

On Deducing Ethical Egoism from Psychological Egoism

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Abstract: A familiar question is whether psychological egoism (suitably supplemented with plausible further premises) entails ethical egoism. This paper considers this question, treating it much more thoroughly than do any previous treatments. For instance, it discusses all the most common understandings of ethical and psychological egoism. It further discusses many strategies and arguments relevant to the question addressed. Although this procedure creates complexity, it has value. It forestalls the suspicion, aroused by so many treatments of this subject, that the results stem largely from leaving stones unturned – for instance, from ignoring many natural argumentative strategies and many familiar understandings of the views discussed. The paper’s conclusion is that psychological egoism (suitably supplemented ...) does not entail ethical egoism.

1.

It is tempting to think that psychological egoism, the view that our motives are ultimately self-interested, somehow supports ethical egoism, the view that our acts are morally right or obligatory just in case they optimally serve our own interests.¹ Indeed, some philosophers suggest, or say things that suggest, that if we conjoin psychological egoism with a few plausible further assertions, it validly implies ethical egoism (e.g., Stace, 1937, p. 209; Palmer, 2005, p. 38; Lukes, 2006, p. 87; Deigh, 2010, p. 34; Naticchia 2013, p. 250 n. 43).² Most treatments of this topic focus on whether psychological egoism is plausible (e.g., Frankena, 1973, pp. 20–23; Taylor, 1975, pp. 33–45; Russell, 1982, pp. 95–99; Luper, 2002, pp. 105–108; Holmes, 2007, pp. 60–64; Deigh, 2010, pp. 34–43; Pojman & Fieser, 2017, pp. 78–83; Vaughn, 2019, pp. 87–89).

My focus is whether, given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism indeed follows validly from psychological egoism – or more fully, from psychological egoism, suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions. (The word “suitably” indicates that the assertions are such that when combined with psychological egoism, the

¹These are rough formulations of the two views. I improve them in sections 2 and 3.

²See also McConnell’s (1978, p. 43) remark about Taylor (1975).

resulting set of premises is consistent and non-question-begging).³ Adequacy of formulation and validity of argument are thus two of my chief concerns. Plausibility matters as well, partly because adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism must be plausible to the extent possible.

One reason for my question is that to the extent that psychological egoism is tempting, its relationship to ethical egoism has interest. And in some academic quarters, psychological egoism is indeed tempting – in fact, it seems to receive increasing respect.⁴ Speaking more generally, among those acquainted with psychological egoism it has never ceased to find followers, many of whom see ethical egoism as a consequence of it.⁵

A natural reading of my question is whether, given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from psychological egoism conjoined with *ought-implies-can* (OIC) (and suitably supplemented ...), the claim that we morally ought to do an act only if we are able to do it. I address this question in sections 2 through 5. In section 6 I consider an argument that includes no variation of OIC.

Earlier I noted some of my chief concerns. A further one is comprehensiveness regarding the subjects discussed. I strive for much more of it than we find elsewhere on this topic.⁶ For example, I discuss not one or two, but what I take to be all the most common understandings of ethical and psychological egoism. I also identify, and inspect for viability, eight broad varieties of the view that from psychological egoism (suitably supplemented) and OIC, ethical egoism follows. Although my procedure creates complexity, it has value. When I conclude, as I will, that we cannot validly derive ethical egoism from psychological egoism, I do so with considerable confidence. My procedure forestalls the suspicion, aroused by so many treatments of this subject, that the results stem largely from leaving stones unturned – for instance, from ignoring many natural argumentative strategies and many familiar understandings of the positions treated.

2.

In this section and the next three, I consider the following thesis:

³Regarding the phrase just mentioned (“suitably supplemented with ...”): Although I may sometimes leave it implicit, I intend it (*mutatis mutandis*) anytime I raise the thought, or a variant of the thought, of ethical egoism following from a position that includes psychological egoism.

⁴A good source for this point is Slote (2014, chap. 4), who supports it with many sources.

⁵This is certainly true of many students. For philosophers who see ethical egoism as a consequence of psychological egoism, see again the list in the first paragraph of this section.

⁶I have done so further by producing Tilley (2022), a paper which, although considerably different (e.g., in the set of arguments treated) from this one, is on the same general topic. I draw on that paper (with modifications) in the following two passages below: the penultimate paragraph of section 5; and the unsound argument for proposition 7, early in section 5.

Given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from the conjunction of psychological egoism and OIC, that conjunction being suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions.

Some preliminaries are necessary, some of which will lead me to refine the above thesis. First, in considering that thesis, I have no interest in arguments in which psychological egoism or OIC is merely *listed* as a premise, contributing nothing to the argument's validity.

Second, we need adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism. By an adequate formulation of, say, psychological egoism I mean a formulation that results in what philosophers would recognize as psychological egoism and, at the same time, treats that position charitably.

Let us begin by formulating psychological egoism, proceeding to ethical egoism in the next section. The following theses, the first explicitly about (voluntary human) actions, the second explicitly about desires, capture two common understandings of psychological egoism.⁷ (The subscript "i" means "in terms of serving the agent's own interests".)

PE1. Owing to human nature, the ultimate motive of every act includes a belief on the agent's part that the act has (some) merit_i. A person can do an act only if she has that belief.

PE2. Owing to human nature, a person can desire nothing but self-benefits, a "self-benefit" being either a real or perceived personal good, such as the person's own health, happiness, or survival; or something she believes to be a direct or indirect means to (source of, element of) such a good.

These positions do not claim that the beliefs to which they refer are rational, explicit, or occurrent. PE1, for instance, does not deny that we sometimes do things that we only irrationally believe to have merit_i. Also, PE1 makes no claim that the belief to which it refers is the sole element of the motive PE1 mentions. Another element, presumably, is a desire to do acts that have merit_i.

