



# MORAL PHILOSOPHY

*Selected Readings*

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*Under the general editorship of*  
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# Preface

*Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings* introduces the reader to the full range of problems of moral philosophy, from metaethics to applied ethics. It combines substantial chunks of the classics, which everyone should read, with some of the best of the extremely interesting work of the recent past and the present. In general, my principle of selection has been simply to include as much as possible of what seems to be best and most important. However, in Part VI, Applications, I have purposely included none of the fine recent work on social policy and the justice of institutions. Essays on these topics would not mesh well with the preceding selections, which focus mostly on individual behavior.

There is no need for lengthy introductory discussion; the essays speak for themselves. But two pedagogical matters do require brief mention. There is, first, the matter of the book's organization. To provide the student with some structure, I have followed the convention of grouping the readings into sections. But I am as aware as anyone that the divisions thus imposed are largely spurious. We cannot fully understand why someone ought to be moral without understanding what it is to have a reason, and neither can we fully understand what it is to have a reason without understanding how reasons can engage the will. Because of this, the issues raised in the first three sections flow back and forth into one another. Things are somewhat—but only somewhat—more orderly when we come to the next three sections. Thus, I bequeath to the instructor the problem of imparting a sense of multiple connectedness without allowing the inquiry to degenerate into formless free-for-all.

The second pedagogical issue concerns the readings' level of difficulty. Some very important positions in moral philosophy are inherently complex, while others presuppose sophisticated views from other areas of philosophy. As a result, any collection of this type must strike some balance between comprehensiveness and comprehensibility. In establishing my own balance, I have included a few essays that seem too difficult to assign to beginning students. But I think the great majority of the book's essays—far more than can be taught in any single semester—fall well within the grasp of the beginning student. Thus, the anthology is compatible with a variety of styles of introductory ethics courses. At the same time, it should be suitable for an intermediate or even an advanced course in moral theory.

In compiling and editing the book, I have received help from a variety of friends and colleagues, and I am pleased to acknowledge their contributions. While choosing the readings, I received many helpful suggestions from Hilary Kornblith, Arthur Kuflik, A. John Simmons, Robert Simon, Richard Werner, and William Wilcox. When writing the introductory material, I received valuable criticism from Hilary Kornblith, Arthur Kuflik, William Mann, and William Wilcox, none of whom should be held responsible for any errors the introductory material may now contain. At both stages, Robert Fogelin, Philosophy Series Editor for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, was extremely helpful. In addition, I benefited from the highly professional skills of Bill McLane, Eleanor Garner, and Rick Roehrich at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and—as always—of Leslie Weiger at the University of Vermont. To all these people, I am very grateful.

George Sher

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# I

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## MORAL PSYCHOLOGY AND MORAL EDUCATION

MORALITY IS ACTION-GUIDING. When we ask which acts are right and wrong, we are, in part, trying to discover how to act. Moreover, our beliefs about morality often affect the ways in which we *do* act. In many cases, people seem to do things precisely because they believe them to be right. The study of such moral behavior is known as *moral psychology*.

Perhaps the most basic question of moral psychology is *how* moral reasons move us to act. When people do what they have promised to do, or support worthy causes out of duty, are they influenced by the rightness of the acts themselves? Or is it because they expect to receive some benefit by doing what is right? The view that we always pursue our own benefit—that our ultimate motive in acting is always self-interest—is known as *psychological egoism*. Because there are different views about what is in a person's interest, there are also different versions of psychological egoism. In one common view, our interest consists entirely of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. If a psychological egoist believes this, he accepts *psychological hedonism*.

Because it is obvious that we do care about what affects us, psychological egoism has an immediate plausibility. Versions of this view can be found in the thoughts of Thomas Hobbes (reading 18), Jeremy Bentham (reading 34), and, although less consistently, John Stuart Mill (reading 26). Yet despite its attractiveness, psychological egoism is far from obviously correct. Indeed, when we are given arguments such as those presented by Joel Feinberg (reading 1), the case for it seems far weaker than many believe.



