Psychological Self-ism: An alternative approach to Psychological Egoism

Abstract

This paper seeks to put forward an alternative approach to Psychological Egoism which attempts to capture what Psychological Egoism often alludes to. Thoughts of selfishness, thinking about one’s own role and gain in any action or event, the moralization of the concept of selfishness - all of these prompt us to think of humans as psychological egoists. Yet, certain examples such as a soldier jumping up on a grenade seemingly debunk the concept of Psychological Egoism. This paper seeks to redefine and expand the basic tenets of want, Self, desire, Selfishness, behaviour, etc., to better explain the phenomena, behaviour and Self, that Psychological Egoism alludes to. This paper will do so by increasing the scope of the Self, and what it means to be Selfish through Humanist and Social psychology, and attempt to show how humans act in accordance with this new framework of psychological egoism. Various examples are to be used to demonstrate the application of this alternative approach, and, their real-world and moral consequences.

Introduction

The SEP defines Psychological Egoism through the following statement –

*“Psychological egoism, the most famous descriptive position, claims that each person has but one ultimate aim: her own welfare”* (Shaver)

The origins of Psychological Egoism come from several observations of self-interested behaviour in humans (Shaver). Altruistic or selfless actions are often shown to have some self-interested factor, which incentivises us to act in a way that can be considered altruistic or moral. There are frequent observations and examples of humans thinking of their own interests, and their own gain/role in a certain event/activity. These observations show humans as actively concerned about their own selfish needs, material/external wants, etc.

But there have been a great many objections to Psychological Egoism as a viable theory. One of the major examples used to argue against Psychological Egoism is the Soldier who selflessly jumps on the grenade to save his fellow humans (Shaver). This is said to obliterate any credibility afforded to psychological egoism. Yet, the psychological egoists have fought back with comments about how the soldier wanted to live up to his duty, or, is in deceived/in denial, which makes his sacrifice self-interested. Or, they argue that the soldier is working for his own welfare, as he is avoiding years of regret, social castigation, etc. which he may have suffered if he didn’t jump on the grenade (Shaver). The first objection is easily countered by focusing on the amount of will/courage required to make the sacrifice, and, the concern for humans instilled deep in him which prompted him to sacrifice himself. At least, one of the above is required for the soldier to make that jump, which should dispel any possibility of the soldier deceiving himself, or acting in his physical self-interest (Shaver). The second objection seems to imitate a post-diction. No soldier would have the time to contemplate his future to decide whether he should jump on the grenade or not. The action is too quick for any secondary concerns of future considerations. Moreover, humans are woefully bad at considering the future (present bias) – if they were good, climate change and capitalism would be less of a problem (Dhir).

Main Body

But, why am I going against psychological egoism if my intention is to prop it back up? It is imperative that we understand the basic conflicts and problems in the theory which can help us find better ways of explaining it. The existing theory has a great number of problems. This theory attempts to fix them by changing/expanding the ambit/meaning of certain concepts involved.

The first thing to address is the concept of selfish behaviour and its relation to the Self, in the theory of psychological egoism. The confusion in Psychological Egoism occurs when we think of altruism to be an act divorced from the Self. The Self is inseparable from the decisions, thoughts and actions that we take (Stangor et al.). The desires, preferences & priorities of the Self guide the subsequent decisions, thoughts and actions we take, which in turn, impact our desire, preferences & priorities. Both of these are consistently in flux and are engaged in an interplay with each other (Graham). As all decisions, thoughts and actions we take, stem from the Self, we are always considering our own desires, preferences & priorities. This may prompt a certain moralizing of certain acts as being self-interested, as every single act has some link back to the Self. To think of these actions as being self-interested is a very moralistic perspective way on humanity, and a big part of the problem when it comes to psychological egoism. To interpret humans as being self-interested in the face of such observations is the wrong response. We should look at them as Self-ish instead of selfish, i.e., inextricably linked to the Self. All human activity can’t be detached from the Self’s considerations of its own place, as these decisions, thoughts and actions are taken from the perspective of the Self.