Although PE2 is sufficiently clear, some of it is not perfectly clear. This is unavoidable, for there is no way sharply to distinguish personal goods from other ends, such as the means to personal goods.⁸ (Is a person's liberty, for example, a personal good or a means to such goods?)

⁷In some cases, it is hard to tell whether a definition of psychological egoism is a variant of PE1 or instead of PE2. At any rate, between the two of them, PE1 and PE2 capture the understandings of psychological egoism in many sources, e.g., Stace (1937, p. 209), Russell (1982, pp. 95–96), Kavka (1986, p. 44), Luper (2002, p. 104), Deigh (2010, p. 33), May (2011, sec. 1), Sober (2013, pp. 148, 151), Timmons (2013, p. 183), Miller (2014, p. xl), Feinberg (2017, pp. 561–562), Shafer-Landau (2018, pp. 91–92), Vaughn (2019, pp. 87–88), Kraut (2020, sec. 2.1), and Shaver (2021, sec. 1).

⁸For useful discussion see Kavka (1986, pp. 39–44).

Theses PE1 and PE2 are not the only common formulations of psychological egoism. There is one more, much less plausible than PE1 and PE2:

PE3. Owing to human nature, the ultimate motive of every act includes a belief on the agent's part that the act is in her own best interest. She can do the act only if she has that belief (e.g., Frankena, 1973, pp. 20, 21; Sobel, 1996, p. 26; Bowie, 2013, p. 32; Pojman & Fieser, 2017, p. 78.)

The phrase "in her own best interest" could mean either "better_I than any of her other options" or "at least as good_I as any of her other options". Either way, PE3 is unfair to psychological egoists. Fairly interpreted, such egoists can grant that for whatever reasons, people sometimes strive for immediate or alluring self-benefits without considering whether another available act would be better_I overall – or even knowing that another such act would be better_I overall.

From here on, then, I ignore PE3. I also ignore the formulation of psychological egoism according to which we always act to satisfy our own desires. The same goes for the formulation according to which every ultimate desire, every desire we possess insofar as we want something as an end in itself, either aims at a perceived personal good or, if it does not, exists owing to our long association of its object with such a good. These views are not genuine forms of psychological egoism. Each is consistent with the view that many of our ultimate desires, even our strongest ones, aim not at our own good but only at the good of others (Kavka, 1986, pp. 35–36).

I thus return to PE1 and PE2, which I consider adequate formulations of psychological egoism. I know of no formulations more adequate. Before proceeding, however, allow me three more points about PE2, the view that we can desire nothing but self-benefits.

First, PE2 is often put as a thesis not about desires in general but about *ultimate* desires (e.g., May, 2011; Sober, 2013). It says that we can ultimately desire nothing but real or perceived personal goods. However, an accompanying assumption is that anytime we desire something, we do so either ultimately or as a perceived means to something we desire ultimately. With that assumption, the thesis implies that we can desire nothing but self-benefits (as earlier defined).

Second, PE2 invariably comes with an assumption, essentially a tacit component: that a person can do an act only if she believes, if only implicitly and non-occurrently, something roughly of the form, "This act will bring about *x*", where *x* is something she desires (e.g., May, 2011; Sober, 2013). With that assumption, PE2 ties action, not merely desire, to self-interest. It implies that a person can do an act only if she believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit – or more exactly, only if she believes something roughly of the form "This act will bring about *x*", where *x* is a self-benefit.

Third, the latter point raises an objection: that because the implication just mentioned differs little from PE1, we can set PE2 aside. For my purposes, it is

best to ignore this objection. PE1 and PE2 are both common, viable understandings of psychological egoism. Given my aims, it is valuable to discuss both.

3.

Let me now identify adequate formulations of ethical egoism. I mean ethical egoism as most philosophers understand it: as a normative theory that claims to identify a property that accounts for, and is necessary and sufficient for, an act's being morally right or obligatory.

Theses EE1 and EE3 (or the two together) capture the usual understandings of ethical egoism (e.g., Luper, 2002, pp. 103–104; Holmes, 2007, pp. 56, 240; Burgess-Jackson, 2013, pp. 532–533; Timmons, 2013, pp. 178–180; Miller, 2014, pp. xxxix–xl; Pojman & Fieser, 2017, pp. 78, 82; Gensler, 2018, pp. 178, 237; Shafer-Landau, 2018, G-3; Rachels & Rachels, 2019, pp. 73–74; Vaughn, 2019, pp. 68, 85; Shaver, 2021, sec. 2). EE2 and EE4 are natural variations, respectively, of EE1 and EE3.

EE1. A person morally ought to do an act if and only if (and because) the act is his best_I option (meaning a better_I option than any others he has).⁹

EE2. A person morally ought to do an act if and only if (given his epistemic situation) he rationally ought to believe (or it would be most reasonable for him to believe) that the act is his best_I option.

EE3. An act is morally right if and only if it is at least as good_I as any of the agent's other options.

EE4. An act is morally right if and only if the agent rationally ought to believe that the act is at least as good_I as any of his other options.

In EE1 and EE2 we find the term “morally ought”; in EE3 and EE4 we find “morally right” (meaning morally permissible). Although related, these two notions differ. We morally ought to do an act only if the act is (or would be) morally right; however, it is false that an act is morally right only if we (or someone) morally ought to do it. Sometimes, exactly two of our options, *A* and *B*, are each morally right. In such cases, although *A* is morally right, what we morally ought to do is not *A* but either *A* or *B*.

I regard EE1 through EE4 as satisfactory formulations of ethical egoism. This is partly because they reflect what philosophers generally regard as ethical egoism. Many other statements resemble EE1 through EE4 (some of them familiar from ethics texts), but do not merit the same attention. Some examples:

⁹The parenthetical phrase “and because” is important to any formulation of ethical egoism. I mean it to be implicit in EE2 through EE4, below.

