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A Defense of Psychological Egoism

Scott Berman

Plato and others may be right in holding that a regard for the rights of others never in the long run involves a loss of happiness for the agent, that "the just life profits a man." But this, even if true, is irrelevant to the rightness of the act. As soon as a man does an action because he thinks he will promote his own interests thereby, he is acting not from a sense of rightness but from self-interest. [Ross (1930)].

I argue that psychological egoism is the best explanation for human action. The view I defend is that given the truth about human psychology and how particular actions are produced by human beings, all humans are ultimately the same with respect to their intentions or motives for doing what they do. Therefore, we cannot, as Ross thinks, make a moral differentiation based upon the agent's intention. What I

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1 This view was first argued for by the Socrates in the early dialogues of Plato. I am thinking of, for example, Plato's Hippasus Minor 376b; Plato's Protagoras 358cd; Plato's Euthydemus 278e (with 280b and 282a); Plato's Gorgias 466a-468e; and Plato's Meno 77b-78b.

2 Jan Narveson, in personal correspondence, objects to this inference. He writes: 'But there could still be a subset of agent's intentions which are moral intentions, even if what makes them moral isn't that they aim at something not related to the agent's own good. Suppose that being moral is good for us, but good in a different way, for different reasons: e.g., good as a policy rather than as result-producer independently of the moral situation. - The point is, the collapse of morality into general prudence doesn't follow straight off from the acceptance of some sort of psychological egoism.' I remain unconvinced. As long as all of the agent's intentions are interconnected and hierarchically ordered toward the agent's own good, these intermediate intentions get their identity from the larger structure of which they are a part. Therefore, morality does collapse into general prudence if psychological egoism is true. The aim of this paper is to argue that all of our intentions are interconnected and hierarchically ordered toward the agent's own good.
argue is that the only motive each person ultimately has for doing some action is that each person thinks that the action will be, all things considered, prudentially best. In other words, everyone does whatever he or she thinks will ultimately bring about the best consequences for him or herself. If psychological egoism is true, then it will be impossible for any action or agent to be evaluated differently from any other action or agent in virtue of the agent’s intention or motive because every action will be motivated ultimately by the same thing, namely, the agent’s own self-interest. In that case, Ross’s complaint about Plato (and Socrates) would presuppose a false theory about human motivation. I propose to defend psychological egoism indirectly by arguing that any other view concerning the nature of human motivation is false.

The opponent to psychological egoism as a sufficient explanation of all human action is committed to the possibility that someone could want something that is not ultimately for the sake of her own happiness. There are two possibilities here. First, our opponent might think that a human could want some external object just for its own sake, that is, ultimately, and not also for the sake of her own happiness. This is the view defended by Plato in Book IV of the Republic and Bishop Butler in ‘Sermon XI’ and it is assumed by many if not most contemporary philosophers of mind and moral philosophers. Second, our opponent might think that a human could want to achieve a plurality of values which are incommensurable, that is, a human could want to achieve her own happiness for its own sake as well as some other values, e.g., justice and friendship and so forth, for their own sakes, and these other values are not themselves wanted ultimately for the sake of her own happiness. My strategy is to assume that psychological egoism is false and examine the explanation of human action that would be required by such an assumption. In other words, assuming psychological egoism to be false, could either of the two alternatives outlined above demonstrate a plausible theory of human action?

In order to argue that neither is plausible, I shall make use of an account, defended by Terry Penner, of how beliefs and desires come together to produce particular actions. Penner argues, convincingly I think, that what Hampshire desires cannot, simply by occa- a human being to do a particular differentiates thought-indepen
desire in virtue of how their one hand, the motivational str stronger or weaker independent the desired object will be. One of a thought-independent desire good or bad the agent thinks a thought-independent desire on the agent believes the desired-dep defined an object to be not very, the agent believes the desired object is the explanation of his own happiness. The point is that the thought-indepen dent one, could never be the pr explanation of weakness of and then explain why those proximate causes of actions.

I enter the grocery store w then eat any bags of tortilla ch not be best for me, all things co chip display next to the brea tortilla chips. I then notice a stronger as I get closer. I am a where the explanandum occu and start eating. This is a typ best being overcome by a pass is: how did this craving for tor the action which brought the

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3 Even a Kantian like Nagel sees that such a problem needs to be avoided. See his 1991, passion.

