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## *A Defense of Psychological Egoism*

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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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 *Hippias 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.



ultimately has for doing some the action will be, all things considered, everyone does whatever turns out the best consequences for true, then it will be impossible to prefer any other action or motive because every action has its own good, namely, the agent's own happiness. I will now address the complaint about Plato (and Aristotle) about human motivation.<sup>3</sup> I will address it indirectly by arguing that any explanation of weakness of will that is based on a single motivation is false.

As a sufficient explanation of weakness of will, the possibility that someone could act for the sake of her own happiness. My opponent might think that a person could act just for its own sake, that is, for the sake of her own happiness. This is the position of Plato in *Republic* and Bishop Butler in the 18th century. If not most contemporary philosophers. Second, our opponent might argue that to achieve a plurality of values a person could want to achieve her own happiness and some other values, e.g., justice for the sake of her own happiness. Psychological egoism is false and examine how it could be required by such an explanation of weakness of will. Psychological egoism to be false, the arguments outlined above demonstrate a

possible, I shall make use of an explanation of how beliefs and desires come about. Penner argues, convincingly I

problem needs to be avoided. See his

think, that what Hampshire (1965, 46-7) calls thought-independent desires cannot, simply by occurring *simultaneously* with a belief, move a human being to do 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.<sup>5</sup> The problem with there really being a conflict here is that the thought-independent desire, unlike the thought-dependent 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

<sup>5</sup> 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 those 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. But whether she thinks it best to reach over to that object depends upon an all-things-considered *whether* to satisfy that thought-independent desire is the ultimate aim of all humans considered. It may turn out that reaching over to that object is not what she thinks is the best way to satisfy it. However, if she is all-things-considered, then she will satisfy it. If reaching over to that object is considered to be the best option, all things considered, then the one who thinks that reaching over to that external object just for its own sake is the best way to satisfy it, namely, that a thought-independent desire for that external object as its aim.

However, someone might object that someone might agree 'with the thought-independent desire' but that desire cannot, of themselves, bring about the action. 'But,' on the other hand, someone might have moved toward those objects just for its own sake, are not, as such, either descriptive, or descriptions involving thought-independent desire. Is this impossible? I don't think so. A human can want some external object just for its own sake, and so not just for its own sake, but with no connection to the agent's thought-independent desire for that kind of thing worth pursuing.

I think that it is not possible to have a thought-independent desire for something, and then, when some particular thing, one's thought-independent desire is integrated into that former desire. After that, when some particular object comes into percept could do the required action. For example, to determine what the percept is. For example, given the agent's background perception of a bag of tortilla chips, the perception of a bag of tortilla chips coming in all the time

simultaneously with a belief in the best way to satisfy that desire. Pointing to those two states is sufficient because it does not tell us about any other belief-desire pairs. This is the first pair of states. Moreover, the craving for tortilla chips is prior. Why? Because pointing to the craving behavior for these tortilla chips is sufficient to reach over to the bag of tortilla chips further than I think that the best way to reach for these tortilla chips right here. Then this belief is integrated with the thought-independent desire to do whatever is the best way to reach over to the bag of tortilla chips. And this desire is what motivates the action more than those. In other words, the belief is the way to action will be so, have to be a thought-dependent desire, then, the belief is at all. If they could, But since they cannot, they are insufficient for particular actions, that

there is some sort of 'substitution' for the best way to satisfy the desire. The best to reach over to these states is thought-dependent desire. It is this integration which is sufficient. His argument, in its fullness, refuting one kind of attack on the agent's Plato-inspired argument are produced by thought-independent desire. I suppose that a human could reach for an object at all, she must be able to reach for that object given her circumstances into the best way to reach over to that desire for what's best given her circumstances. Thought-independent desires motivate a human all the way to action. The agent's reason tries to discover the best way

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, considering 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 opponent, 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.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand someone might agree 'with the general point, that thought-independent desires cannot, of themselves, motivate any action at all, properly speaking.' '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 determine 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

<sup>6</sup> 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 the existentialists 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<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Suppose that there is no

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

<sup>8</sup> Besides those referred to in note 12 below, I think that Kant held this view also. See, for example, his 1934, 16-17 and esp. the note on pp. 17-18 where he says that

common 'currency' or 'scale' certain values which are *ex hypo* a person actually succeed in *de* action when each course has values which are themselves in arrive at an all-things-consider courses of action is best because or 'criterion' for deciding wh although we can have a reason and we can have a reason for d could never have a reason for d because, *ex hypothesi*, there is n could compare value X to valu allegedly resultant 'choice' fro reflex actions or a miracle.<sup>9</sup> The as an explanation of such actio argument is directed against, rists.<sup>10</sup> Reluctance to embrace obvious. Let me say why.