- EE5. A person morally ought to do an act if and only if he believes that the act is his best_I option.
- EE6. A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act is at least as good_I as any of his other options.
- EE7. A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act is the best option in terms of *my* (the speaker's) self-interest.
- EE8. An act is morally right if and only if it is the agent's best_I option.
- EE9. An act is morally right if and only if, for the agent of the act, it has merit_I.
- EE10. An act is morally right if and only if it will bring the agent a self-benefit.
- EE11. An act is morally right if and only if it is at least as good_I, or nearly as good_I, as any of the agent's other options.

Thesis EE5, which includes the phrase “he believes that” after “if and only if”, is an uncharitable formulation of ethical egoism. (The same goes for other formulations that include “he believes that” – e.g., the variation of EE5 that substitutes “that the act has merit_I” for “that the act is his best_I option”.) For example, we cannot plausibly say that anytime a person *believes* that an act has such and such a property, he morally ought to do it. His belief might stem from culpable ignorance, careless reasoning, or even willful self-deception.

To give a second example, suppose a person's best_I option is act *A*, and conclusive, easily seen evidence reveals this. But owing to sloppy reasoning, the person fails to believe that *A* is his best_I option. Then EE5 implies that he has no moral obligation to do *A*. This is a problem, for I doubt that those who identify as ethical egoists would accept that implication. The example is just as forceful if, in EE5, we replace “believes” with “reasonably believes”. A better choice is to replace “believes” with “rationally ought to believe” – but this just turns EE5 into EE2.

Thesis EE6 is a variation of EE1 that replaces “his best_I option” with “at least as good_I as any of his other options”. This ruins it as a statement of ethical egoism. Suppose that a person's two most optimal_I options, *A* and *B*, are equally good_I. Here *A* meets the necessary and sufficient condition stated in EE6. However, ethical egoists, fairly interpreted, would deny that the person morally ought to do *A*. They would say that he morally ought to do either *A* or *B*. Also, we produce no improvement in EE6 by inserting “he rationally ought to believe that” after “if and only if”, or by substituting “has merit_I” for “is at least as good_I as any of his other options”.

Thesis EE7 is called “individual ethical egoism”. This contrasts it with EE1, often called “universal ethical egoism” (Taylor, 1975, p. 33). No philosopher finds EE7 acceptable as a normative moral theory, for it clearly is not.

Thesis EE8 is highly implausible, even to those attracted to ethical egoism. It implies that if a person has just two available actions, exactly equal in merit_I, he acts wrongly if he does either of them. A similar problem infects the version of EE8 in which “the agent rationally ought to believe that” follows “if and only if”.

Turning to EE9 and EE10, suppose an act has merit_I in this way: it brings the agent a self-benefit, namely pleasure. Then EE9 and EE10 each imply that in doing the act, the agent does something morally right. They do so even if the agent knows that as a source of self-benefits, including pleasure, the act is greatly inferior to his other options. This makes EE9 and EE10 uncharitable statements of ethical egoism. Similar remarks go for the variations of EE9 and EE10 that include, after “if and only if”, “the agent rationally ought to believe that”.

Regarding EE11, some might say that it merits discussion. However, we need not discuss it explicitly. It is so similar to EE3 that my main points about EE3 apply to it, *mutatis mutandis*. Similar remarks go for the variation of EE11 in which “the agent rationally ought to believe that” follows “if and only if”. That variation closely resembles EE4.

To summarize thus far: I will retain PE1 and PE2 as formulations of psychological egoism, and retain EE1 through EE4 as formulations of ethical egoism.

Let me note that because the notion of moral rightness has come up often thus far, our discussion should include not only OIC but also right-implies-can (RIC).

OIC. A person morally ought to do an act only if he can do it.

RIC. An act is morally right only if the agent can do it.

Thesis RIC is perhaps less plausible than OIC. Certainly it is less clear in meaning. However, partly to be thorough, I will include both. Also, to be charitable (and to follow a precedent I find in the literature), I will assume that the position presently at issue – roughly, that psychological egoism combined with OIC or RIC supports ethical egoism – is not threatened by any differences in which “can” is used in those various theses. I will treat “can” as having the same sense in OIC, RIC, PE1, and PE2’s implication that a person can do an act only if he believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit.

4.

The previous sections lead to a rewording of the thesis mentioned early in section 2:

Ethical egoism, meaning EE1, EE2, EE3, or EE4, follows validly from the conjunction of psychological egoism, meaning PE1 or PE2, with OIC or

RIC, that conjunction being suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions.

This thesis asserts that at least one of the following is true:

- (A) The conjunction of PE1 and OIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE1 or EE2.
- (B) The conjunction of PE1 and OIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE3 or EE4.
- (C) The conjunction of PE1 and RIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE1 or EE2.
- (D) The conjunction of PE1 and RIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE3 or EE4.
- (E) The conjunction of PE2 and OIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE1 or EE2.
- (F) The conjunction of PE2 and OIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE3 or EE4.
- (G) The conjunction of PE2 and RIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE1 or EE2.
- (H) The conjunction of PE2 and RIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE3 or EE4.

We can reject six of these positions straightaway, namely, all except (B) and (F). This is because the six statements below are true. Beneath them, beginning directly after (h), I have listed the propositions to which they refer, excluding those already mentioned.

- (a) PE1 and OIC, combined, imply 1, which conflicts with 2, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE1 and EE2 each commit us.¹⁰
- (c) PE1 and RIC, combined, imply 1.1, which conflicts with 2, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE1 and EE2 each commit us.
- (d) PE1 and RIC, combined, imply 1.1, which conflicts with 2.1, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE3 and EE4 each commit us.
- (e) PE2 (including its tacit component) and OIC, combined, imply 1.2, which conflicts with 2.2, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE1 and EE2 each commit us.¹¹

¹⁰Russell (1982, pp. 93, 94–95) and McConnell (1978, pp. 45–46) each make a similar point, though in each case about a variation of PE3, not PE1. I am indebted to their points for stimulating some of the thoughts in this section.