Second, what is the Self? Is it some innate object/entity? Does it have a certain sense of stability and coherence? The description of humans as being self-interested attaches a certain sense of innateness, stability & coherence to the Self. Borrowing from the ideas of Social Psychology (Markus and Wurf). The Self is constructed by the social interactions and relationships that we have over time, and, is constantly in flux due to the dynamic nature of the milieu and our response to it. A sense of stability or pre-determined essence evades the concept of Self. Essentialist descriptions of the Self by contemporary Psychological Egoists fail because of this very reason. The Self itself isn’t a standalone entity, it is a self-image - The Conscious observer (or the Self) arising out of complex cognitive processes creates an image of the Self, a dynamic image which changes with the flow of time, and social context.

Borrowing from the ideas of Humanistic psychology (Cherry), I would like to introduce the concept of the Ideal Self. The Ideal Self is the absolute, ideal state/being that the Self desires to be (Ismail and Tekke). This Ideal Self is also constructed by elements of the Self’s milieu and The Self’s interaction with this milieu. The Self’s dynamic state of Being induces a certain sense of flux into the Ideal Self. Depending upon the social context, and the flow of time, the Ideal Self also differs and changes. There are various factors which influence the composition of the Ideal Self. Our parents, immediate family, friends, educators, etc. act as sources of affirmation and normative values for the individual (Markus and Wurf). We learn to idealize certain values, standards & things on the basis of what we have been socialised into valuing. For example, A child is entirely innocent of the cultural & moral aspects of touching one’s own genitals, eating food from the ground, or, being polite & soft. It is the parents, educators and other sources of social affirmation that socialise the child to create a normative judgement about such things. Another parallel can be drawn to the example of a hot pan. The child doesn’t understand the nature or risks of the hot pan. But the child learns that it is ‘favourable’ for him to stay away from the hot pan in the future, once he touches it and burns his hand. These 2 examples demonstrate how the Self, its desires, and its values, are shaped by its interaction with the milieu and people. The Self seeks to emulate this Ideal Self to actualize its best Self and create a sense of congruity and psychological comfort (Markus and Wurf).

The Self’s behaviour is also moulded in advance due to the standards or reactions it foresees it would receive, which is based on the Self’s interaction milieu over time. The Cultural influences of the Self’s milieu are disseminated through media, film, art & music which create a range of standards & values that the Self learns. These can include standards of masculinity, age-appropriate behaviour, fashion, morality, etc., and have a great impact on the Self, as the Self attempts to place itself in the media, and creates an Ideal Self in that context. All these images and standards can be said to work as forces - forces that act in tandem and in opposition simultaneously creating various versions of the Ideal Self, which vie for importance, and whichever seems most Self-actualising is then idealized. This is not to say that the choices made are absolute. These choices, priorities & preferences are very much dynamic and in flux, dependent on social context, and how the self perceives itself in a certain moment in a certain context, and how it correlates and views itself in that scenario, and, in the future, in the aftermath of that moment and context. As they are considered to be social standards or norms, these are often socially reproduced by family, friends, acquaintances, etc., depending upon their experiences and milieu, and the dynamic subjective perceptions that stem from it.

These desires and Self-images shouldn’t be conceived of as an entirely conscious cognitive process. At any given point in time, our mind isn’t aware of all of its memories or the cognitive processes it possesses. It is unnecessary and impractical to be conscious/aware of these in our day-to-day life, and, these are all present in our Unconscious mind (Osman), ready to be called upon if needed. In a similar way, our mind internalises these social standards, norms & values, and, thinks & acts almost ‘instinctively’ on them. These form the bedrock of our everyday functioning, and, the Self works in accordance with them (Lumer).

This model also shows us the socially constructed, historically contingent nature of an individual’s morals. For the individual, there are no absolute good morals. There are only values, aesthetics, social norms, etc. that the individual has imbibed in its Self, to which it strives to. The terms ‘favourable’ and ‘unfavourable’, depict a better picture of the Self’s operations and desires, instead of ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘evil’, ‘moral’, etc. The tag of ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’ is what we learn to attach to our behaviour and thoughts on influence from society.