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'the ultimate subjective ground (my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> Rawls's 'intuitionism' is a third the vague idea presented in his *asserted without argument* that thi what I argue for in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> 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 tha In the center of the board, betwe occurs'. Appeals to miracles prov provide placeholders for such dis



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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.<sup>9</sup> 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 theo-  
rists.<sup>10</sup> 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

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'the ultimate subjective ground of the adoption of moral maxims is *inscrutable* ...'  
(my emphasis).

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<sup>11</sup> 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. How-

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, 166-86, esp. 167-9.

ever, so far as I can tell, incommensurability is not a view. In fact, they seem to be they view humans, more or less as equal persons.<sup>12</sup> He says:

Since we start within a framework that think of citizens as *free* that in virtue of what we reason, thought, and judgment persons are free. ... A set of principles apply, and to act from them characterizes the fair terms of the conception of the good is the conception of one's rationality.

Hence, it is vital that persons themselves be based upon reasoning. A person must have 'the capacity for' a sense of the amount of reasoning being applied to be able to (1) *understand* a public conception of the good and when it does not apply, and (2) *create* such a conception, (2) *means-ends* thinking in order to create a person to be free that their reasoning is itself based upon a great deal of incommensurable values and no reason from which to act. Hence, persons. Such a consequence

12 Other incommensurability theorists who believe in freedom of persons arguably in Williams' 1973; Larmore 1987, Chapter 6;

13 No habituation process could be conditioned to respond in certain ways out when the appropriate situation

it? That looks promising. The on to do the moral course of course whenever they conflict<sup>11</sup> situation arises, the person acts out having a *reason* for choosing a there is a cause of the action, 'choice' has become hardwired at we, the parents, are able to moral act over the prudential act t that we think it *better* for our *judgment* possible if we cannot

ght respond to this objection by precisely because we ourselves We habituate our children re-rough our ancestors *forever*. But reasons. First, the explanation traps for the originator of this self off the ground, the unhabi-are the allegedly incommensu-umption that these values are as it impossible for parents to om how they themselves were supposing incommensurability onditioning in favor of some- could not have a *reason* for : X over Y when they conflict. ility theorist, perhaps it is even 's children this way as opposed y, as if by instinct. There is no

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re cannot simultaneously follow both ms' excellent discussion of this in his

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.'<sup>12</sup> 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<sup>13</sup> 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 incom-

12 Other incommensurability theorists who would agree with Rawls about the freedom of persons arguably include Nagel 1979; Williams 1981; 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.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Taylor 1982, where he repeatedly says things such as 'incommensurably higher'. Such talk ought to be meaningless on his view. Now he might have in mind the idea 'you *could* compare these goods, but why bother?' For example, suppose I take any five philosophers and put them up against the United States' Olympic basketball team in 1992, that is, 'The Dream Team'. You might say that

And second, how can the i Julie, say, sometimes acts m when in situations of conflict Bob's three initially indefinite the desire to do whatever is p such that she cannot do bot morally required. In order for we need to know why Julie s indefinite desire and why som measurability theorist is goir but, such a desire is going to better to do the prudential ac And if such determinations then the alleged incommensu fore, it makes explanatory s substitution device.

Once again, someone mig might say:

Well, here all you need, doesn't work against th goistic moral propensit or the other. At other r other. We plot the cur function on prudence/r trade for how much p curve without thereby one thing in common t

there is no comparison betwe that you could not compare t comparisons would be pointl philosopher's team. So, don't when Taylor says that justic compare them, say with resp but why bother, because the not know what Taylor's resp

<sup>15</sup> Again, this is Jan Narveson.