¹¹Recall from section 2 that owing partly to its tacit component, PE2 implies that a person can do an act only if she believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit.

- (g) PE2 and RIC, combined, imply 1.3, which conflicts with 2.2, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE1 and EE2 each commit us.
- (h) PE2 and RIC, combined, imply 1.3, which conflicts with 2.3, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE3 and EE4 each commit us.
- 1. A person morally ought to do an act only if she believes that the act has merit_I. (Entailed by PE1 and OIC.)
 - 1.1. An act is morally right only if the agent believes that it has merit_I. (Entailed by PE1 and RIC.)
 - 1.2. A person morally ought to do an act only if she believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit. (Entailed by PE2 and OIC.)
 - 1.3. An act is morally right only if the agent believes that it will bring about a self-benefit. (Entailed by PE2 and RIC.)
- 2. It might be true both that a person morally ought to do an act and that she does not believe that the act has merit_I. (Entailed by F, below, combined with EE1 or EE2.)
 - 2.1. It might be true both that an act is morally right and that the agent does not believe that the act has merit_I. (Entailed by F combined with EE3 or EE4.)
 - 2.2. It might be true both that a person morally ought to do an act and that she does not believe that the act will bring about a self-benefit. (Entailed by F combined with EE1 or EE2.)
 - 2.3. It might be true both that an act is morally right and that the agent does not believe that the act will bring about a self-benefit. (Entailed by F combined with EE3 or EE4.)
- F. Even if an act has the properties (some of which include some of the others) of being a person's best_I option, of having merit_I, of being at least as good_I as any of the person's other options, and of bringing about a self-benefit, it might be that the person believes none of the following: that the act has merit_I; that the act is at least as good_I as any of her other options; and that the act will bring about a self-benefit. Likewise, even if a person rationally ought to believe that an act is her best_I option, that it has merit_I, that it is at least as good_I as any of her other options, and that it will bring about a self-benefit, it might be that the person believes none of the following: that the act has merit_I; that the act is at least as good_I as any of her other options; and that the act will bring about a self-benefit.

If (a), (c), (d), (e), (g), and (h) are true, we must reject the theses to which they correspond – thesis (A) in the case of (a), thesis (C) in the case of (c), and so on. For example, if, as (a) says, PE1 and OIC imply a proposition, namely 1,

that conflicts with a thesis to which EE1 and EE2 each commit us, namely 2, then (A) is false. Contrary to (A), neither EE1 nor EE2 follows from a set of consistent, non-question-begging premises that includes PE1, OIC, and some plausible further assertions. Rather, if we hold PE1 and OIC, we must reject EE1 and EE2.¹²

Also, the statements just mentioned – (a), (c), and so on – are true. First, fact F, mentioned in those statements, is indeed a fact. This would not be true if a person’s options, her available acts, were confined to acts she takes to have merit_I (or to promise self-benefits, or to be at least as good_I ...). But unless “option” (or “available”) has a needlessly odd sense (as I assume it does not, either in F or in EE1 through EE4), some acts can be options for a person even if she does not see them as having merit_I.

This point does not conflict with psychological egoism. To see this, suppose that according to the evidence available to a person, act A has merit_I. But owing solely to careless error or inattention, the person lacks the belief that A has merit_I. Suppose that in every respect aside from that – physical, psychological, and so on – she is fully able to do A. For instance, with the possible exception of the belief that A has merit_I, she has every psychological state causally required for a choice to do A.

Psychological egoists need not say that because this person lacks the belief that A has merit_I, act A is not an option for her. Given their thesis and what they mean by it, they would say that unless the person forms the belief that act A has merit_I, that act will not occur. In that sense, she presently cannot do A. However, they can grant that act A, being rationally (physically, etc.) accessible to the person, is an option for her, an available act, in an ordinary sense of those terms.¹³

So as I said, F is indeed a fact. Also, in each of the above statements – (a), (c), (d), (e), (g), and (h) – the variation of 2 referred to indeed follows from the things said to imply it. Statement (c), for instance, says, in part, that proposition 2 follows from fact F combined with EE1 or EE2. Proposition 2 indeed does that. Fact F asserts, in part, that even if a particular act is a person’s best_I option, the person might not believe that the act has merit_I. That assertion, combined with EE1, which says that a person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act is her best_I option, implies that even if a person morally ought to do an act, she might not believe that the act has merit_I. This implication is proposition 2.

¹²The phrase “consistent, non-question-begging” is important. If, for example, PE1 and OIC logically compelled us, through *inconsistent* premises, to reject EE1 and EE2, then given the principle of explosion, they would entail EE1 and EE2 through those same premises.

¹³Although I stand by what I say in this paragraph, I realize that it raises questions for my charitable assumption (mentioned at the end of section 3) that “can” has the same sense in OIC, RIC, PE1, and PE2’s implication that a person can do an act only if she believes that the act will produce a self-benefit. I will not consider those questions here. I do so in another paper, still in preparation.

Similarly, F asserts, in part, that even if a person rationally ought to believe that an act is her best₁ option, she might not believe that the act has merit₁. That assertion, combined with EE2, which says that a person morally ought to do an act if and only if she rationally ought to believe that the act is her best₁ option, implies 2: that even if a person morally ought to do an act, she might not believe that the act has merit₁.

So again, 2 follows from fact F combined with EE1 or EE2. This is one illustration of the point that in each of the six statements mentioned shortly ago – (a), (c), (d), (e), (g), and (h) – the variation of 2 referred to follows from the things said to imply it.

