- At the same time, the policy of "looking out for others" is an offensive intrusion into other people's privacy; it is essentially a policy of minding other people's business.
- Making other people the object of one's "charity" is degrading to them; it robs them of their individual dignity and self-respect. The offer of charity says, in effect, that they are not competent to care for themselves; and the statement is self-fulfilling. They cease to be self-reliant and become passively dependent on others. That is why the recipients of "charity" are so often resentful rather than appreciative.

Thus, the policy of "looking out for others" is said to be self-defeating. If we want to do what is best for people, we should not adopt so-called altruistic policies of behavior. On the contrary, if each person looks after his or her own interests, it is more likely that everyone will be better off. As Robert G. Olson says in his book *The Morality of Self-Interest* (1965), "The individual is most likely to contribute to social betterment by rationally pursuing his own best long-range interests." Or as Alexander Pope put it,

> Thus God and nature formed the general frame
> And bade self-love and social be the same.

It is possible to quarrel with this argument on a number of grounds. Of course no one favors bungling, butting in, or

depriving people of their self-respect. But is that really what we are doing when we feed hungry children? Is the starving child in Somalia really harmed when we "intrude" into "her business" by supplying food? It hardly seems likely. Yet we can set this point aside, for considered as an argument for Ethical Egoism, this way of thinking has an even more serious defect.

The trouble is that it isn't really an argument for Ethical Egoism at all. The argument concludes that we should adopt certain policies of behavior; and on the surface they appear to be egoistic policies. However, the *reason* it is said we should adopt those policies is decidedly unegoistic. It is said that we should adopt those policies because doing so will promote the "betterment of society"—but according to Ethical Egoism, that is something we should not be concerned about. Spelled out fully, with everything laid on the table, the argument says:

(1) We ought to do whatever will best promote everyone's interests.

(2) The best way to promote everyone's interests is for each of us to adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.

(3) Therefore, each of us should adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.

If we accept this reasoning, then we are not Ethical Egoists. Even though we might end up behaving like egoists, our ultimate principle is one of beneficence—we are doing what we think will help everyone, not merely what we think will benefit ourselves. Rather than being egoists, we turn out to be altruists with a peculiar view of what in fact promotes the general welfare.

Ayn Rand's Argument. Ayn Rand is not much read by philosophers, largely because the leading ideas associated with her name—that capitalism is a morally superior economic system, and that morality demands absolute respect for the rights of individuals—are developed more rigorously by other writers. Nevertheless, she was a charismatic figure who attracted a devoted following during her lifetime, and today, two decades after her death, the Ayn Rand industry is still going strong. Among 20th-century writers, the idea of Ethical Egoism is probably more closely associated with her than with anyone else.

Ayn Rand regarded the ethics of "altruism" as a totally destructive idea, both in society as a whole and in the lives of individuals taken in by it. Altruism, to her way of thinking, leads to a denial of the value of the individual. It says to a person: Your life is merely something that may be sacrificed. "If a man accepts the ethics of altruism," she writes, "his first concern is not how to live his life, but how to sacrifice it." Those who promote the ethics of altruism are beneath contempt—they are parasites who, rather than working to build and sustain their own lives, leech off those who do. She writes:

> Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being—nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protections, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism.

By "sacrificing one's life" Rand does not mean anything so dramatic as dying. A person's life consists, in part, of projects undertaken and goods earned and created. Thus to demand that a person abandon his projects or give up his goods is an effort to "sacrifice his life."

Rand also suggests that there is a metaphysical basis for egoistic ethics. Somehow, it is the only ethics that takes seriously the *reality* of the individual person. She bemoans "the enormity of the extent to which altruism erodes men's capacity to grasp . . . the value of an individual life; it reveals a mind from which the reality of a human being has been wiped out."

What, then, of the hungry children? It might be argued that Ethical Egoism itself "reveals a mind from which the reality of a human being has been wiped out"—namely, the human being who is starving. But Rand quotes with approval the answer given by one of her followers: "Once, when Barbara Brandon was asked by a student: 'What will happen to the poor . . . ?' she answered: 'If *you* want to help them, you will not be stopped.' "

All these remarks are, I think, part of one continuous argument that can be summarized like this:

(1) A person has only one life to live. If we value the individual—that is, if the individual has moral worth—then we must agree that this life is of supreme importance. After all, it is all one has, and all one is.

(2) The ethics of altruism regards the life of the individual as something one must be ready to sacrifice for the good of others. Therefore, the ethics of altruism does not take seriously the value of the human individual.

(3) Ethical Egoism, which allows each person to view his or her own life as being of ultimate value, does take the human individual seriously—it is, in fact, the only philosophy that does so.

(4) Thus, Ethical Egoism is the philosophy that we ought to accept.