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 ial course of action. Moreover,  
 ther and neither habit could be  
 o standard of comparison. And  
 claims that there is no standard  
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atedly says things such as 'incommen-  
 ngless on his view. Now he might have  
 goods, but why bother?' For example,  
 ut them up against the United States'  
 'The Dream Team'. You might say that

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 what 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.<sup>15</sup> 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

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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.

<sup>15</sup> 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? I would say that it is the desire to explain human behavior by means of something other than miracles or vagueness.<sup>16</sup> 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.

16 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).

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 impossible will not be met *even to* psychologically feasible, then moral theorists would be happy human life. Nor should they be motivates people would help change or guide them, as for ex

It is a short step from here true. Since every theorist acknowledges the motivations or values shows is that whatever additional might think exist, these allegations be reduced *ultimately* to self-interest only one ultimate motivation that a human can act at all. In the tion of human motivation to ultimate value.

Many people, however, because of, in Jon Elster's (example, the following sorts, vated by self-interest: parents, most famously, voting.<sup>17</sup> The rational self-interest' and ye

17 See, for example, the theories (including Kant) or Neo-Kantian Sen, Elster, Jencks, Frank, Davis that *besides* self-interest, there

18 But see Leach 1994, xiv, who makes but for ourselves. Parents reasons for wanting them in v

19 But on voting, see Parfit 1984

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 requirement 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,<sup>17</sup> 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 explanation 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 motivated by self-interest: parenting,<sup>18</sup> giving to charity, paying taxes, and most famously, voting.<sup>19</sup> 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 (1990), as well as any Kantian (including Kant) or Neo-Kantian. The theorists in Mansbridge's collection, e.g., Sen, Elster, Jencks, Frank, Dawes, van de Kragt, Orbell, Margolis, 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 their own sakes but for ourselves. Parents of both sexes from many cultures sum up their reasons for wanting them in words that best translate as 'for pleasure and for fun'.

19 But on voting, see Parfit 1984, 73-5.



explain these cases away? What all of these so-called 'facts' say, I think, is just that it is possible for people 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*.<sup>20</sup> 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 elsewhere<sup>21</sup> 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 experiments<sup>22</sup> which seem to me to show how other experiments<sup>23</sup> miss that structure.<sup>24</sup>

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 differentiate people as required by many contemporary moral philosophers. It will be implausible because *everyone* arguably has the *same* ultimate 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, 137 112-5. 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 Jencks.] 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 Plott 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 of that human beings differ. What is in fact best for us. That is, with knowledge as regards which actions are not in fact best for what *moves* us to act, that is, our guides our actions, that is, our on what is prudentially best are the ones with the better guides worse people are the ones with best.<sup>26</sup>

25 One thing that Socrates thinks each person is the avoidance of that Socrates thinks each person's self-interest is going to be possible.

26 Many people have helped me with 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 Penner from the 'Prudence and Moral on Value inquiry held at Drew University in attendance for their very helpful Pietroski, Robert Ginsberg, William day. I would also like to thank discussions: Marshall Abrams, Brown, Keith Butler, Bill Char Jane Mansbridge, Howard Ma Bill Rehg, Naomi Reshotko, G Penner. And lastly, I want to thank this paper which was provided in the summer of 1994.



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the dichotomy presented in her 1990a, arguing for it in her 1990b, 137 ¶¶2-5. argument, if she is actually arguing as here she says: 'By unselfish or altruistic promoting another's welfare that is effects on [one's] own welfare' (142).' at she destroys her own argument is e, then there could exist no behavior n welfare.

85.

Orbell 1990.

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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 to the Society for the Contemporary Assessment of Platonism at the Pacific Division meetings of the APA 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 22<sup>nd</sup> 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 Pietroski, Robert Ginsberg, William Cornwell III, Gerald Gaus, and Robert Halliday. 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 Dees, Paula Gottlieb, Richard Kraut, Jane Mansbridge, Howard Margolis, Jan Narveson, Richard Newman, Guy Perez, Bill Rehg, Naomi Reshotko, George Rudebusch, 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.