

Has Joel Feinberg Refuted Psychological Egoism?

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Abstract

It's roughly claimed by psychological egoism that all voluntary actions are driven by egoistic motives. Joel Feinberg is distinguished for his aggressive refutation against psychological egoism. In his article "Psychological Egoism", he mainly establishes two arguments: one is against psychological hedonism. Feinberg asserts that pleasure is just by-product of satisfaction of other desires. Another view is that psychological egoism is only an analytical statement. In response to that, the paper intends to formulate two refutations against the arguments respectively to show that Feinberg doesn't prove pleasure cannot be the ultimate desire and that the psychological egoism is not analytic statement.

Keywords

Joel Feinberg, Psychological Egoism, tautology.

1. Introduction

The study can be divided into three parts: First, introduction of psychological egoism. Second, reorganization of Joel Feinberg's arguments. Third, refutations to Feinberg. However, my aim in this paper is not to defend psychological egoism, but to show Feinberg's criticism of psychological egoism is not ultimately established.

2. The Concept of Psychological Egoism

At the beginning of his article, Feinberg writes that he refers to the theory with the term "psychological egoism", which states: "only thing anyone is capable of desiring or pursuing ultimately (as an end in itself) is his own self-interest." [1, p. 167]. And the theory is mainly supported by the following two reasons:

(1) Reason1: "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."

(2) Reason2: every action of mine is prompted by motives or desires or impulses which are my motives and not somebody else's". Therefore, motive of all the actions can be described as satisfying agents.

3. Feinberg's Criticism of Psychological Egoism

Based on the two reasons supporting psychological egoism, Feinberg mainly formulates two arguments against psychological egoism:

3.1. Argument one: psychological hedonism has not yet been established

Reason1 mainly represents the view of hedonism which regards the self-interests in the definition of psychological egoism as pursuing agent's own happiness or pleasure and avoiding displeasure.

Firstly, Feinberg[1, p. 170] illustrates the example of Lincoln:

“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 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?’”

Feinberg claims that Lincoln insisted that he helped the pigs out of a selfish motive which was to reduce the trepidation of his mind, but if there were no care about the welfare of the pigs, Lincoln would not be so disturbed and would not be so relieved after helping the pigs. Similar to Joseph Butler[2, p. 365], Feinberg asserts that this example, which seems to support psychological egoism, acknowledges that in addition to pursuing the agent's own happiness, there is another motive, which is the welfare of pigs in Lincoln's case.

Feinberg proves that the motivation of pursuing pleasure has to be supervenient to another motive. Pleasure is abstract and we can't find anything called pleasure in the material world. People can just find pleasure in specific activities or items. It is ridiculous to imagine a person who feel bored about everything in his life but claims that he is pursuing pleasure in his life. So, pleasure is just “by-product” of satisfying another motive and is normally gained through other items or activities rather than pure pleasure, just like Sidgwick, who writes “We could not pursue pleasure at all; unless we had desire for something else than pleasure”[3, p. 44].

Moreover, to refute psychological hedonism, Feinberg must prove that sometimes or at least in one case, "by-product" cannot be the ultimate desire. To refute hedonism properly and eliminate the ambiguity of what pleasure means in hedonism, Feinberg writes that there are two versions of pleasures: one is sensual pleasure and the other is from satisfying which is a gerund used in phrases like satisfying needs or desires--- “we tend to get pleasure in this sense whenever we get what we desire, no matter what we desire”[1, p. 172].

Desire for the first version of pleasure cannot be the sole motive, because we are obviously not doing everything for pleasure. Feinberg takes eating as an example. Although some gourmets eat for enjoying the pleasure brought by food, most of people eat just because they are very hungry, and then, Feinberg writes that even by our common sense, we can easily make the judgement that Christian martyrs and soldiers in Stalingrad didn't sacrifice out of pursuing pleasure.

Desire for the second version of pleasure cannot be the sole motive either, because it leads to infinite regress problem. Feinberg writes:

“All men desire only satisfaction.”

“Satisfaction of what?”

“Satisfaction of their desires.”

“Their desires for what?”

“Their desires for satisfaction.”

“Satisfaction of what?”

“Their desires.”

“For what?”

“For satisfaction” – etc., ad infinitum[1, p. 173].

Therefore, in neither situation hedonism can be established. Feinberg claims that he has successfully refuted psychological hedonism.

3.2. Argument two: Psychological egoists justify their theory by redefining selfish and unselfish

In Feinberg’s opinion, psychological egoism is established on the ground of a tautology.

