

BELIEF IN PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM IS EPISTEMICALLY SELF-DEFEATING

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Psychological egoism (PE) may be defined as the view that all voluntary acts are motivated solely by self-interest. Either we have no nonegoistic desires (such as altruism and a sense of justice) at all, or if we do, they are causally inert and play no role in the genesis of our actions. Suppose that I believe that PE is true. Then I have to believe not only that all of my acts of keeping promises, caring for my children, and so forth are motivated in the final analysis by pure self-interest, but also that all of my *mental* acts are similarly motivated. In particular, I have to believe that my intellectual act of affirming PE as true is motivated solely by self-interest. But can I do this and continue to affirm PE as true without impugning my own epistemic reasonableness? If I believe that I am motivated to believe something solely by self-interest, then should I not also think that that belief rests entirely on *bias*, and thus, that I have no *good reason* to believe it? The answer to this last question seems to me to be "yes." I maintain that PE, in conjunction with what seem to be plausible principles about the conditions of reasonable belief formation, precludes the possibility of anybody reasonably believing that it is true. Belief in PE is epistemically self-defeating.

Before fleshing out this argument against the reasonableness of believing in PE, I want to dispose of a fairly obvious but I think wrongheaded reply to it. The reply is that belief is not an action under the control of the will, and therefore, not the sort of thing that PE alleges is motivated exclusively by self-interest. Just as my belief that it is now daytime is an involuntary response on my part to the evidence of my senses, the defender of PE might claim that his belief is an involuntary response on his part to all of the evidence that he has about human beings and what makes them tick. The problem with this reply is that it is beside the point. Whether or not belief is an action, such things as assenting to the proposition that PE is true and weighing the evidence for and against its truth are voluntary acts that defenders of PE engage in, and the above argument has application to them. For the sake of brevity I shall continue to speak of "belief in PE," but I shall mean by it intellectual acts like these.

The argument against believing in PE that I have sketched seems to rest on two principles:

(A) For a person to be reasonable as regards his beliefs, he has to be open to all the evidence relevant to whether or not they are true and base his decisions about what to believe *solely* on the weight of the evidence that he has. A person who does this is "epistemically reasonable."

(B) Insofar as self-interest influences one's belief formation, one is *not* being guided by the weight of the evidence. One's beliefs are tainted by *bias*, and one is guilty of epistemic unreasonableness.

(A) seems beyond question. Suppose that an employer has enough funds to give either Mary or Bill a raise, the evidence is overwhelming that Mary is the needier, harder working, more productive employee, yet Bill sincerely believes that he, not Mary, is more deserving.

of the raise. Bill's belief is *caused* by his self-interested desire to get the raise himself. It is the product of "wishful thinking." Suppose, further, that Bill's *having* this belief is in his self-interest, because his sexist boss will likely give him the raise if Bill lobbies the boss hard enough, something that Bill will do if and only if he has the belief. Bill's belief remains unreasonable, and principle (A) explains why.

Of course Bill is unaware of the role self-interest is playing in his belief formation because it operates in him unconsciously. We can distinguish the mundane cases of unconscious bias from the less common ones in which one is aware of one's biases and tries to overcome them. And we can distinguish both of these from the much more unusual cases in which self-interest is cited (consciously, of course) as a justifying reason for believing something, as in Pascal's "wager" argument for God's existence. The defender of PE who believes that all of his beliefs are motivated by self-interest will be more like Pascal than Bill, inasmuch as he will be aware of the role that self-interest has supposedly played in the genesis of his beliefs. Yet I shall assume that unlike Pascal, defenders of PE admit that only evidential considerations, not prudential ones, can justify a belief. Hence, they admit that if Bill persists in believing that he is more deserving of the raise in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, then his belief is unreasonable, no matter how much good having it would do him. I shall assume that defenders of PE accept (A), the idea that one holds a belief reasonably only if one satisfies the requirements of epistemic reasonableness.

The problem with the argument that I have sketched, defenders of PE can argue, is its reliance on (B). What makes Bill unreasonable, they may insist, is not that he has allowed self-interest to influence what he believes, but rather, that he has failed to give proper weight to all the evidence that he has against his belief. It is his insensitivity to contrary evidence, *not* his self-interested motivation, which makes him unreasonable in believing that he is more deserving of the raise. Of course his blindness to all the evidence that Mary is more deserving is caused by his self-interested desire to receive the raise himself. But defenders of PE can argue is that while self-interest may have that effect in Bill, it does not or need not have the same effect in everyone (and, in particular, themselves). They can deny the claim, implicit in (B), that a distorted weighing of evidence is an *unavoidable consequence* of self-interest whenever self-interest affects belief formation.