There is a certain tension between the Ideal Self and the Self. The Self constantly tries to emulate the Ideal Self, but always falls short. The Self is consistently trying to prioritise its own interest – its interest being the need to be the Ideal Self (Behrendt). In this regard, humans are selfish (or Self-ish). They are always trying to actualize their own Self. This can take various forms. It can be in the form of a Soldier attempting to align with his Self-perception of his identity as a courageous protector of his fellow beings. The businessman who makes a fortune off of the backs of cheap labour does so without any moral shame because for him this is ‘normal’ or ‘favourable’. The poor robber who harms people and steals items despite knowing that he shouldn’t commit certain crimes is also Self-ish, because for him it is more important that his life is prolonged and sustained. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, we shall be addressing the theory that this paper propounds as Psychological Self-ism.

There is an element of ‘Self-Preservation’ present in the interplay of the Ideal Self and the Self (Behrendt). These concepts allow for various priorities that a human can possess to have varying degrees of importance. External, material or biological desires are often given primacy, or a negative attribute of selfishness is attached to them. Such frameworks of psychological egoism have trouble accommodating examples such as the Soldier jumping on the grenade even though it goes against his desire to survive or live. Psychological Self-ism situates the desires of the human in the Self, thus, unseating external/physical desires from their seat of primacy, and allowing desires to exist & be analysed in flux, regardless of their nature/origin. Through this, desires that prioritize non-biological wants (duty, morals, etc.), and desires that prioritize biological/material wants (money, survival, luxury goods) even in the face of social wants or moral opposition, can both be legitimate and take precedence over each other. The deep-seated nature of certain values, and the desire to be the Ideal Self that actualizes those values, in the Soldier can easily override his biological desire to survive.

Another contention to Psychological Egoism/Self-ism that may come up is that the soldier can’t ‘consciously’ will to effectively kill himself (Schaefer and Northoff). These contentions to Psychological Egoism/Self-ism assume that a large part of our cognitive processes is conscious. The Soldier isn’t necessarily conscious of his complex cognitive/psychological processes, but, the unconscious beliefs or values that he holds, prompt him to act almost ‘instinctively’. The cognitive processes under Psychological Self-ism are largely unconscious and the various internalised social standards, norms or values silently shape our decisions, thoughts, & preferences, pushing us to take even drastic measures such as sacrificing ourselves on a grenade to help other people.

This ideal self can also be shown as a fantasy created in the social context that the subject exists in (Microfascism). The desires to be the ideal self, involve coming across as a certain person to ourselves, but more importantly to other people. For example, I wish for an iPhone, in the current social context (milieu), which may be due to a desire to be seen as the “person who owns and uses an iPhone”. We desire such a projection of our Self because, in the current milieu, such a projection indicates various socially ‘favourable’ attributes such as wealth, quality, brand, etc. It wishes to be seen as the person who possesses, and is capable of possessing the iPhone, and, is someone who values these traits or attributes of the iPhone, and what these traits or attributes tell others about him, from his perspective (“Microfascism”). Capitalism consistently propagates and creates conditions that allow widespread acceptance of such consumerist/materialist ways of living (Guitart). Similarly, we may wish to be seen as moral people. So, we would want to show ourselves as people who consume certain progressive media, act in a way that can be considered progressive by the people, etc. The standards of progressiveness exist in the milieu and are thrust upon the individual who internalises it and acts in accordance with it (Felluga). Hence, the milieu has a formative role to play in the Self & its future discursive development (Gao). It may often lead to a certain illusion of freedom in which we consider our views, beliefs & actions to be our own (Hendricks). But, in setting the Self firmly in the pre-existing social order, Psychological Self-ism shows us how deeply non-individualistic our existence is. The conformity & dedication to one’s beliefs & ideals (beliefs & ideals present in the Ideal Self) are maintained by the Self’s desire to emulate its Ideal Self. In venerating & idealizing our Ideal Self, we may unconsciously conform to society’s standards & ways of being without realizing the lack of freedom & agency we possess.