One problem with this argument, as you may already have noticed, is that it assumes we have only two choices: Either we accept the "ethics of altruism" or we accept Ethical Egoism. The choice is then made to look obvious by picturing "the ethics of altruism" as an insane doctrine that only an idiot would accept—"the ethics of altruism" is said to be the view that one's own interests have *no* value, and that one must be ready to sacrifice oneself *totally* any time *anybody* asks it. If this is the alternative, then any other view, including Ethical Egoism, will look good by comparison.

But that is hardly a fair picture of the choices. What we called the commonsense view stands between the two extremes. It says that one's own interests and the interests of others are *both* important and must be balanced against one another. Sometimes, when the balancing is done, it will turn out that one should act in the interests of others; at other times, it will turn out that one should take care for oneself. So even if we should reject the extreme "ethics of altruism," it does not follow that we must accept the other extreme of Ethical Egoism, because there is a middle way available.

Ethical Egoism as Compatible with Commonsense Morality. The third line of reasoning takes a different sort of approach. Ethical Egoism is usually presented as a *revisionist* moral philosophy, that is, as a philosophy that says our commonsense moral views are mistaken and need to be changed. It is possible, however, to interpret Ethical Egoism in a much less radical way, as a theory that accepts commonsense morality and offers a surprising account of its basis.

The less radical interpretation goes as follows. Ordinary morality consists in obeying certain rules. We must avoid doing harm to others, speak the truth, keep our promises, and so on. At first glance, these duties appear to have little in common—they are just a bunch of separate rules. Yet from a theoretical point of view, we may wonder whether there is not some hidden unity underlying the hodgepodge of separate duties. Perhaps there is some small number of fundamental principles that explain all the rest, just as in physics there are basic principles that bring together and explain diverse phenomena. From a theoretical point of view, the smaller the number of basic principles, the better. Best of all would be one fundamental principle, from which all the rest could be derived. Ethical Egoism, then, would be the theory that all these duties are ultimately derived from the one fundamental principle of self-interest.

Understood in this way, Ethical Egoism is not such a radical doctrine. It does not challenge commonsense morality; it only tries to explain and systematize it. And it does a surprisingly successful job. It can provide plausible explanations of the duties mentioned above, and more:

- *The duty not to harm others:* If we make a habit of doing things that are harmful to other people, people will not be reluctant to do things that harm us. We will be shunned and despised; others will not have us as friends and will not do us favors when we need them. If our offenses against others are serious enough, we may even end up in jail. Thus it is to our own advantage to avoid harming others.
- *The duty not to lie:* If we lie to other people, we will suffer all the ill effects of a bad reputation. People will distrust us and avoid doing business with us. We will often need for people to be honest with us, but we can hardly expect them to feel much of an obligation to be honest with us if we have not been honest with them. Thus it is to our own advantage to be truthful.
- *The duty to keep our promises:* It is to our own advantage to enter into mutually beneficial arrangements with other people. To benefit from those arrangements, we need to be able to rely on them to keep their bargains—we need to be able to rely on them to keep their promises to us.

> But we can hardly expect others to keep their promises to us if we do not keep our promises to them. Therefore, from the point of view of self-interest, we should keep our promises.

Pursuing this line of reasoning, Thomas Hobbes suggested that the principle of Ethical Egoism leads to nothing less than the Golden Rule: We should "do unto others" because if we do, others will be more likely to "do unto us."

Does this argument succeed in establishing Ethical Egoism as a viable theory of morality? It is, in my opinion at least, the best try. But there are two serious problems with it. In the first place, the argument does not prove quite as much as it needs to prove. At best, it shows only that *mostly* it is to one's advantage to avoid harming others. It does not show that this is *always* to one's advantage. And it could not show that, for even though it may usually be to your advantage to avoid harming others, sometimes it is not. Sometimes you can gain from treating another person badly. In that case, the obligation not to harm the other person could not be derived from the principle of Ethical Egoism. Thus it appears that not all our moral obligations can be explained as derivable from self-interest.

But set that point aside. There is a still more fundamental problem. Suppose it is true that, say, contributing money for famine relief is somehow to one's own advantage. It does not follow that this is the only reason, or even the most basic reason, why doing so is a good thing. For example, the most basic reason might be *in order to help the starving people.* The fact that doing so is also to one's own advantage might be only a secondary, less important consideration. Thus, although Ethical Egoism says that self-interest is the *only* reason why you should help others, nothing in the present argument really supports that.

6.3. Three Arguments against Ethical Egoism

Ethical Egoism haunts moral philosophy. It is not a popular doctrine; the most important philosophers have rejected it outright. But it has never been very far from their minds. Although no thinker of consequence has defended it, almost everyone has felt it necessary to explain why he was rejecting it, as though the very possibility that it might be correct was hanging in the air, threatening to smother their other ideas. As the merits of

the various "refutations" have been debated, philosophers have returned to it again and again.