First, Feinberg establishes an argument against reason². It is absolutely true that all our actions are driven by our own motives, not those of others. Because it is the explanation of the tautology that my actions are my actions. However, it offers us no more information but a definitely true proposition similar to $A=A$. And We cannot derive that all the actions are prompted by egoistic motives (from it). Therefore, the first reason actually offers no justification to the theory but repeats its premise. Therefore, it is illegitimate to derive psychological egoism from such a tautology.

Second, Feinberg illustrates Aunt Emma, a warm-hearted woman, who gave her money to a beggar and got nothing to eat for a whole week. However, the moving woman who is strongly believed to be unselfish with our common sense and described as unselfish in our ordinary language can still be clarified as selfish by psychological egoists. And there are similar examples of Christian martyrs and soldiers in Stalingrad. Therefore, Feinberg asserts that it is impossible to find actions with unselfish motives against psychological egoism, which means psychological egoism is unfalsifiable in principle.

What is more, Feinberg introduces a discussion which classifies propositions as analytic statements and synthetic statements. Analysis statements which are basically equal to tautology can be derived directly from the meaning of words. Therefore, it is necessarily true. Synthetic statements are different and they have to be derived from empirical facts, which makes them testable and falsifiable.

According to the aforementioned Kantian discussion, Feinberg asserts that psychological egoism is an analytic statement. Based on the tautology that agent’s actions are prompted by the agent’s motives not other’s, psychological egoists redefine “selfish” and “unselfish”, which equals all the voluntary actions including unselfish ones as well as selfish actions. In this sense, psychological egoism is established.

4. Refutations to Feinberg’s Criticism

Referring to the foregoing reorganization of Feinberg’s article, the refutation can be divided into two parts.

4.1. Refutation to argument one

Argument one is against psychological hedonism which claims that “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”. Argument one is clear and succinct which can be formulated as follows:

- a. Pleasure is only a by-product of satisfying the desire for another object.
- b. Sometimes the by-product cannot be the object of ultimate desire

Feinberg introduces the example of Lincoln. He writes that if there were no consideration of the welfare of the pigs Lincoln wouldn't be so disturbed and couldn't help stopping the driver and saving the pigs. Therefore, the example actually proves that pleasure is supervenient to the satisfaction of another desire such as Lincoln's saving pigs.

By illustrating this example and related discussion, Feinberg successfully proves that pleasure is supervenient. However, there still lies two possibilities: Lincoln saved the pig out of (1) concern for the welfare of the pig or (2) to avoid mental unrest. In other words, no matter how Feinberg calls pleasure, by-product or supervenience, he cannot exclude that pleasure, the "by-product", is the ultimate desire of agents. Feinberg needs to prove pleasure is not the ultimate desire in at least one circumstance to refute psychological hedonism.

To preclude the possible explanation of psychological hedonism on some occasions, Feinberg writes that there are two possible versions of pleasure for hedonism. However, the discussion is confusing and there lies several problems:

a. As for discussion about pleasure two, Feinberg wants to prove this version of pleasure cannot be the ultimate desire of hedonism, and to make it clear that the pleasure of hedonism is pleasure one or pleasure from sensations, and then, Feinberg can refute psychological hedonism by proving that all the actions are not prompted by desire for pleasure from sensations. However, pleasure one and pleasure two don't cover all the emotions that can be counted as pleasure. For example, Mark Mercer[4, p. 560] argues that desire to experience pleasure is not identical to the desire to experience particular sort of sensation:

Drinking wine with friends over an evening can be very pleasant in the sense, that is, of being a very pleasant experience and thereby it can satisfy an agent's desire for pleasure, even when that agent had no experience of pleasure that evening.

Therefore, Feinberg cannot simply refute psychological egoism by arguing that some actions are not for pleasure from sensations. There is still huge space left to psychological hedonists to explain that these behaviors are in pursuit of other types of pleasure.

b. As for pleasure one, Feinberg writes that, unlike gourmets, most of ordinary people don't eat to "savor the textures and flavors of fine food" and find pleasure in tasting food. They eat just because they are hungry. This example is used to defeat psychological hedonism, which is really confusing because pursuing pleasure and avoiding displeasure are two sides of one thing. Therefore, psychological hedonism can still be established by explaining eating out of hunger as eliminating unpleasant experiences.