What are the alternatives? One possibility, often associated with Immanuel Kant (reading 29), is that moral reasons can themselves move us to act. On this view, appreciating why we ought to do something can by itself provide us with the impetus to do it. Indeed, there are places where Kant appears to go further. He sometimes suggests that unless moral rightness can be demonstrated by reason alone, the motivation it provides is too contingent, too accidental, to confer genuine moral worth upon acts. As Kant himself describes it, “[t]he practical necessity of acting according to this principle, i.e. duty, does not rest at all on feelings, impulses, and inclinations; it rests merely on the relation of rational beings to one another, in which the will of a rational being must always be regarded as legislative. . . .” In short, reason itself can be practical, and thus supply guidance to agents.

Kant’s view of moral motivation is elevated and inspiring. But it is also obscure. For how, exactly, can moral reasons (or our awareness of them) provide an impulse to do something if the desire to act on such reasons is not already present? The view that this cannot occur—that reason can show us how to achieve our ends, but cannot supply those ends themselves—is defended by David Hume in reading 20. If we accept Hume’s argument, we may be attracted to yet another account of moral motivation. In that account, developed by Philippa Foot in reading 21, the moral person is moved not by a bare awareness of moral reasons, but by that awareness plus an independent desire to act on such reasons. This alternative appears to assimilate moral motivation to a familiar pattern. However, the Kantian might reply that it leaves open the question of why persons *have* the desire to act morally, and thus also leaves room for the answer that moral reasons have intrinsic appeal.

Whatever we say about this, the desire to act morally is clearly not our *only* desire. We care about much else besides doing what is right. Thus, any theory of morality must elucidate the relationship between moral and nonmoral desires. On many theories, persons are only permitted to act on nonmoral desires if they can do so within the constraints of morality. But in reading 2, Bernard Williams contests this ordering. He argues that when our fundamental desires conflict with moral principles, it is unrealistic to expect us to subordinate those desires. In addition, our personal relationships may demand a kind of partiality that rules out the impersonal perspective of morality. For example, our devotion to our children may require that we favor them over others. In a similar vein, Susan Wolf argues in reading 3 that nonmoral values and ideals provide reasons that are just as compelling, and just as valid, as moral reasons. If Williams and Wolf are right, the person who always assigns the highest priority to moral duty may be alienated from other worthwhile goals and relationships. But Marcia Baron argues in reading 4 that acting from duty does not alienate us either from others or from our own fundamental commitments. The idea that it does reflects a number of mistaken assumptions. Once these are exposed, we see that duty leaves ample room for other valuable motives.

So far, we have focused on the moral agent’s responsiveness to moral reasons, and on the relation between those reasons and other motives. But further questions concern the ways in which people *become* moral agents. In his classic

discussion (reading 5), Aristotle construes moral education as the acquisition of virtuous character traits. These are acquired in the same way as other habits—through repeated performance of the relevant acts. In Aristotle’s view, we learn to be good by being good. But according to Lawrence Kohlberg (reading 6), moral education is less practical and more cognitive than this. In his view, the learner moves through a series of developmental stages until he reaches a maximally articulated moral sensibility. At the highest stage, the learner has transcended his earlier desires merely to please others or obey conventional norms, and is committed to respect for persons as determined by fully universal principles of right. By presenting hypothetical examples that make the learner aware of the inadequacies of his present stage, the moral educator stimulates him to move to a higher stage.

If Kohlberg is correct, moral educators need not use nonrational techniques to influence behavior. They need not resort to punishment, reward, exhortation, or the setting of examples. But many do favor such “directive” techniques. Thus, we must ask whether directive techniques can be distinguished from mere indoctrination. When a teacher goes beyond appeals to reason, and tries to instill good moral habits by voicing approval and disapproval or setting a personal example, isn’t he interfering with the child’s ability to recognize reasons? And isn’t this a violation of the right to exercise moral autonomy by choosing for oneself? In reading 7, George Sher and William J. Bennett concede that directive techniques can be misused, but argue that they need not violate the autonomy of either the child or the adult he will later become. Sher and Bennett also argue that such techniques are compatible with the democratic values of pluralism and tolerance.