4 See his 1990.

5 I am simplifying Penner’s argu- paper is his account of how pat 1971.
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think, that what Hampshire (1965, 46-7) calls thought-independent
desires cannot, simply by occurring simultaneously with a belief, move
a human being todo a particular action. Following Santas (1966), Penner
differentiates thought-independent desires from thought-dependent
desires in virtue of how their motivational strength changes. On the
one hand, the motivational strength of a thought-independent desire gets
stronger or weaker independently of how good or bad the agent thinks
the desired object will be. On the other hand, the motivational strength
of a thought-dependent desire gets stronger or weaker depending on how
good or bad the agent thinks the desired object will be. For example, a
thought-independent desire can be motivationally strong even though
the agent believes the desired object to be very bad whereas a thought-
dependent desire is motivationally weak when the agent believes the
desired object to be not very good and is motivationally strong when
the agent believes the desired object to be very good. Penner then argues
that Plato's explanation in Republic IV of weakness of will depends upon
a conflict of two sorts of desires, one thought-dependent and the other
thought-independent.5 The problem with there really being a conflict
here is that the thought-independent desire, unlike the thought-depen-
dent one, could never be the proximate cause of an action. Hence, as an
explanation of weakness of will, it fails. Let me give an example first
and then explain why thought-independent desires cannot be the
proximate causes of actions.

I enter the grocery store with the strong desire that I not buy and
then eat any bags of tortilla chips because I know that such a thing will
not be best for me, all things considered. But then, I notice an attractive
chip display next to the bread aisle containing several large bags of
tortilla chips. I then notice a craving in my body for them. It gets
stronger as I get closer. I am about to pass the display, when, and here's
where the explanandum occurs, I reach over and grab one of the bags
and start eating. This is a typical example of the knowledge of what is
best being overcome by a passion to do the opposite. Now the question
is: how did this craving for tortilla chips make my arm and hand perform
the action which brought the bag to my shopping cart? It is not enough

5 I am simplifying Penner's argument in his 1990 here because all I want out of that
paper is his account of how particular actions are produced in humans. See also his
1971.
of an explanation to say that it occurred simultaneously with a belief concerning the location of the tortilla chips. Pointing to those two psychological states is explanatorily insufficient because it does not tell you why just those two states get acted on and no other belief-desire pairs which also occur simultaneously with that first pair of states. Moreover, it is explanatorily insufficient to say that the craving for tortilla chips is a proximate cause of the reaching behavior. Why? Because pointing to that craving has to explain this reaching behavior for these tortilla chips and not just any tortilla chips. If not, then why do I reach over to just these tortilla chips instead of some other bag of tortilla chips further away in the chip aisle? The answer is that I think that the best way to satisfy this craving for tortilla chips is to eat these tortilla chips right here in front of me and not these farther away and then this belief is integrated with an initially indefinite thought-dependent desire to do whatever is best. The result of this integration is a thought-dependent desire to eat these tortilla chips and not those farther away. And this desire is what explains my eating these tortilla chips rather than those. In other words, any desire which is capable of bringing me all the way to action will have to be integrated with my beliefs, and so, have to be a thought-dependent desire. The problem with thought-independent desires, then, is that they cannot be integrated with my beliefs at all. If they could, they would not be thought-independent. But since they cannot, they could never function as the proximate causes of particular actions, that is, doing this rather than that.

Penner (1990, 60) hypothesizes that there is some sort of ‘substitution device’ which substitutes my belief about the best way to satisfy the craving, namely, a belief that it would be best to reach over to these tortilla chips, etc., into an initially indefinite thought-dependent desire to do whatever is best, and further that it is this integration which produces a desire to eat these tortilla chips. His argument, in its full details, seems to me to be sufficient for refuting one kind of attack on psychological egoism, namely, Bishop Butler’s Plato-inspired argument to the effect that some particular actions are produced by thought-independent desires. Hence, it is wrong to suppose that a human could want some external object just for its own sake because in order for a human to want some particular external object at all, she must be able to integrate her beliefs about what’s best given her circumstances into an initially indefinite thought-dependent desire for what’s best given her circumstances. This is not to deny that thought-independent desires exist. They do exist, but they can’t bring a human all the way to action. All they can do is initiate her cognitive faculties to discover the best way to satisfy that thought-independent desire. Whether she thinks it be desire depends upon an all-things-considered thinking whether to satisfy that thought-independent desire is not what she thinks would not satisfy it. However, if considered, then she will satisfy to be the best option, all thin this, the one who thinks the external object just for its own sake, namely, that a thought-independent external object as its aim.