The following example proves that they are right to deny it. Imagine Harriet, who believes that PE is true, that self-interest motivates all of her own actions, including her choices about what to believe, and finally, that being epistemically reasonable is in her best interests. On each and every occasion of her forming a belief, she *is* epistemically quite reasonable, but she is motivated to be epistemically reasonable only because she thinks that beliefs arrived at in that way will always benefit her more than beliefs not arrived at in that way. Self-interest influences her belief formation, but it does not lead her to ignore relevant evidence or weigh it in some inappropriate way, and so, it is not functioning as bias. The example of Harriet shows that (B) is false.

But does the example of Harriet show that it is possible to believe in PE without falling prey to epistemic unreasonableness? I think not. Harriet does manage to reconcile her belief that all of her beliefs are motivated by self-interest with her commitment to epistemically reasonable belief formation, but she does so only because she holds a means-ends belief that is false, and patently so. Her belief that for each and every belief she might hold, the one that epistemic rationality tells her to hold is also the one that it is in her long-term self-interest to hold (and that it is in her self-interest because it is epistemically reasonable) is *clearly false*.

The example of Bill proves this. His belief that he is more deserving of the raise than Mary is epistemically unreasonable but in his best interests. Harriet—indeed, all of us—are likely to be in situations similar to Bill's at some time in our lives. Harriet's unreasonableness is not explained by (B), but it is by:

(B') If self-interest is motivating one's beliefs, then either it is causing one to ignore evidence relevant to those beliefs, and thus functioning as a kind of bias, or it is motivating a commitment to epistemic reasonableness via some clearly false belief about how epistemic reasonableness is in one's best interests. In either case, one is being epistemically unreasonable.

The argument against believing in PE that I am defending is cogent, I suggest, if (B') is true. Defenders of PE need to show that (B') is false by showing how self-interest can motivate a commitment to epistemic reasonableness via a belief linking the two that is *reasonable and probably true*. Harriet's is not such a belief.

Here is another belief that defenders of PE might suggest fills the bill. The belief is that occasionally an epistemically reasonable belief will be contrary to one's self-interest; still, one is better off following the *policy or rule* (or having the steady disposition) to be epistemically reasonable, than one would be following any alternative rule or having some different disposition. But there are two problems with this suggestion. First, the belief in question, though not so clearly false as Harriet's, is probably false. It seems to me unlikely that a disposition to be epistemically reasonable on *every* occasion of belief formation will maximize one's long term happiness. The disposition that maximizes long term happiness is more likely to be a mixed one, leading one to be fully sensitive to evidence in some sorts of cases, but having biases built into it for dealing with other sorts. A certain amount of self-deception about one's personal shortcomings may be psychologically healthy. Second, and more important, whether or not the belief is true, a pure egoist who adopted an iron-clad rule of epistemic reasonableness because she thought that it was in her best interests, and who stuck to the rule even in cases when violating it would benefit her (i.e., cases like Bill's) would not be someone in whom each and every belief is motivated by self-interest. Rather, she would be someone whose beliefs are motivated by commitment to the rule.

Let me rephrase this point in terms of dispositions. Suppose it were the case that the disposition to form beliefs in a way that is fully sensitive to evidence is to one's maximum advantage. A fully rational egoist, then, would want to cultivate this disposition. But I claim that he would no longer *be a pure* egoist after he acquired it. The "paradox of hedonism" makes a similar point. Suppose, as seems likely, that pure hedonists (people whose only ultimate goal in life is their own satisfaction) tend to be lonelier, more prone to ennui and alienation, and thus worse off in hedonistic terms than people who value knowledge, excellence, friendship, etc., for their own sakes (not just a means to pleasure). In that case normative hedonism tells them to cultivate the *nonhedonistic* motivations that will improve the quality of their lives. If they believe in normative hedonism, they will do this; they will, for hedonistic reasons, try to form the motivations. But if they succeed, they will no longer be pure hedonists.

Defenders of PE need to do more than explain why an enlightened, rational egoist would want to have a disposition to form beliefs in a way that is sensitive to all the evidence. They need to explain how, after acquiring this disposition, he would still *be* a pure egoist. That is, they need to explain how the disposition is a *kind* of egoistic motivation.