Curiously, philosophers have not paid much attention to what you might think is the most obvious argument against Ethical Egoism, namely that it would endorse wicked actions—provided, of course, that those actions benefit the person who does them. Here are some examples, taken from various newspapers: To increase his profits, a pharmacist filled prescriptions for cancer-patients using watered-down drugs. A nurse raped two patients while they were unconscious. A paramedic gave emergency patients injections of sterile water rather than morphine, so that he could sell the morphine. Parents fed a baby acid so that they could fake a lawsuit, claiming the baby's formula was tainted. A 13-year-old girl was kidnapped by a neighbor and kept shackled in an underground bomb-shelter for 181 days, while she was sexually abused.

Suppose that, by doing such things, someone could actually gain some benefit for himself. Of course, this means that he would have to avoid being caught. But if he could get away with it, wouldn't Ethical Egoism have to say that such actions are permissible? This seems enough by itself to discredit the doctrine. I believe this is a valid complaint; nonetheless, one might think that it begs the question against Ethical Egoism, because in saying that these actions are wicked, we are appealing to a nonegoistic conception of wickedness. So we might ask if there isn't some further problem with Ethical Egoism, that doesn't beg the question.

Thus, some philosophers have tried to show that there are deeper, logical problems with Ethical Egoism. The following arguments are typical of the refutations they have proposed.

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Cannot Handle Conflicts of Interest. In his book *The Moral Point of View* (1958), Kurt Baier argues that Ethical Egoism cannot be correct because it cannot provide solutions for conflicts of interest. We need moral rules, he says, only because our interests sometimes come into conflict—if they never conflicted, then there would be no problems to solve and hence no need for the kind of guidance that morality provides. But Ethical Egoism does not help to resolve conflicts of interest; it only exacerbates them. Baier argues for this by introducing a fanciful example:

> Let B and K be candidates for the presidency of a certain country and let it be granted that it is in the interest of either to be elected, but that only one can succeed. It would then be in the interest of B but against the interest of K if B were elected, and vice versa, and therefore in the interest of B but against the interest of K if K were liquidated, and vice versa. But from this it would follow that B ought to liquidate K, that it is wrong for B not to do so, that B has not "done his duty" until he has liquidated K; and vice versa. Similarly K, knowing that his own liquidation is in the interest of B and therefore, anticipating B's attempts to secure it, ought to take steps to foil B's endeavors. It would be wrong for him not to do so. He would "not have done his duty" until he had made sure of stopping B . . .
>
> This is obviously absurd. For morality is designed to apply in just such cases, namely, those where interests conflict. But if the point of view of morality were that of self-interest, then there could never be moral solutions of conflicts of interest.

Does this argument prove that Ethical Egoism is unacceptable? It does, *if* the conception of morality to which it appeals is accepted. The argument assumes that an adequate morality must provide solutions for conflicts of interest in such a way that everyone concerned can live together harmoniously. The conflict between B and K, for example, should be resolved so that they would no longer be at odds with one another. (One would not then have a duty to do something that the other has a duty to prevent.) Ethical Egoism does not do that, and if you think an ethical theory should, then you will not find Ethical Egoism acceptable.

But a defender of Ethical Egoism might reply that he does not accept this conception of morality. For him, life is essentially a long series of conflicts in which each person is struggling to come out on top; and the principle he accepts—the principle of Ethical Egoism—grants to each person the right to do his or her best to win. On this view, the moralist is not like a courtroom judge, who resolves disputes. Instead, he is like the Commissioner of Boxing, who urges each fighter to do his best. So the conflict between B and K will be "resolved" not by the application of an ethical principle but by one or the other of them winning the struggle. The egoist will not be embarrassed by this. On the contrary, he will think it is no more than a realistic view of the nature of things.

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Is Logically Inconsistent. Some philosophers, including Baier, have leveled an even more serious charge against Ethical Egoism. They have argued that it leads to logical contradictions. If this is true, then Ethical Egoism is indeed a mistaken theory, for no theory can be true if it is self-contradictory.

Consider B and K again. As Baier explains their predicament, it is in B's interest to kill K, and obviously it is in K's interest to prevent it. But, Baier says,

> if K prevents B from liquidating him, his act must be said to be both wrong and not wrong—wrong because it is the prevention of what B ought to do, his duty, and wrong for B not to do it; not wrong because it is what K ought to do, his duty, and wrong for K not to do it. But one and the same act (logically) cannot be both morally wrong and not morally wrong.

Now, does *this* argument prove that Ethical Egoism is unacceptable? At first glance it seems persuasive. However, it is a complicated argument, so we need to set it out with each step individually identified. Then we will be in a better position to evaluate it. Spelled out fully, it looks like this:

(1) Suppose it is each person's duty to do what is in his own best interests.