However, someone might someone might agree ‘with th desires cannot, of themselves, ing’ ‘But,’ on the other hand, moved toward those objects are not, as such, either descrip- or descriptions involving ology. Is this impossible? I don’t a human want some external that very object, and so not no connection to the agent’s kind of thing worth pursuing.

I think that it is not possible for someone to want some particular thing, one’s into that former desire. After all, of particular objects come to one’s percept could do the require- mine what the percept is. For given the agent’s background perception of a bag of tortilla stimuli coming in all the rum
simultaneously with a belief.

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to satisfy that thought-independent desire, given her circumstances.
But whether she thinks it best to satisfy that thought-independent desire depends upon an all-things-considered judgment. That is, consid-
ering whether to satisfy that thought-independent desire or not is part of
the ultimate aim of all humans, that is, a desire for what is best, all things
considered. It may turn out that satisfying that thought-independent desire is not what she thinks is best, all things considered. And so, she
will not satisfy it. However, if it is what she thinks is best, all things
considered, then she will satisfy it. It all depends upon what she judges
to be the best option, all things considered. Therefore, our first oppo-
nent, the one who thinks that a human can want some particular
external object just for its own sake presupposes what is impossible,
namely, that a thought-independent desire can have some particular
external object as its aim.

However, someone might object to my inference. On the one hand
someone might agree with the general point, that thought-independent
desires cannot, of themselves, motivate any action at all, properly speak-
ing. 'But,' on the other hand, 'the question is whether we could be
moved toward those objects just in virtue of certain descriptions that
are not, as such, either descriptions including a prediction of, say, pleasure,
or descriptions involving the use of explicitly normative terminology.
Is this impossible? I don't quite see why not.' In other words, could
a human want some external object dependent on some thought about
that very object, and so not just that kind of object, but which includes
no connection to the agent's own good either via pleasure or any other
kind of thing worth pursuing? This objector thinks that it is possible.

I think that it is not possible because in order for some initially
indefinite desire for something or other to become a definite desire for
some particular thing, one's reason has to figure out what to substitute
into that former desire. After all, where else would these descriptions
of particular objects come from if not from one's reason? Surely no
percept could do the required substitution without being able to deter-
mine what the percept is. For example, the agent's reason determines,
given the agent's background theories, that this visual stimulus is a
perception of a bag of tortilla chips. But then, there are lots of visual
stimuli coming in all the time and the agent's reason is figuring out what

6 The objection that follows is from personal correspondence with Jan Narveson.
all these stimuli are and determining which are relevant and which are not. But the agent’s reason has to have some kind of ordering principle or criterion for doing the sorting. My hypothesis here is that the ordering principle or criterion is ‘whatever is best for the agent given the circumstances’. It is that principle or criterion which guides the agent’s reason in its sorting process. (Of course, if there are many principles or criteria, then the agent’s reason will need to process along several distinct lines. However, if this is what our objector is thinking, then I argue against this possibility forthwith.) In sum, my reply to our objector here is that whatever description we acted on could only have been acted on in virtue of the fact that the description was connected up with the agent’s own good.

The other kind of attack on psychological egoism focuses on the ultimate criterion for action, that is, the ‘substitution device’. Penner writes:

For Socrates, Aristotle and the modern decision theorist, there is only one such substitution device. ... On the other hand, some modern philosophers have (in effect) asserted not only that there is a plurality of such substitution devices — prudential good, moral good, pleasure, honor, and so forth — but also that there is no one substitution device by means of which all the different desiderata can be assessed against each other. At this level of generality, one must, as to the existentilists say, just choose. Our ultimate values are incommensurable. (61, n 23; italics in original)

However, I want to push this further than Penner wants to, and argue that such a claim about our ultimate values is false, or at least had better be false. That is, I shall argue that our ultimate values are, or had better be, commensurable and hence that there is plausibly only one ultimate substitution device.

My argument is a reductio ad absurdum of the claim that our ultimate values are plural and incommensurable. Suppose for the moment, then, that the incommensurability thesis is true. Suppose that there is no common ‘currency’ or ‘scale’ certain values which are ex hypo a person actually succeed in di action when each course has values which are themselves int arrive at an all-things-consider courses of action is best because or ‘criterion’ for deciding whether we can have a reason and we can have a reason for d could never have a reason for di because, ex hypothesi, there is n could compare value X to val allegedly resultant ‘choice’ from reflex actions or a miracle. The as an explanation of such action argument is directed against ers. Reluctance to embrace obvious. Let me say why.