Therefore, the discussion based on the classification of pleasure one and pleasure two is not so meaningful. However, the examples of Christian martyrs and soldiers in Stalingrad is convincing because it is obviously incredible that they sacrificed for their own pleasure. For the sake of argument, let's grant that psychological hedonism has been refuted. Psychological hedonism equates self-interest with the happiness of the subject itself, which is a form of psychological egoism. There are still several other versions of self-interests. Hence, psychological egoists can reduce the motives of martyrs and soldiers to other selfish motives. For example, Christian martyrs sacrificed because they believed they would go to heaven after their death and soldiers in Stalingrad fought to death for the good reputation. In other words, their motives can be attributed to other versions of egoism.

To draw a conclusion, on the one hand, Feinberg successfully proves that pleasure is by-product. However, his following discussion about pleasure one is not established and discussion about pleasure two is not so meaningful. Therefore, the supposition that the by-product cannot be the ultimate desire is not proved. On the other hand, the study doesn't want to research that whether the boons or God's grace and good reputation can be counted as pleasure (or not.)

Even if the psychological hedonism is refuted, opponents cannot stop psychological egoists from reducing the sacrifice motivation of Christian martyrs and soldiers, who strongly believe that Christian martyrs and soldiers are altruistic motivations for altruism. Hence, the establishment of the argument against psychological hedonism is still doubtful, let alone psychological egoism.

4.2. Refutation to argument two

First of all, Feinberg believes that psychological egoism is an inevitable and correct analytical statement, which is equivalent to the tautology in which the agent's behavior is driven by the agent's motivation rather than the motivation of others. This is because even Christian martyrs and soldiers who are strongly regarded as altruistic by ordinary people or common sense can be described as altruistic by psychological altruism. Feinberg is seeking help from the consensus of ordinary people. Psychological egoism describes the motives of Christian martyrs and soldiers as egoistic and they are strongly or most strongly believed to be altruistic by ordinary people, and it is implied in Feinberg's article that we can hardly find actions whose motive is closer to altruistic. Therefore, Feinberg claims that we cannot find evidence against psychological egoism and it is necessarily true.

However, the effectiveness of common sense and ordinary language in philosophy is doubtful. In everyday life, people usually take the consequence of actions into the consideration of the motives, and they strongly believe that altruism is related to morality and self-sacrifice. Actually, both egoism and altruism focus on the motives, impulses and will that motivate people to act, regardless of how they act or the results of their actions. In other words, egoist can do good and altruists don't have to sacrifice themselves. That Christian martyrs and soldiers in Stalingrad were egoistic and for God's grace and good reputation respectively is conceivable and does no hurt to the value of their actions.

Therefore, it is illegitimate to assert that psychological egoism is an analytic statement because it strongly contradicts common sense.

What is more, psychological egoists don't redefine "selfish" and "unselfish" according to the tautology, and psychological egoism is not just an analytic statement. The reason why Feinberg regards psychological egoism as analytic statement is that the theory is unfalsifiable. It is impossible, Feinberg asserts, to find evidence against psychological egoism.

Actually, Feinberg[1, p. 167] doesn't distinguish "selfish" and "egoistic" in Psychological Egoism. He wrote: "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". And the difference between "selfish" and "unselfish" or "egoistic" and "altruistic" is quite clear. For example, Joshua May[5, p. 27] writes that:

One's desires are "egoistic" if the contents of one's ultimate desires fail to contain someone other than oneself as an essential beneficiary.

In other words, egoistic motives are ultimately concerned with the interests of the agent's own, not the interests of others, otherwise, they are altruistic. Hence, the example of opposition is easily and clearly conceivable. Reconsider Lincoln's example of saving pigs. There roughly lies two possibilities of the motive of the action:

- a. Lincoln saved the pigs for the sake of the pigs
- b. Lincoln saves the pigs for avoiding no peace of mind

If a is close to reality, we can say that the motive of Lincoln is altruistic; if b is close to reality, we can say that the motive of Lincoln is egoistic. Similar to this situation, for the examples of Aunt Emma, Christian martyrs and soldiers mentioned before, we have both self-serving and

beneficial explanations for their motives. Therefore, we can clearly conceive the evidence against psychological egoism and psychological egoism is falsifiable and testable.

According to the foregoing discussion, the problem is not that the evidence against psychological egoism cannot be found or unconceivable, but the opponents are not able to exclude the possibility of psychological egoism's explanation for the motives of these actions, which is totally different from "true by definition".

5. Conclusion

To draw a conclusion, Feinberg made great efforts to refute psychological egoism but he didn't succeed. He provided altruistic explanations for some behaviors, but could not stop their motives from being attributed to selfish motives, and misunderstood psychological egoism as a tautology. However, more and more philosophical discussions and psychological experiments are against psychological egoism. After all, Feinberg's failure in this article doesn't mean the establishment of psychological egoism.

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