Psychological Self-ism does away with the reductionist or essentialist conceptions of the Ego/Self which lead to the primacy of biological/material desires. The isolated Ego/Self in older frameworks (of the critics of Psychological Egoism) conceives of altruism/altruistic acts as a feature of the person (the Self), while considering such acts to be Selfless. Such contradictions lead to flawed descriptive theories like Psychological Egoism which present a narrow perspective on the Self and Human behaviour. By expanding the theoretical ambit of the Self beyond just the individual, and into the Unconscious mind, with the Self as inextricable from its milieu, we are able to encompass and explain all sorts of human activity & behaviour. The subject is placed at the mercy of society and its forces, and in the domain of the unconscious mind, and reflects the various complexities involved in the cognitive and social processes which work hand in hand to shape both the individual and the environment. The individual changes the environment and his role in it, while being simultaneously impacted by the environment - an environment which also constitutes other agents, agents that are also impacted by the socio-historical forces of their environment. The uncertainty provided by this theory by considering the subject to not be a constant, free agent, but, an agent of his milieu, helps it explain more and better when compared to its mainstream alternatives.

This theory can explain intentions and driving forces in humans, as not essentialised and Innate, but, as a by-product of complex social, and historical forces which act on our biological apparatus which has Self-awareness that shape & facilitate our desires.

This theory can improve social sensibility & reduce moral judgement of humans & their behaviour. This framework will allow people to understand the joy or sadness they may feel when they commit an act that is good or bad according to them, as Self-esteem is impacted by the relative success or failure of the Self in emulating the Ideal. It does away with the guilt that people may feel for feeling happiness or a sense of self-fulfilment while helping others, as our altruism can never be defined separately from the Self, and the Self’s need to be affirmed by itself or its Milieu. The ideal and absolute conceptions of men as good or bad drive people to such heights of madness to be perfectly good, that it may have a negative impact on their mental health. The Ideal Self of such individuals is so unrealistic & out of reach, that on their inevitable failure, they may suffer from poor Self-Esteem and mental health issues. This framework explains the individual and his actions to be a result of their milieu and subsequent desires, it shows how every single action is intrinsically linked to the self, which is itself social. It rescues people from the social and mental tensions created by the regressive categories of good and bad, where both the individual and society reprimand the individual when they don't conform to the unrealisable absolute good. The insights of this theory prompt the site of reform or progress to be moved away from the individual to the larger socio-political structures that influence & shape the individuals.

Conclusion

Psychological Self-ism is a response to Psychological Egoism and its critics. It accommodates the intuitions & intentions of Psychological Egoism and takes into account the criticism levied on Psychological Egoism’s obvious flaws. It incorporates ideas from Humanistic Psychology, Social Psychology, certain post-structuralist & psychoanalytical authors, etc. Psychological Self-ism’s first objective is to create a framework that reliably explains what Psychological Egoism alludes to but fails to understand and explain. This change in the framework does away with the moralizing & individualistic nature of Psychological Egoism which causes problems when confronted by examples of humans who are seemingly ‘altruistic’. The second objective is to create a radically different framework for human behaviour & Self, by showing the Individual to be a dynamic ‘conduit’ or ‘expression’ of his milieu. This framework decentres the Individual *to properly explain the individual Self,* i.e., the non-individualistic, socially constructed & discursive characteristics of the individual. The Milieu is given primacy over the Individual to explain various behaviours, desires, morals, values, etc. The morals & values of the individual are shown to be a result of its socialisation & interactions with the milieu, thus, any attempt to define a human as intrinsically self-interested (as shown in Psychological Egoism) fails due to the social & non-individual nature of morals in humans. The ‘selfish’ trait of humans is replaced by ‘Self-ish,’ referring to the behaviour, desires or values of humans arising from the Self – A Self that is deeply social. The Self’s prioritisation of its perceived desires & values, to live up to its Ideal Self, and the inextricability of the Self’s desires & values from its actions, behaviours, thoughts, perceptions, judgements, etc. truly encompass what Psychological Egoism attempts to describe – A need fulfilled by Psychological Self-ism.

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