The explanation of the doing a pari with reflex actions has the are the result of some previous and my leg rises reflexively, what point to as the cause of my doi considered judgment about wh

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7 Penner disagrees with the argument that follows, though not the conclusion. However, I do not know what his own argument is.

8 Besides those referred to in note 12 below, I think that Kant held this view also. See, for example, his 1984, 16-17 and esp. the note on pp. 17-18 where he says that

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9 Rawls’s ‘intuitionism’ is a third the vague idea presented in his essay without argument that the what I argue for in this paper.

10 I think it is arguable that no one not argue this here. There is an a blackboard with equations on physicists tells the other one it’s in the center of the board, between occur’, Appeals to miracles pro provide placeholders for such dis
ich are relevant and which are some kind of ordering principle. Hypothesis here is that the ver is best for the agent given or criterion which guides the. Of course, if there are many person will need to process along what our objector is thinking, with.) In sum, my reply to our u we acted on could only have de description was connected up

 logical egoism focuses on the substitution device. Penner

an decision theorist, there is only a the other hand, some modern d not only that there is a plurality ential good, moral good, pleasure, there is no one substitution device desiderata can be assessed against y, one must, as the existentialists s are incommensurable. (61, n 23;

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I think that Kant held this view also. note on pp. 17-18 where he says that

common 'currency' or 'scale' or 'criterion' for adjudicating between certain values which are ex hypothesi incommensurable. How, then, does a person actually succeed in doing one of two incompatible courses of action when each course has been deemed 'best' from two different values which are themselves incommensurable? Ex hypothesi, we cannot arrive at an all-things-considered judgment as to which of these two courses of action is best because there is no common 'currency' or 'scale' or 'criterion' for deciding which is 'better' than the other. Hence, although we can have a reason for doing this action (relative to value X) and we can have a reason for doing that action (relative to value Y), we could never have a reason for doing this action as opposed to that action because, ex hypothesi, there is no further value Z in virtue of which we could compare value X to value Y. And without such a reason, the allegedly resultant 'choice' from this situation is either on a par with reflex actions or a miracle. The reluctance to embrace the latter disjunct as an explanation of such actions is obvious — at least from those this argument is directed against, namely, the incommensurability theorists. Reluctance to embrace the former, though, might not be as obvious. Let me say why.

The explanation of the doing of this as opposed to that by placing it on a par with reflex actions has the following problem. Since reflex actions are the result of some previous cause, e.g., the doctor strikes my knee and my leg rises reflexively, what can the incommensurability theorist point to as the cause of my doing this as opposed to that? An all-things-considered judgment about what would be best to do in this situation

9 Rawls's 'intuitionism' is a third possibility only if he can supply much more than the vague idea presented in his 1971, 34-45. So far as I can see, Rawls has just asserted without argument that this is a viable option which is not itself reducible to what I argue for in this paper.

10 I think it is arguable that no one should embrace such an 'explanation' but I shall not argue this here. There is an apt cartoon by Sydney Harris of two physicists at a blackboard with equations on the left and equations on the right. One of the physicists tells the other one that he needs to be 'more explicit here in step two'. In the center of the board, between the two sets of equations reads: 'Then a miracle occurs'. Appeals to miracles provide no explanation at all but (hopefully!) merely provide placeholders for such discoveries.
is out of the question. How about habit? That looks promising. The person has been habituated since early on to do the moral course of action, say, as opposed to the prudential course whenever they conflict in a given situation. And so, when the situation arises, the person acts reflexively and does the moral act without having a reason for choosing it over the prudential act. Hence, though there is a cause of the action, the person has no reason for doing it. The 'choice' has become hardwired or instinct-like. However, how is it that we, the parents, are able to decide to inculcate the habit to do the moral act over the prudential act when they conflict if it is not for the fact that we think it better for our children to do so? And how is such a judgment possible if we cannot compare them? It is not.

The incommensurability theorist might respond to this objection by explaining that we inculcate these habits precisely because we ourselves have been habituated in such a way. We habituate our children reflexively, and, presumably, so on back through our ancestors forever. But this explanation is not plausible for two reasons. First, the explanation needs to pull itself up by its own bootstraps for the originator of this process. Hence, for this process to get itself off the ground, the unhabituated habituator must be able to compare the allegedly incommensurable values. But this contradicts our assumption that these values are incommensurable. And second, it makes it impossible for parents to choose to raise their children differently from how they themselves were raised. That is, it would be impossible, supposing incommensurability to be true, to decide against one's own conditioning in favor of something different for one's children. One could not have a reason for choosing to raise one's children to value X over Y when they conflict. Indeed, according to the incommensurability theorist, perhaps it is even wrong to say that one chooses to raise one's children this way as opposed to that way. It is all done mechanistically, as if by instinct. There is no choice involved at all.