Likewise, in each of those statements, the variation of 1 referred to follows from the things said to imply it. Statement (e), for example, asserts, in part, that 1.2 follows from PE2 and OIC. That assertion is true. PE2 (with its tacit component) implies that a person can do an act only if she believes that it will bring about a self-benefit. OIC says that a person morally ought to do an act only if she can do it. So PE2 and OIC imply 1.2, which says that a person morally ought to do an act only if she believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit.

Finally, in each of the six statements, the things said to conflict with each other indeed conflict. For instance, as (g) says, 1.3 conflicts with 2.2. Recall that we morally ought to do an act only if the act is morally right. That fact, combined with 1.3 – the claim that an act is morally right only if the agent believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit – implies that a person morally ought to do an act only if she believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit. That implication conflicts with 2.2, the claim that even if a person morally ought to do an act, she might not believe that the act will bring about a self-benefit.

Thus, as I said, statements (a), (c), (d), (e), (g), and (h) are true. This makes their corresponding theses – (A), (C), (D), (E), (G), and (H) – false.

Regarding (B) and (F): I find no statements similar to (a), (c), and so forth that lead me to exclude (B) or (F) straightaway. In particular, the following do not do that:

- (b) PE1 and OIC, combined, imply 1, which conflicts with a proposition to which EE3 and EE4 each commit us.
- (f) PE2 and OIC, combined, imply 1.2, which conflicts with a proposition to which EE3 and EE4 each commit us.

The conflicts mentioned in (b) and (f) do not exist, making the two statements false. At least, I find no reason to accept these statements, no proposition which, were it the referent of the words “a proposition” in (b) or (f), would make (b) or (f) true.

For example, (b) is true only if there is a proposition with the following two features. First, it conflicts with assertion 1. Second, EE3 and EE4 each

commit us to it, perhaps by entailing it when conjoined with this or that fact. The word “fact” is important. If EE3 and EE4 each “commit” us to the proposition only in conjunction with some falsehood, they do not really commit us to the proposition.

I find no proposition with these two features. For example, given fact F, EE3 and EE4 each commit us to 2.1, 2.3, and the additional proposition – call it 2.4 – that even if an act is morally right, the agent might not believe that the act is at least as good_I as any of her other options. However, none of those three propositions conflicts with the version of 1 to which (b) refers, namely 1 itself. Proposition 2.1, for example, says that even if an act is morally right, the agent might not believe that it has merit_I. This is consistent with 1, according to which a person morally ought to do an act only if she believes that the act has merit_I. It would not be consistent with 1 if by saying that an act is (or would be) morally right we implied that the relevant agent morally ought to do it. But we imply no such thing, as observed earlier.

Of course, when a person has just one morally right act available, she morally ought to do it. But this means, not that (b) is true but that (b*) is true.

- (b*) PE1 and OIC, combined, imply 1, which, if conjoined with the proposition that the act in question, if morally right, is the agent’s only morally right option (and thus what she morally ought to do), conflicts with 2.1, a thesis to which, via fact F, EE3 and EE4 each commit us.

Unlike (b), statement (b*) can be true without disproving (B). According to (B), EE3 or EE4 follows from consistent, non-question-begging premises that include, inter alia, PE1 and OIC. Nothing in (B) implies that these premises include the proposition, mentioned in (b*), that the act in question, if morally right, is the agent’s only morally right option.

My points about (b) are true, *mutatis mutandis*, of (f), which, like (b), refers to EE3 and EE4. Propositions 2.1, 2.3, and 2.4, to which EE3 and EE4 each commit us, are consistent with 1.2, the variation of 1 to which (f) refers.

Thus, to repeat, I find nothing like (a), (c), and so forth that leads me to exclude (B) or (F) straightaway. More generally, I find nothing at all that leads me to do that.

5.

My results lead to a new formulation of the thesis introduced in section 2:

At least one of the following is true. First, as (B) says, the conjunction of PE1 and OIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE3 or EE4. Second, as (F) says, the conjunction of PE2 and OIC (suitably supplemented ...) entails EE3 or EE4.

If we have good reason to reject this thesis, we have good reason to reject the general thesis that given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from the conjunction of psychological egoism with either OIC or RIC, that conjunction being suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions. This is what our preliminaries reveal.

And indeed, we have good reason to reject the above thesis. Consider (B), for instance. Its meaning is that PE1, conjoined with OIC and some plausible further assertions, the resulting set of premises being consistent and non-question-begging, entails EE3 or EE4. But how can we validly deduce EE3 or EE4 from consistent, non-question-begging premises that include, along with PE1 and OIC, only *plausible* assertions? Much as I try, I find no better attempt than this:

PE1. The ultimate motive of every act includes a belief on the agent's part that the act has merit_I. A person can do an act only if he has that belief.

OIC. A person morally ought to do an act only if he can do it.

1. Thus (from PE1 and OIC), a person morally ought to do an act only if he believes that the act has merit_I.
3. An act is morally right only if the relevant agent morally ought to do it.
4. If a person believes that an act has merit_I, then that act is at least as good_I as any of his other options.
5. Thus (from 1, 3, and 4), an act is morally right only if the act is at least as good_I as any of the agent's other options.
6. If a particular act is at least as good_I as any of the agent's other options, then it is morally right.
7. Thus (from 5 and 6), as EE3 says, an act is morally right if and only if it is at least as good_I as any of the agent's other options.

This argument fails, partly because premises 3 and 4 have no plausibility. Also, no improvement comes from revising the argument so that it defends EE4 rather than EE3, or so that it concerns (F) rather than (B).