Most often, people perform the acts that they believe are supported by the strongest reasons. But sometimes a person will believe that it is best to perform one act, and yet perform another. Such a person exhibits weakness of will. Because people may exhibit weakness by eating or drinking too much as well as by acting wrongly, this is not exclusively a moral phenomenon. Still, weakness of will is clearly pertinent to moral psychology. In his dialogue *The Protagoras*, Plato represented his teacher Socrates as arguing that we never knowingly pursue evil. When we do something wrong, it is always because we are ignorant of what we should do. In the second part of reading 5, Plato’s own student, Aristotle, disputes this Socratic view. According to Aristotle, the weak-willed person *does* know that he is acting wrongly or foolishly, but his knowledge is ineffective. It is not “worked into the living texture of the mind.” Gary Watson takes up this theme in reading 8. Watson agrees that the weak-willed person knows he is acting wrongly or foolishly, but asks why, in that case, he acts as he does. Is it because he fails to resist impulses that he could resist, or is his will overborne by his impulses? Although the second alternative threatens to conflate weakness with compulsion, Watson regards it as the more plausible. In his view, we exhibit weakness when we are unable to resist impulses that the normal person could resist.



# Psychological Egoism

JOEL FEINBERG

*Joel Feinberg (b. 1926), Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona, has done influential work in social and legal philosophy. His books include Doing and Deserving, Social Philosophy, and a recent quadrilogy with the overall title The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law.*

*In this reading, Feinberg examines psychological egoism—the view that we never want or pursue anything except our own happiness or self-interest. Although this view claims to explain why we act as we do, Feinberg points out that it is rarely supported by empirical evidence. Instead, it trades on certain arguments that are seldom carefully examined. Psychological egoism is, for example, often thought to hold because each person is motivated by his own desires and no one else's. However, as Feinberg notes, the fact that my desires are my own implies nothing about what I desire. Thus, it does not imply that I desire only my own happiness or satisfaction. Again, defenders of the view sometimes note that we get pleasure from helping others (or feel pangs of conscience about not helping). Yet far from supporting psychological egoism, this fact actually tells against it. For why should we feel such pleasure, if not that helping others satisfies a desire to help them—a desire that is emphatically not aimed only at our own happiness?*

*These examples do not exhaust the arguments considered by Feinberg. Throughout his discussion, however, the main point is clear. When we consider the matter carefully, we find no good reason to accept psychological egoism. We are free, therefore, to accept the common-sense view that people often act not to increase their own happiness, but simply to help others or to do the right thing.*

## The Theory

1. “PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM” is the name given to a theory widely held by ordinary men, and at one time almost universally accepted by political economists, philosophers, and psychologists, according to which all human actions when properly understood can be seen to be motivated by selfish desires. More precisely, psychological egoism is the doctrine that the only thing anyone is capable of desiring or pursuing ultimately (as an end in itself) is his *own* self-interest. No psychological egoist denies that men sometimes do desire things other than their own welfare—the happiness of other people, for example; but all psychological egoists insist that men are capable of desiring the happiness of others only when they take it to be a *means* to their own happiness. In short,

purely altruistic and benevolent actions and desires do not exist; but people sometimes appear to be acting unselfishly and disinterestedly when they take the interests of others to be means to the promotion of their own self-interest.

2. This theory is called *psychological* egoism to indicate that it is not a theory about what *ought* to be the case, but rather about what, as a matter of fact, *is* the case. That is, the theory claims to be a description of psychological facts, not a prescription of ethical ideals. It asserts, however, not merely that all men do as a contingent matter of fact “put their own interests first,” but also that they are capable of nothing else, human nature being what it is. Universal selfishness is not just an accident or a coincidence on this view; rather, it is an unavoidable consequence of psychological laws.