(2) It is in B's best interest to liquidate K.

(3) It is in K's best interest to prevent B from liquidating him.

(4) Therefore B's duty is to liquidate K, and K's duty is to prevent B from doing it.

(5) But it is wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty.

(6) Therefore it is wrong for K to prevent B from liquidating him.

(7) Therefore it is both wrong and not wrong for K to prevent B from liquidating him.

(8) But no act can be both wrong and not wrong; that is a self-contradiction.

(9) Therefore, the assumption with which we started—that it is each person's duty to do what is in his own best interests—cannot be true.

When the argument is set out in this way, we can see its hidden flaw. The logical contradiction—that it is both wrong and not wrong for K to prevent B from liquidating him—does not follow simply from the principle of Ethical Egoism. It follows from that principle *together with* the additional premise expressed in step (5), namely, that "it is wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty." Thus we are not compelled by the logic of the argument to reject Ethical Egoism. Instead, we could simply reject this additional premise, and the contradiction would be avoided. That is surely what the ethical egoist would do, for the ethical egoist would never say, without qualification, that it is always wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty. He would say, instead, that whether one ought to prevent someone from doing his duty depends entirely on whether it would be to one's own advantage to do so. Regardless of whether we think this is a correct view, it is, at the very least, a consistent view, and so this attempt to convict the egoist of self-contradiction fails.

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Is Unacceptably Arbitrary. Finally, we come to the argument that I think comes closest to an outright refutation of Ethical Egoism. It is also the most interesting of the arguments, because it provides some insight into why the interests of other people *should* matter to us. But before presenting this argument, we need to look briefly at a general point about moral values. So let us set Ethical Egoism aside for a moment and consider this related matter.

There is a whole family of moral views that have this in common: They all involve dividing people into groups and saying that the interests of some groups count for more than the interests of other groups. Racism is the most conspicuous example; racism divides people into groups according to race and assigns greater importance to the interests of one race than to others. The practical result is that members of one race are treated better than the others. Anti-Semitism works the same way, and so can nationalism. People in the grip of such views will think, in effect: "*My* race counts for more," or "Those who believe in *my* religion count for more," or "*My* country counts for more," and so on.

Can such views be defended? The people who accept such views are usually not much interested in argument—racists, for example, rarely try to offer rational grounds for their beliefs. But suppose they did. What could they say?

There is a general principle that stands in the way of any such defense, namely: *We can justify treating people differently only if we can show that there is some factual difference between them that is relevant to justifying the difference in treatment.* For example, if one person is admitted to law school while another is rejected, this might be justified by pointing out that the first graduated from college with honors and scored well on the admissions test, while the second dropped out of college and never took the test. However, if both graduated with honors and did well on the entrance examination—if they are in all relevant respects equally well qualified—then it is merely arbitrary to admit one but not the other.

So, we must ask: Can a racist point to any differences between, say, white people and black people that would justify treating them differently? In the past, racists have sometimes attempted to do this by picturing blacks as stupid, lacking in ambition, and the like. If this were true, then it might justify treating them differently, in at least some circumstances. (This is the deep purpose of racist stereotypes, to provide the "relevant differences" needed to justify differences in treatment.) But of course it is not true, and in fact there are no such general differences between the races. Thus racism is an arbitrary doctrine, in that it advocates treating people differently even though there are no differences between them to justify it.

Ethical Egoism is a moral theory of the same type. It advocates that each of us divide the world into two categories of people—ourselves and all the rest—and that we regard the interests of those in the first group as more important than the interests of those in the second group. But each of us can ask, what is the difference between me and everyone else that justifies placing myself in this special category? Am I more intelligent? Do I enjoy my life more? Are my accomplishments greater? Do I have needs or abilities that are so different from the needs or abilities of others? In short, *what makes me so special?* Failing an answer, it turns out that Ethical Egoism is an arbitrary doctrine, in the same way that racism is arbitrary. And this, in addition to explaining why Ethical Egoism is unacceptable, also sheds some light on the question of why we should care about others.

We should care about the interests of other people for the same reason we care about our own interests; for their needs and desires are comparable to our own. Consider, one last time,

the starving children we could feed by giving up some of our luxuries. Why should we care about them? We care about ourselves, of course—if we were starving, we would go to almost any lengths to get food. But what is the difference between us and them? Does hunger affect them any less? Are they somehow less deserving than we? If we can find no relevant difference between us and them, then we must admit that if our needs should be met, so should theirs. It is this realization, that we are on a par with one another, that is the deepest reason why our morality must include some recognition of the needs of others, and why, then, Ethical Egoism fails as a moral theory.