The failure of the argument, and of others like it, is no surprise. Before I explain this, however, let us examine another attempt to substantiate (B) or (F). It comes from John Deigh's well-regarded *Introduction to Ethics*:

The doctrine [psychological egoism], if sound, furnishes a defender of [ethical] egoism with a seemingly powerful argument for [ethical] egoism's fundamental principle. In particular, if sound, it seems strongly to support the proposition a defender must establish to meet the main burden of proof on such arguments. ... Intuitively, it draws on the thought that it makes no sense to prescribe for someone actions that best promote of some end unless he or she could have a

motive to pursue that end. ... Hence, clearly, if ... at bottom the only motive people could ever have is the desire to promote their own interests, then the only end whose promotion it makes sense to prescribe as an ultimate end is a person's own interests, which is to say, his or her own happiness. Therefore, the only end whose promotion it makes sense for a fundamental principle of right action to prescribe is the actor's own happiness. And this, in effect, is the proposition the defender of [ethical] egoism must establish. (Deigh, 2010, p. 34)

We can state this argument as follows:

8. It makes no sense to prescribe for a person acts that promote some end unless that person could have a motive to pursue that end.
9. Psychological egoism: At bottom, the only motive a person can have is a desire to promote his own interests.
10. Therefore, the only end whose promotion it makes sense to prescribe as an ultimate end is a person's own interests, which is to say, his own happiness.
11. Therefore, the only end whose promotion it makes sense for a fundamental principle of right action to prescribe is the agent's own happiness.

Deigh challenges neither the validity of this argument nor any premise except 9. In fact, after restating the argument in what he considers an equivalent form, he says "Plainly, the weight of this argument lies with ... psychological egoism. So the question to ask is: How plausible is it [psychological egoism]?" (Deigh, 2010, p. 34). My own question is whether the argument substantiates (B) or (F).

Premise 8 is a variation of OIC. At least, it is no stretch to read it that way. (If I am wrong about this, it means only that Deigh's argument would be better treated in the next section, which concerns arguments that exclude OIC and RIC.) Premise 9, on the surface, is not PE1 or PE2, but it becomes one of those as we analyze and improve the argument. Similarly, statement 11, on the surface, does not specifically endorse EE3 or EE4, but it does so if charitably read. Hence, we can treat this argument as an effort to substantiate a variation of (B) – that is, an effort to deduce EE3 or EE4 from a variation of OIC combined with PE1 or PE2.

The argument is not obviously valid. And as just said, whether it really defends EE3 or EE4 is unclear. In fact, it appears to defend something like EE9 or EE10, each of which inadequately states ethical egoism.

So let us improve the argument. Let us reword its conclusion so that it explicitly endorses EE3. (I set EE4 aside briefly.) Also, let us reword its premises to promote validity and precision.

- 8.1. It makes no sense to prescribe for a person acts that promote some end unless that person could have a motive to do those acts.
- 9.1. Psychological egoism: A person can have motives to do acts only if the acts are at least as good_I as any of the person's other options.
- 10.1. Therefore, it makes no sense to prescribe for a person acts that promote some end unless those acts are at least as good_I as any of the person's other options.
- 11.1. Therefore, the only fundamental principle of right action it makes sense to recommend to people is EE3, which says that an act is morally right if and only if it is at least as good_I as any of the agent's other options.

Given one or two assumptions – for instance, that to recommend a fundamental principle of right action to people is to prescribe for them actions that promote some end – the above argument is valid. However, 9.1 inadequately expresses psychological egoism. Like PE3, it includes the notion of *maximizing* self-interest. Additionally, it lacks the phrase “believed by the person to be”, making it clearly false.

So let us revise 9.1 so that it reflects PE1 or PE2. Our results will be the same either way; so let us revise it as follows, making it essentially PE1:

- 9.2. A person can have motives to do acts that promote some end only if he believes that those acts have merit_I.

The argument now consists of 8.1, 9.2, 10.1, and 11.1. It thus defends EE3 (endorsed in 11.1) using premises that include PE1 (9.2) and a variation of OIC (8.1). If successful, it supports a variation of (B).

Unfortunately, 8.1 and 9.2 fail to entail 10.1. Also, I see no way to repair the argument. Suppose, for example, that we make the argument valid by revising its final two steps thus:

- 10.2. Therefore (from 8.1 and 9.2), it makes no sense to prescribe for a person acts that promote some end unless the person believes that those acts have merit_I.
- 11.2. Therefore, the only fundamental principle of right action it makes sense to recommend to people is that an act is morally right if and only if the agent believes that the act has merit_I.

These revisions are ineffective. As an expression of ethical egoism, the principle to which 11.2 refers is no good. It implies that we can succeed in acting rightly even if our act is greatly inferior_I to our other options. Furthermore, it contains the phrase “the agent believes that”, which, as observed earlier, has no place in a formulation of ethical egoism.

Thesis (B) mentions not only EE3 but also EE4. Thus, as a final effort to repair the argument, suppose we replace 11.2 with this:

11.3. Therefore, the only fundamental principle of right action it makes sense to recommend to people is EE4, which says that an act is morally right if and only if the agent rationally ought to believe that the act is at least as good_I as any of his other options.

This revision is unhelpful. If we make it, then to preserve validity we must revise 10.2 and 9.2. The revised form of 9.2 asserts, preposterously, that a person can have motives to do acts that promote some end only if he rationally ought to believe that the acts are at least as good_I as any of his other options.

Thus, the argument for proposition 11 fails. In general, I can find no acceptable deduction of EE3 or EE4 from premises that include a variation of OIC along with PE1 or PE2.¹⁴

Really, this is not surprising. Consider what OIC, conjoined with PE1 or PE2, directly entails. It directly entails either statement 1, “A person morally ought to do an act only if he believes that the act has merit_I”, or statement 1.2, “A person morally ought to do an act only if he believes that the act will bring about a self-benefit”. Those statements connect what a person morally ought to do with what he believes about the relation of his actions to his interests. And they do so through the phrase “only if”, which denotes merely a necessary condition. Also, that condition mentions, basically, the act’s having merely some merit_I. EE3 and EE4, by contrast, each connect what is morally right of a person to do with what is true or rational to believe about the relation of his actions to his interests. And they do so through the phrase “if and only if”, which denotes a necessary and sufficient condition. Finally, that condition concerns the act’s having optimal merit_I. These facts create an enormous logical gap between statement 1 and both EE3 and EE4; also between 1.2 and both EE3 and EE4.