The theory is to be distinguished from another doctrine, so-called “ethical egoism,” according to which all men *ought* to pursue their own well-being. This doctrine, being a prescription of what *ought* to be the case, makes no claim to be a psychological theory of human motives; hence the word “ethical” appears in its name to distinguish it from *psychological* egoism.

3. There are a number of types of motives and desires which might reasonably be called “egoistic” or “selfish,” and corresponding to each of them is a possible version of psychological egoism. Perhaps the most common version of the theory is that apparently held by Jeremy Bentham.<sup>1</sup> According to this version, all persons have only one ultimate motive in all their voluntary behavior and that motive is a selfish one; more specifically, it is one particular kind of selfish motive—namely, a desire for one’s own *pleasure*. According to this version of the theory, “the only kind of ultimate desire is the desire to get or to prolong pleasant experiences, and to avoid or to cut short unpleasant experiences for oneself.”<sup>2</sup> This form of psychological egoism is often given the cumbersome name—*psychological egoistic hedonism*.

### Prima Facie Reasons in Support of the Theory

4. Psychological egoism has seemed plausible to many people for a variety of reasons, of which the following are typical:

- a. “Every action of mine is prompted by motives or desires or impulses which are *my* motives and not somebody else’s. This fact might be expressed by saying that whenever I act I am always pursuing my own ends or trying to satisfy my own desires. And from this we might pass on to—‘I am always pursuing something for myself or seeking my own satisfaction.’ Here is what seems like a proper description of a man acting selfishly,

<sup>1</sup> See his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Chap. I, first paragraph: “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. . . . They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it.”

<sup>2</sup> C. D. Broad, *Ethics and the History of Philosophy* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1952), Essay 10—“Egoism as a Theory of Human Motives,” p. 218. This essay is highly recommended.

- and if the description applies to all actions of all men, then it follows that all men in all their actions are selfish.”<sup>3</sup>
- b. It is a truism that when a person gets what he wants he characteristically feels pleasure. This has suggested to many people that what we really want in every case is our own pleasure, and that we pursue other things only as a means.
  - c. *Self-Deception*. Often we deceive ourselves into thinking that we desire something fine or noble when what we really want is to be thought well of by others or to be able to congratulate ourselves, or to be able to enjoy the pleasures of a good conscience. It is a well-known fact that people tend to conceal their true motives from themselves by camouflaging them with words like “virtue,” “duty,” etc. Since we are so often misled concerning both our own real motives and the real motives of others, is it not reasonable to suspect that we might *always* be deceived when we think motives disinterested and altruistic? . . .
  - d. *Moral education*. Morality, good manners, decency, and other virtues must be teachable. Psychological egoists often notice that moral education and the inculcation of manners usually utilize what Bentham calls the “sanctions of pleasure and pain.” Children are made to acquire the civilizing virtues only by the method of enticing rewards and painful punishments. Much the same is true of the history of the race. People in general have been inclined to behave well only when it is made plain to them that there is “something in it for them.” Is it not then highly probable that just such a mechanism of human motivation as Bentham describes must be presupposed by our methods of moral education?

### Critique of Psychological Egoism: Confusions in the Arguments

5. *Non-Empirical Character of the Arguments*. If the arguments of the psychological egoist consisted for the most part of carefully acquired empirical evidence (well-documented reports of controlled experiments, surveys, interviews, laboratory data, and so on), then the critical philosopher would have no business carping at them. After all, since psychological egoism purports to be a scientific theory of human motives, it is the concern of the experimental psychologist, not the philosopher, to accept or reject it. But as a matter of fact, empirical evidence of the required sort is seldom presented in support of psychological egoism. Psychologists, on the whole, shy away from generalizations about human motives which are so sweeping and so vaguely formulated that they are virtually incapable of scientific testing. It is usually the “armchair scientist” who holds the theory of universal selfishness, and his usual arguments are either based simply on his “impressions” or else are largely of a nonempirical sort. The latter are often shot full of a very subtle kind of logical

<sup>3</sup> Austin Duncan-Jones, *Butler’s Moral Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1952), p. 96. Duncan-Jones goes on to reject this argument. See p. 512f.

confusion, and this makes their criticism a matter of special interest to the analytic philosopher.