Let us return to the belief that I attributed to Harriet, that for every one of her beliefs, the one required by epistemic reasonableness will always be the same as the one that it is in her best interests to hold. I claimed that the example of Bill prove that Harriet is mistaken. The defender of PE might respond that I am assuming too narrow a conception of self-interest. Suppose she believes that epistemic reasonableness is the most effective means not to maximize her long term happiness, satisfaction, or pleasure but simply to arrive at beliefs likely to be true and/or avoid beliefs likely to be false. Suppose too that having such beliefs is one of her intrinsic goals or desires (i.e., something she desires for its own sake). Her means-ends belief is surely reasonable, and the end in question looks like a self-interested one. After all, what she prefers is that *she* have true but displeasing beliefs over false but consoling ones. In that case is not she, like the people who refuse to plug into Nozick's experience machine because they do not want their lives to be based on delusion, motivated by self-interest?

She is not, because the desire to have true beliefs is *not* a self-interested one. It is self-regarding, but that is not enough to make it self-interested. If I desired (for its own sake, and not as a means to any later, greater good) being tortured to death, my desire would be self-regarding but still contrary to my self-interest. PE makes the stronger claim that everyone's deepest desires are purely self-interested, not merely the weaker claim that they are self-regarding.

Defenders of PE might respond that crassly hedonistic or materialistic accounts of self-interest may well exclude an intrinsic desire for true beliefs from counting as self-interested. But a more refined, spiritually elevated account of the good, like the one that Plato defended in *The Republic*, will imply not only that it is impossible for knowledge of the truth to conflict with long-term advantage, but that it is impossible fully to realize one's good without such knowledge. If the defender of PE accepts an account of self-interest of this sort, it will be quite consistent for him to regard his intrinsic desire for true beliefs as self-interested.

My reply to this move is that any such account is implausible in the extreme. It is not implausible to think that among our many interests (health, longevity, material comfort, and so forth) is an interest in knowing certain truths. But in order for knowledge *always* to be in our best interests, it has to be the case either that our interest in knowing the truth *never* conflicts with our other interests, or it *trumps* those interests whenever they do conflict. It seems to me deeply implausible to suppose that either of these alternatives holds. There probably are people who have suffered horrible experiences early in life and can cope with the resulting trauma *only* by means of repression and false memories. Such people would be plunged into suicidal depression were they accurately to remember the experiences. I do not claim that psychotherapy never works, only that there are some people for whom it would be counterproductive. Surely these people will be better off retaining their false but sanity-preserving beliefs on *any* remotely plausible account of what self-interest is. (Another class of examples that supports my general point are "self-fulfilling prophecies." The cancer patient who believes that he will certainly beat his disease is more likely to recover than the epistemically reasonable patient who acknowledges that statistically, the chances that his type of cancer will go into remission are quite small. The major league hitter who steps into the batter's box against Randy Johnson and is "pumped up" with the epistemically unreasonable belief that he will definitely get a hit is more likely to succeed than the hitter who acknowledges that the chances of success against this pitcher are well below one in three. There are countless examples of this sort.)

I concede that the defender of PE can reasonably regard his commitment to epistemic reasonableness as motivated by an intrinsic desire to acquire true and avoid false beliefs. And he can regard that desire as self-interested if he accepts a certain sort of "spiritually elevated" account of what is best for us. But I deny he will thereby have avoided epistemic unreasonableness because I claim that his spiritually elevated account of self-interest is patently false.

Humeans think that PE is false, because sometimes we are motivated by benevolence. Kantians think that it is false because sometimes we are motivated by a desire to conform to the dictates of impartial practical reason. I think that PE is false not only for both of these reasons, but also because we are motivated to make judgments about what is and is not the case by what Nietzsche called "the will to truth." (Of course Nietzsche insisted that the will to truth is not genuine, but instead is a disguised form of an egoistic will to power.) But the argument defended in this paper is different. My claim is that whether or not we really do have this desire, we have to view ourselves and our judgments as motivated by it. (It is, in Kantian jargon, a "Regulative Ideal" of our intellectual life.) To maintain one's epistemic reasonableness in connection with any judgment one makes, one has to believe that that judgment has been formed in a way that is responsive to all of the evidence that one has, properly weighed. Defenders of PE, I have assumed, accept this last point, and try to show that a commitment to epistemic reasonableness can be motivated by self-interest. But I have argued that self-interest can motivate such a commitment only in someone who holds patently false views about links between the two. Hence, try as they might, believers in PE cannot avoid the epistemically self-defeating implications of their belief.