To conclude this section: We should reject the thesis that given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from the conjunction of psychological egoism with OIC or RIC, that conjunction being suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions.

6.

In rejecting the thesis just mentioned, I have assumed that it tacitly includes the claim that not only psychological egoism, but also OIC or RIC, contributes to the deduction’s validity. Thus, I have not yet rejected the following thesis, which mentions neither OIC nor RIC.

Given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from psychological egoism, suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions.

¹⁴Timmons, for example (2013, pp. 186–188), produces an attempt at such a deduction, but then shows that it fails. He does so to illustrate the difficulty of founding ethical egoism on OIC and psychological egoism.

To challenge this thesis forcefully we must not ignore putative deductions of ethical egoism from psychological egoism that exclude OIC and RIC. I cannot examine every imaginable deduction of that type, but I will examine what I consider the best one.¹⁵ I adapt it from Bruce Russell (1982, pp. 95–96), who presents an argument which, potentially, establishes the above thesis. I say that Russell “presents” the argument, not that he accepts it. He objects to it on the grounds that the form of psychological egoism it employs has no sound supporting argument (*ibid.*, pp. 96–99). I show that if the argument employs an adequate formulation of psychological egoism, then insofar as it is valid and its other premises are plausible, its conclusion is not really ethical egoism. This project differs from Russell’s, though it neither conflicts with his nor disputes his results.

Russell presents the argument thus:

If ... a person has reason to do an act only if it is reasonable for him to believe that it will satisfy, or is a means to satisfying, his desires, whether self-interested *or* other-regarding, then one can use the desire version of psychological egoism [“No one ever desires anything for its own sake except what he believes is in his own self-interest”] to lend support to ethical egoism. If the desire version is true, then people only desire what they believe is in their self-interest or a means to it. ... Given the above account of reasons for action, it would ... follow that the only reason a person has for doing an action is that it is reasonable to believe that it will satisfy, or is a mean to satisfying, his self-interested desires. This is equivalent to what has been called rational egoism.... If any adequate, fundamental moral principle must be such that every person has reason to follow it simply in virtue of the fact that his action satisfies the conditions of obligation set forth in the statement of the principle, then only a principle that expresses some version of ethical egoism could be an adequate, fundamental moral principle if rational egoism were true. (Russell, 1982, p. 96)

What Russell calls “the desire version of psychological egoism” is basically PE2.¹⁶ Also of note is that we can improve the above argument, though in ways congenial to Russell’s aims. I say this for a few reasons; allow me to give two. First, although the argument’s conclusion, “Only a principle that expresses some version of ethical egoism could be an adequate, fundamental moral principle”, mentions ethical egoism, it does not say that ethical egoism is true. However, we can produce a conclusion that does that. We need only extend the argument by two steps (18 and 19, below).

¹⁵Let me mention three others, however. The first comes from Stace (1937, p. 209). It claims that ethical egoism follows from psychological egoism because, “since [assuming psychological egoism] there is no such thing as disinterested altruism, morality must be founded upon egoism. It cannot be anything except intelligent calculation”. No matter how I plausibly unpack the unclear and ambiguous first sentence in this quotation, I produce no valid, plausible deduction of EE1, EE2, EE3, or EE4 from the claim that disinterested altruism does not exist. The other two deductions are in Deigh (2010, pp. 34, 37–39). Unlike the argument of Deigh’s addressed in section 5, above, these two rely on no variation of OIC. I address the two in Tilley (2022).

¹⁶Here the antepenultimate paragraph in section 2 is relevant.

Second, on a strict reading, the intermediate conclusion “The only reason a person has for doing an action is that it is reasonable to believe that it will satisfy ... his self-interested desires” does not follow from the premises meant to entail it, namely, “People only desire what they believe is in their self-interest or a means to it” and “A person has reason to do an act only if it is reasonable for him to believe that it will satisfy ... his desires”. Although the latter entail what I think Russell wants them to entail (14, below), they do not entail that the content of the reason in question is the proposition, “It is reasonable to believe that the act will satisfy, or is a mean to satisfying, my (the agent’s) self-interested desires”.

Here is the improved argument:

12. People desire only what they see as in their interest or as a means to things in their interest. In short, every desire is (ultimately) self-interested.
13. A person has a reason to do an act only if it is reasonable for her to believe that the act will satisfy (or is a means of satisfying) some of her desires.
14. Therefore, a person has a reason to do an act only if it is reasonable for her to believe that the act will satisfy some of her self-interested desires.
15. The statement “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act meets condition *C*” is an adequate fundamental moral principle only if, for every person, the fact that her act (i.e., one of the acts available to her) meets condition *C* ensures that she has a reason to do that act.
16. (Tacit premise.) If, for every person, the fact that her act meets condition *C* ensures that it’s reasonable for her to believe that the act will satisfy some of her self-interested desires, then the statement “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act meets condition *C*” reduces to a version of ethical egoism.
17. Therefore (from 14, 15, and 16), the statement “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act meets condition *C*” is an adequate fundamental moral principle only if it reduces to a version of ethical egoism.
18. We can find a statement of the form “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act meets condition *C*” that qualifies as an adequate fundamental moral principle, the word “adequate” meaning, in part, “true”.
19. Therefore (from 17 and 18), a version of ethical egoism is true.