6. The psychological egoist's first argument (see 4a) is a good example of logical confusion. It begins with a truism—namely, that all of my motives and desires are *my* motives and desires and not someone else's. (Who would deny this?) But from this simple tautology nothing whatever concerning the nature of my motives or the objective of my desires can possibly follow. The fallacy of this argument consists in its violation of the general logical rule that analytic statements (tautologies),\* cannot entail synthetic (factual) ones.† That every voluntary act is prompted by the agent's own motives is a tautology; hence, it cannot be equivalent to "A person is always seeking something for himself" or "All of a person's motives are selfish," which are synthetic. What the egoist must prove is not merely:

- (i) Every voluntary action is prompted by a motive of the agent's own.

but rather:

- (ii) Every voluntary action is prompted by a motive of a quite particular kind, viz. a selfish one.

Statement (i) is obviously true, but it cannot all by itself give any logical support to statement (ii).

The source of the confusion in this argument is readily apparent. It is not the genesis of an action or the *origin* or its motives which makes it a "selfish" one, but rather the "purpose" of the act or the *objective* of its motives; *not where the motive comes from* (in voluntary actions it always comes from the agent) but *what it aims at* determines whether or not it is selfish. There is surely a valid distinction between voluntary behavior, in which the agent's action is motivated by purposes of his own, and *selfish* behavior in which the agent's motives are of one exclusive sort. The egoist's argument assimilates all voluntary action into the class of selfish action, by requiring, in effect, that an unselfish action be one which is not really motivated at all.

. . .

7. But if argument 4a fails to prove its point, argument 4b does no better. From the fact that all our successful actions (those in which we get what we were after) are accompanied or followed by pleasure it does not follow, as the egoist claims, that the *objective* of every action is to get pleasure for oneself. To begin with, the premise of the argument is not, strictly speaking, even true. Fulfillment of desire (simply getting what one was after) is no guarantee of satisfaction (pleasant feelings of gratification in the mind of the agent). Sometimes when we get what we want we *also* get, as a kind of extra dividend, a warm, glowing feeling of contentment; but often, far too often, we get no

\* Traditionally, analytic statements have been taken to be statements that are true by virtue of the meanings of words, and hence convey no information about the world.

† Traditionally, statements that do convey information about the world.

dividend at all, or, even worse, the bitter taste of ashes. Indeed, it has been said that the characteristic psychological problem of our time is the *dissatisfaction* that attends the fulfillment of our very most powerful desires.

Even if we grant, however, for the sake of argument, that getting what one wants *usually* yields satisfaction, the egoist's conclusion does not follow. We can concede that we normally get pleasure (in the sense of satisfaction) when our desires are satisfied, *no matter what our desires are for*; but it does not follow from this roughly accurate generalization that the only thing we ever desire is our own satisfaction. Pleasure may well be the usual accompaniment of all actions in which the agent gets what he wants; but to infer from this that what the agent always wants is his own pleasure is like arguing, in William James's example,<sup>4</sup> that because an ocean liner constantly consumes coal on its trans-Atlantic passage that therefore the *purpose* of its voyage is to consume coal. The immediate inference from even constant accompaniment to purpose (or motive) is always a *non sequitur*.

Perhaps there is a sense of "satisfaction" (desire fulfillment) such that it is certainly and universally true that we get satisfaction whenever we get what we want. But satisfaction in this sense is simply the "coming into existence of that which is desired." Hence, to say that desire fulfillment always yields "satisfaction" in this sense is to say no more than that we always get what we want when we get what we want, which is to utter a tautology like "a rose is a rose." It can no more entail a synthetic truth in psychology (like the egoistic thesis) than "a rose is a rose" can entail significant information in botany.