Theorists who do not believe in Free Will on the grounds that everything we 'choose' to do is simply a result of our inherited genes and childhood conditioning will perhaps applaud such statements. However, so far as I can tell, inconveniences. In fact, they seem to be the view humans, more or less, and equal persons. He says:

Hence, it is vital that persons itself based upon reasoning. P's [the capacity for] a sense of amount of reasoning being able to (1) understand a public applies and when it does not basis. And with respect to situation of the good', again, the reasoning being appealed to I create such a conception, (2) it means-ends thinking in order a person to be free that their order for a person to be free, itself based upon a great deal of incommensurable values con reason from which to act. He, persons. Such a consequence

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11 Two courses of action conflict whenever one cannot simultaneously follow both of them given the way the world is. See Williams' excellent discussion of this in his 1973, 166-68, esp. 167-9.

12 Other incommensurability t...
ever, so far as I can tell, incommensurability theorists do not take that view. In fact, they seem to be committed to just the opposite. That is, they view humans, more or less, as Rawls (1985) does, namely, as 'free and equal persons.' He says:

Since we start within the tradition of democratic thought, we also think of citizens as free and equal persons. The basic intuitive idea is that in virtue of what we may call their moral powers, and the powers of reason, thought, and judgment connected with those powers, we say that persons are free. ... A sense of justice is the capacity to understand, to apply, and to act from the public conception of justice which characterizes the fair terms of social cooperation. The capacity for a conception of the good is the capacity to form, to revise, and rationally to pursue a conception of one's rational advantage, or good. (233; my italics)

Hence, it is vital that persons, who are free, act from a reason which is itself based upon reasoning. Actually, with respect to what Rawls calls 'the capacity for a sense of justice,' there is arguably an immense amount of reasoning being appealed to here in order for someone to be able to (1) understand a public conception of justice, (2) realize when it applies and when it does not, and (3) put all that together and act on that basis. And with respect to what Rawls calls 'the capacity for a conception of the good,' again, there is arguably an immense amount of reasoning being appealed to here in order for someone to be able to (1) create such a conception, (2) revise such a conception, and (3) engage in means-ends thinking in order to achieve it. Hence, it is not enough for a person to be free that their actions are caused, e.g., by habituation; in order for a person to be free, a person has to act from a reason which is itself based upon a great deal of reasoning. But in situations where incommensurable values conflict, there could be, ex hypothesi, no such reason from which to act. Hence such actions do not emanate from free persons. Such a consequence would not be warmly welcomed by incommu-

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12 Other incommensurability theorists who would agree with Rawls about the freedom of persons arguably include Nagel 1979; Williams 1991; Raz 1986, Chapter 13; Larmore 1987, Chapter 6; and Lukes 1989.

13 No habituation process could help someone with this. Someone who has been conditioned to respond in certain ways to certain stimuli still must be able to figure out when the appropriate stimuli are present.
measurability theorists for the reason that one could never freely choose to act morally when such actions conflict with prudential courses of action.

An example might help here. Bob discovers that, given his situation, he cannot do what is morally required and what is prudentially best at the same time. How is he to decide which course of action he should do here and now? If he is lucky, the incommensurability theorist explains, Bob has been habituated to do the former and not the latter course of action. Remember, though, that such an action could not have been chosen based upon any kind of reason. It ‘just happens’ as a result of Bob’s earlier conditioning. Hence, besides having a substitution device that produces moral actions and an irreducibly different substitution device that produces prudential actions, Bob also has, because of conditioning, a substitution device that produces moral actions whenever the previous two devices give conflicting answers. So, besides an initially indeﬁnite desire to do whatever is morally required, and an irreducibly different initially indeﬁnite desire to do whatever is prudentially best, Bob also has a third irreducibly different initially indeﬁnite desire to do whatever is morally required whenever the situation is such that he cannot do both what is morally required and what is prudentially best. Two questions:

First, if there is, ex hypothesi, no further criterion which can be appealed to in order to compare two incommensurable ultimate values, why describe Bob’s having the conditioning that he has as ‘lucky’? If there is no way to compare them, then strictly speaking, you cannot make any kind of evaluative statements like that. It is no more lucky than it is unlucky to have such a habit and likewise with having the habit to choose in favor of the prudential course of action. Moreover, neither habit could be better than the other and neither habit could be more rational than the other if there is no standard of comparison. And since the incommensurability theorist claims that there is no standard of comparison between certain ultimate values, it is not possible to say anything in favor of one habit over the other.14

And second, how can the Julie, say, sometimes act in a way that is paradoxical to Bob’s three initially indeﬁnite desires? For example, the desire to do whatever is morally required is such that she cannot do both morally required and prudentially good. In order for us to understand what Julie is doing, we need to know why Julie acts in this way. If we only knew that Julie has an indeﬁnite desire and why so, the incommensurability theorist is gone. But, such a desire is going to do better to the prudential act. And if such determinations are not made, then the alleged incommensurability of the two devices makes explanatory substitution device.

Once again, someone might say:

Well, here all you need, doesn’t work against the god’s moral propensi...
at one could never freely choose conflict with prudential courses of
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further criterion which can be ommensurable ultimate values, meaning that he has as 'lucky'. If
strictly speaking, you cannot s like that. It is no more lucky and likewise with having the
course of action. Moreover, ther and neither habit could be o standard of comparison. And
claims that there is no standard values, it is not possible to say ther

And second, how can the incommensurability theorist explain why
Julie, say, sometimes acts morally and sometimes acts prudentially
when in situations of conflict? It will not do to say that Julie has, besides
Bob's three initially indefinite and irreducible desires, a fourth which is the desire to do whatever is prudentially best whenever the situation is
such that she cannot do both whatever is prudentially best and what is morally required. In order for such an explanation to get off the ground,
we need to know why Julie sometimes particularizes the third initially indefinite desire and why sometimes the fourth. Obviously, the incommensurability theorist is going to have to appeal to a fifth such desire, but, such a desire is going to have to be able to determine when it is better to do the prudential act and when it is better to do the moral act.
And if such determinations are necessary to explain Julie's behavior, then the alleged incommensurability of these values falls apart. Therefore, it makes explanatory sense to say that there can be only one substitution device.

Once again, someone might object to the inference. Our objector might say:

Well, here all you need, in principle, are demand curves. The argument doesn't work against this. Suppose we are egoists and we have nonegoistic moral propensities. At the moment of decision, we choose one or the other. At other moments of decision we also choose one or the other. We plot the curves for the two and come up with our utility function on prudence/morality: how much morality are we willing to trade for how much prudence, and vice versa? We can draw such a curve without thereby conceding that the person must be finding some one thing in common to the two (that was one of the things wrong

there is no comparison between these two teams and by that you have in mind not that you could not compare them, but that you could compare them and that such comparisons would be pointless because the 'Dream Team' is much better than the philosopher's team. So, don't bother comparing them. Such could also be the case when Taylor says that justice is incommensurably higher than money. You could compare them, say with respect to how important they are for human flourishing, but why bother, because the former is much more important than the latter. I do not know what Taylor's response to this would be.

15 Again, this is Jan Narveson.
with Marx's argument for the Labor Theory of Value at the beginning of *Capital*).

My response to this is that our objector begs the question. What I have argued is that if we *can* make those choices, then what we are doing is comparing them by one standard. But our objector might predict my reply with:

Perhaps a psychologist would hold that deep down in the soul — out of sight, as it were — there is indeed some psychic magnitude which the agent is attempting to maximize in every intentional action. That would certainly provide an elegant explanation of our utility functions. But it is not clear whether logic itself, or some deep metaphysical principle, requires that such an explanation be true. AND it is not entirely clear that we would have psychological [egoism] even if it were true.

This is a complicated series of questions. First, what requires that we commit ourselves to the kind of 'elegant explanation?' I am arguing for the idea that it is the desire to explain human behavior by means of something other than miracles or vagueness. But perhaps what our objector is really saying here is that even if psychological egoism is true — and it might just very well be — nothing interesting follows from it.