This argument is unsuccessful. First, the phrase “what they see”, in 12, could mean either “what they see, correctly or reasonably” or “what they see, perhaps correctly or reasonably, though perhaps not”. Only if it has the second meaning does 12 satisfactorily capture psychological egoism (and avoid absurdity). But if the phrase has that meaning, the argument is invalid unless “her self-interested desires”, in 14 and 16, means “her desires, those desires being for things that she sees, perhaps correctly or reasonably, though perhaps not, as in her interest or as means to things in her interest”. So 16 means this:

16.1. If, for every person, the fact that her act meets condition *C* ensures that it’s reasonable for her to believe that the act will satisfy some of her desires, those desires being for things that she sees, perhaps correctly or reasonably, though perhaps not, as in her interest or as means to things in her interest, then the statement “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act meets condition *C*” reduces to a version of ethical egoism.

Now consider the final phrase in 16.1: “a version of ethical egoism”. We cannot read it to mean “something that implies (or is) EE1 or EE2, or something closely similar to them”. For then the antecedent of 16.1, which says nothing about anyone’s *best_i* option, comes nowhere close to supporting the consequent. The only way to make the antecedent guarantee the consequent is to read “a version of ethical egoism” in such a way that the consequent of 16.1 means the following (or something very similar):

The statement “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if the act meets condition *C*” reduces to something that implies the following: “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if it’s reasonable for her to believe that the act will satisfy some of her desires, those desires being for things that she sees, perhaps correctly or reasonably, though perhaps not, as in her interest or as means to things in her interest”.

Thus far we have seen that if 12 adequately expresses psychological egoism, then unless the argument for 19 is invalid, 16 is equivalent to 16.1. Further, 16.1 is true only if its phrase, “a version of ethical egoism”, means the same thing as the long phrase following “reduces to” in the consequent just stated. But if the phrase has that meaning in 16.1, it does so also in 17 and 19; otherwise, the argument is invalid. Therefore, 19 means this:

19.1. Something that implies the following is true: “A person morally ought to do an act if and only if it’s reasonable for her to believe that the act will satisfy some of her desires, those desires being for things that she sees, perhaps correctly or reasonably, though perhaps not, as in her interest or as means to things in her interest”.

This proposition, although significant, is not ethical egoism. Suppose that a person would be reasonable to believe that a particular act will satisfy her

desires. Suppose also that her desires are for things that she sees as in her interest. Then 19.1 implies that she morally ought to do the act. It does so even if her belief about the things she desires – that they are in her interest – is both false and wildly unreasonable. No ethical egoist would accept this view.¹⁷

Interestingly, even if, in 19.1, we substitute “correctly or reasonably” for “perhaps correctly or reasonably, though perhaps not”, 19.1 is not ethical egoism. It implies that a person could act rightly in doing an act even if what she rationally should believe, and what is true, is that the act is inferior₁ to her other options.

The general point is that if premise 12 adequately expresses psychological egoism, then unless the argument for 19 is invalid or premise 16 is implausible, 19 does not adequately express ethical egoism. Hence, the argument fails to support the view that given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from psychological egoism, suitably supplemented with plausible further assertions.

7.

To conclude: My question was whether, given adequate formulations of ethical and psychological egoism, ethical egoism follows validly from psychological egoism and some plausible further assertions, the overall set of premises being consistent and non-question-begging. I have examined many ways of defending a “yes” answer. Some employ ought-implies-can; others employ right-implies-can; one employs neither. All of them fail. Also, I see no better ways of supporting a “yes” answer. I thus arrive at a “no” answer. Others have arrived at that answer, but no one, I believe, has done so from a treatment of the

¹⁷Upon reading this criticism of 19.1, an anonymous referee thought of an alternative adaptation (or revision) of Russell’s argument – one that avoids the criticism. My own wording (or interpretation) of it is this: First, a person morally ought to do an act only if there is a reason for her to do it. Second, there is a reason for a person to do an act only if the act will bring about something she desires. Third, if psychological egoism is true, then a person desires something (and hence an act on her part has a chance of bringing about something she desires) only if she believes that the thing in question is in her interest (i.e., believes either that it is directly in her interest or that it is a means to something directly in her interest). Fourth, given the preceding step, if psychological egoism is true, then if a person’s beliefs to the effect that a thing is in her interest are true, then she desires a thing only if that thing is in her interest. Fifth, given the preceding step and the first two, if psychological egoism is true, then if a person’s beliefs to the effect that a thing is in her interest are true, she morally ought to do an act only if the act will bring about something that is in her interest. Sixth, psychological egoism is true. Finally, as a consequence of the preceding two steps, if a person’s beliefs to the effect that a thing is in her interest are true, she morally ought to do an act only if the act will bring about something that is in her interest. I have two comments about this argument. First, its conclusion is clearly significant. It basically says that in the epistemic situation it describes, we have no moral duty to do anything – relieve another’s suffering, say – that fails to serve our own interests. (Of course, rather than accept the conclusion, we can plausibly reject the argument’s sixth step, psychological egoism, or possibly its second step, reasons-internalism.) Second, the conclusion inadequately states ethical egoism. The same goes even for the final part of the conclusion – the part beginning with “she morally ought”. (Nor did the referee say otherwise. The referee’s idea, I take it, was simply that the argument deserves attention.) This is true for a few reasons, two of which are these: first, the point made in that final part pertains to just some situations in which people act; and second, that point states no necessary and *sufficient* condition for having a moral requirement.

question as comprehensive as mine, a treatment, for instance, that covers a host of argumentative strategies and all the most common understandings of ethical and psychological egoism. Of course, I do not deny that psychological egoism can play a role in defending significant claims about moral requirements.¹⁸ I contend, however, that to try to deduce ethical egoism from psychological egoism is a fruitless task.

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¹⁸ See, e.g., note 17.

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