8. *Disinterested Benevolence*. The fallacy in argument 4b then consists, as Garvin puts it, "in the supposition that the apparently unselfish desire to benefit others is transformed into a selfish one by the fact that we derive pleasure from carrying it out."<sup>5</sup> Not only is this argument fallacious; it also provides us with a suggestion of a counter-argument to show that its conclusion (psychological egoistic hedonism) is false. Not only is the presence of pleasure (satisfaction) as a by-product of an action no proof that the action was selfish; in some special cases it provides rather conclusive proof that the action was *unselfish*. For in those special cases the fact that we get pleasure from a particular action *presupposes that we desired something else*—something other than our own pleasure—as an end in itself and not merely as a means to our own pleasant state of mind.

This way of turning the egoistic hedonist's argument back on him can be illustrated by taking a typical egoist argument, one attributed (perhaps apocryphally) to Abraham Lincoln, and then examining it closely:

Mr. Lincoln once remarked to a fellow-passenger on an old-time mud-coach that all men were prompted by selfishness in doing good. His fellow-passenger was antagonizing this position when they were passing over a corduroy bridge that

<sup>4</sup> *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), Vol. II, p. 558.

<sup>5</sup> Lucius Garvin, *A Modern Introduction to Ethics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), p. 39.



spanned a slough. As they crossed this bridge they espied an old razor-backed sow on the bank making a terrible noise because her pigs had got into the slough and were in danger of drowning. As the old coach began to climb the hill, Mr. Lincoln called out, "Driver, can't you stop just a moment?" Then Mr. Lincoln jumped out, ran back and lifted the little pigs out of the mud and water and placed them on the bank. When he returned, his companion remarked: "Now Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?" "Why, bless your soul Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see?"<sup>6</sup>

If Lincoln had cared not a whit for the welfare of the little pigs and their "suffering" mother, but only for his own "peace of mind," it would be difficult to explain how he could have derived pleasure from helping them. The very fact that he did feel satisfaction as a result of helping the pigs presupposes that he had a preexisting desire for something other than his own happiness. Then when *that* desire was satisfied, Lincoln of course derived pleasure. The *object* of Lincoln's desire was not pleasure; rather pleasure was the *consequence* of his preexisting desire for something else. If Lincoln had been wholly indifferent to the plight of the little pigs as he claimed, how could he possibly have derived any pleasure from helping them? He could not have achieved peace of mind from rescuing the pigs, had he not a prior concern—on which his peace of mind depended—for the welfare of the pigs for its own sake.

In general, the psychological hedonist analyzes apparent benevolence into a desire for "benevolent pleasure." No doubt the benevolent man does get pleasure from his benevolence, but in most cases, this is only because he has previously desired the good of some person, or animal, or mankind at large. Where there is no such desire, benevolent conduct is not generally found to give pleasure to the agent.

9. *Malevolence*. Difficult cases for the psychological egoist include not only instances of disinterested benevolence, but also cases of "disinterested malevolence." Indeed, malice and hatred are generally no more "selfish" than benevolence. Both are motives likely to cause an agent to sacrifice his own interests—in the case of benevolence, in order to help someone else, in the case of malevolence in order to harm someone else. The selfish man is concerned ultimately only with his own pleasure, happiness, or power; the benevolent man is often equally concerned with the happiness of others; to the malevolent man, the *injury* of another is often an end in itself—an end to be pursued sometimes with no thought for his own interests. There is reason to think that men have as often sacrificed themselves to injure or kill others as to help or to save others, and with as much "heroism" in the one case as in the other. The unselfish nature of malevolence was first noticed by the Anglican Bishop and

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the *Springfield (Illinois) Monitor*, by F. C. Sharp in his *Ethics* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1928), p. 75.