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*An anonymous referee raised the following objection: Existential pluralists do not share my 'desire to explain human behavior by means of something other than miracles or vagueness.' The referee asks: Can I show that this desire of mine is more than just arbitrary or miraculous? This is a good question and gets at the heart of how humans relate to the rest of reality. I see humans as naturalistic organisms and not as supernatural or non-natural beings. And so, I think that humans and human behavior has to fit in with other scientific explanations of reality and not be discontinuous with them or in conflict with them. I can't take the space here to defend such a view or the philosophy of science that goes along with it. That would be another paper altogether. All I can say here is simply to say that if the Existential Pluralist is willing to grant that science does explain some parts of reality without appealing ultimately to anything arbitrary or miraculous, then, for the sake of explanatory economy, the Existential Pluralist should also grant what I am saying about human behavior unless they can show what is wrong with my account. The antecedent may not be satisfied by some Existential Pluralists, but those are going to take a much different sort of argument: namely, one that gets at their underlying metaphysics. For a beginning of that argument, see Berman (1994).*

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*So here, perhaps our objector from the fact that all human follows, I think, is that various *if it is required of a moral theory if a moral theory requires of a to do the moral act for its own case is psychologically impose ment will not be met even to psychologically feasible, then moral theorists would be happy human life. Nor should they motivate people would be change or guide them, as for ex It is a short step from here true. Since every theorist asks of the motivations or values shows is that whatever addi might think exist, these alleg be reduced ultimately to self- only one ultimate motivation that a human can act at all. Ion of human motivation the ultimate value. Many people, however, because of, in Jon Elster's (example, the following sorts vated by self-interest: parent most famously, voting. Th rational self-interest' and ye*

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*See, for example, the theory (including Kant) or Neo-Kant Sen, Euler, Jeneck, Frank, Dav that besides self-interest, then*

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*But see Leach, 1994, XIV, who says but for ourselves. Note reasons for wanting them in v*

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Theory of Value at the beginning

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So here, perhaps our objector is wondering whether anything follows
from the fact that all humans act for their own self-interest. What
follows, I think, is that various kinds of moral theories will be untenable
if it is required of a moral theory that it be psychologically feasible. Therefore,
if a moral theory requires of a moral agent that he or she be motivated
to do the moral act for its own sake, i.e., ultimately, then since such a
case is psychologically impossible given human nature, such a require-
ment will not be met even to a degree. If a moral theory need not be
psychologically feasible, then of course anything goes! But, I do not think
moral theorists would be happy with this irrelevance of their theory to
human life. Nor should they be. And further, knowing what ultimately
motivates people would help immeasurably when trying to shape,
change or guide them, as for example, in parenting, politics, and so forth.

It is a short step from here to the view that psychological egoism is true.
Since every theorist acknowledges that self-interest is at least one
of the motivations or values all humans have, what my argument
shows is that whatever additional motivations or values some theorist
might think exist, these allegedly additional motivations or values can
be reduced ultimately to self-interest. This is so because unless there is
only one ultimate motivation or value, it is nothing short of a miracle
that a human can act at all. I conclude that the most plausible explana-
tion of human motivation takes the agent's self-interest as the one
ultimate value.

Many people, however, will not be convinced by my argument
because of, in Jon Elster's (1990) words, 'a few familiar facts'. For
example, the following sorts of behaviors are thought to not be moti-
vated by self-interest: parenting, giving to charity, paying taxes, and
most famously, voting. These behaviors are allegedly not in 'one's
rational self-interest' and yet people do them anyway. How can I

17 See, for example, the theorists in Mansbridge (1999), as well as any Kantian
(including Kant) or Neo-Kantian. The theorists in Mansbridge's collection, e.g.,
Sen, Elster, Jemec, Frank, Dawes, van der Klaag, Orbell, Morgulis, and others, argue
that besides self-interest, there exist other ultimate sources of motivation.

18 But see Leach 1994, xiv, where she says: 'We do not have children for our own
sake, but for ourselves. Parents of both sexes from many cultures run up their
reasons for wanting them in ways that best translate as 'for pleasure and for fun'.

19 But on voting, see Parfit 1964, 73-5.
explain these cases away? What all of these so-called ‘facts’ say, I think, is just that it is possible for people to do things which benefit others. But this is not damaging to psychological egoism. Psychological egoism does not have to claim that all humans try to benefit themselves only and no one else. Rather, psychological egoism simply has to claim that all humans try to benefit themselves ultimately.20 There is a difference between viewing behaviors very narrowly, as Elster and many others seem to do, and viewing behaviors more widely. If each behavior gets its identity from a means-ends structure, then, I think, each of these behaviors, which benefit others, also, more ultimately, benefit oneself. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere22 that Socrates, at least, thinks that one cannot get what is in one's own self-interest ultimately unless one also makes sure that others are also benefited. And this hierarchically structured set of means and ends has been beautifully supported in experiments23 which seem to show how other experiments25 miss that structure.

The relation between this conclusion, then, and the quote from Ross with which I began is that if psychological egoism is the best approximation to the truth that we have at the moment, then it will be implausible to make intentions or motives different from required by many contemporary moral philosophers. It will be implausible because everyone arguably has the same motive or intention in doing whatever he or she does, that is, to get whatever is best for him or herself.

20 Mansbridge seems to miss this possibility in the dichotomy presented in her 1990a, 20; however, she actually seems to me to be arguing for it in her 1990b, 137 f102-8. Unfortunately, she completely destroys her argument, if she is actually arguing as I think she is, in her Appendix B to 1990b where she says: ‘By unselfish or altruistic behavior, I mean in this essay behavior promoting another’s welfare that is undertaken for a reason “independent of its effects on [one’s] own welfare” (142).’ (She is quoting Jeuck.) The reason I say that she destroys her own argument is that if self-interest is the one ultimate value, then there could exist no behavior which is undertaken independent of one’s own welfare.

21 See Berman 1991a and 1991b.
22 For example, see Isaac, McCue, and Plet 1985.
23 For example, see Dawes, van de Kragt, and Orbell 1990.
24 See Mansbridge’s 1990b, 136.

And even though a psycho differentiate people in terms that human beings differ. What is in fact best for us. That is, a knowledge as regards which a actions are not in fact best for what moves us to act, that is, guides our actions, that is, our on what is prudentially best and are the ones with the better go worse people are the ones with best.26

25 One thing that Socrates thinks each person in the avoidance of not that Socrates thinks each person self-interest is going to be possible
26 Many people have helped me in this paper, “Socrates on Moral Contemporary Assessment of APA in San Francisco in March those in attendance there. On a Modern Moral Philosophers”, Robert Audi, and Terry Pepper from the Pluralism and Moral on Value inquiry held at Drew C in attendance for their very he Furstoski, Robert Giraberg, Wy day. I would also like to that discussions: Marshall Abrams brown, Keith Butler, Bill Charjant Mansbridge, Howard Mans Bill Rhim, Naomi Reschocki, G Fanner. And lastly, I want to add this paper which was provided in the summer of 1994.
And even though a psychological egoist cannot think that we can differentiate people in terms of their motivations, he or she can think that human beings differ. Where we can differ is in our ability to do what is in fact best for us. That is, we can and do differ only in our degree of knowledge as regards which actions are in fact best for us and which actions are not in fact best for us. Where we all differ, then, is not in what moves us to act, that is, our intentions or motives, but in what guides our actions, that is, our beliefs. Some people have a good grasp on what is prudentially best and some people do not. The better people are the ones with the better grasp of what is prudentially best and the worse people are the ones with the worse grasp of what is prudentially best.  

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25 One thing that Socrates thinks is true about what is in fact prudentially best for each person is the avoidance of doing harm to others. This, presumably, is one thing that Socrates thinks each person must come to know if the attainment of self-interest is going to be possible.

26 Many people have helped me with this paper and its ancestors. One ancestor of this paper, 'Socrates on Moral Goodness,' was presented at the Society for the Contemporary Assessment of Platonism at the Pacific Division meetings of the AFA in San Francisco in March 1991 and I received some valuable comments from those in attendance there. On a later version, 'Prudence and Morality: Socrates vs. Modern Moral Philosophers,' I received useful comments from George Terzis, Robert Audi, and Terry Penner. The present version is actually a revised section from the 'Prudence and Morality' paper and was presented to the 22nd Conference on Value Inquiry held at Drew University in April 1994. I would like to thank those in attendance for their very helpful comments but especially Jan Narveson, Paul Pietrzak, Robert Ginstberg, William Conwell III, Gerald Gaus, and Robert Hilday. I would also like to thank the following for their useful comments and discussions: Marshall Abrams, Mike Barber, Ilene Berman, Jim Bohman, Eric Brown, Keith Butler, Bill Charron, Richard Does, Paula Gottlieb, Richard Kraut, Jane Manzbridge, Howard Margolis, Ian Narveson, Richard Newman, Guy Perez, Bill Rehg, Naomi Reshotko, George Rusebush, Nick Smith and especially Terry Penner. And lastly, I want to acknowledge the partial financial support for revising this paper which was provided by a Mellon Faculty Development Grant awarded in the summer of 1994.