



PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

Michael Hannon

THE RING OF GYGES

“Suppose now that there were two magic rings [of invisibility], and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a god among men. **Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust.** And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for **wherever anyone thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust.**”

— Plato's *Republic*, 360b–d



HOBBS AND THE BEGGAR

Hobbes said human beings *always* act from self-interest.

He explicitly states in *Leviathan* (1651):

...no man giveth but with intention of good to himself, because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good. (Ch. XV, p. 47)

Yet Hobbes was seen giving money to a homeless person.

When asked why, he said, “ I am trying to **relieve my own discomfort** at seeing the person in need.”



PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

All human (intentional) actions are motivated by self-interest.

One's own self-interest is the *only* thing anyone is capable of desiring or pursuing *ultimately* (as an end in itself).



THE TRUCK ACCIDENT

You're walking down a quiet road and see a crash. Lying on the pavement is the driver. His face is bloody and he is barely moving. What do you do? You help.

But why do you help? What, exactly, is your motive?

A psychological explanation: When we see someone in distress, we ourselves experience feelings of distress, such as shock, alarm, worry, or fear. This unpleasant emotional arousal leads us to want to increase our own well being by reducing these feelings. Helping, then, is only a means to reducing our own distress.



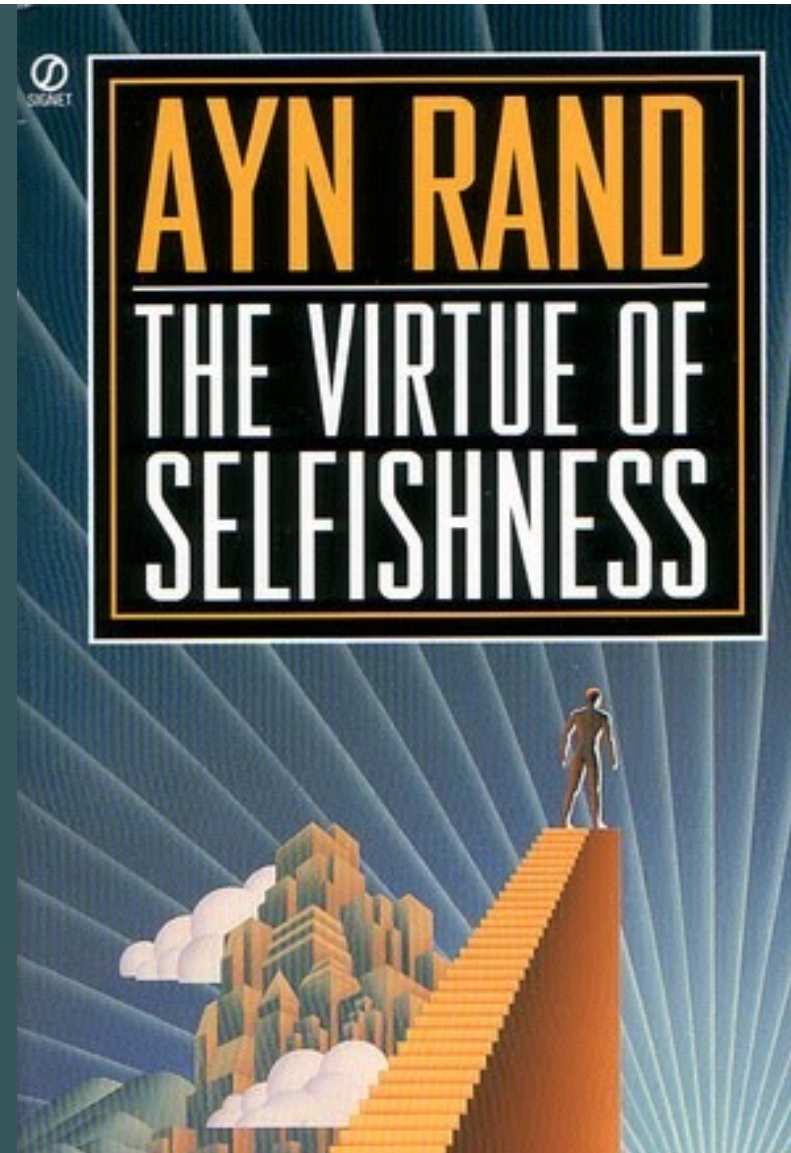
PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

It is a theory about what *is* the case.

- A descriptive theory.
- A claim about psychological facts/laws.

Contrast:

Ethical Egoism: all people *ought* to pursue their own well-being.



THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ALTRUISM

It's not just that we **sometimes** act selfishly.

It's not that we **can** act altruistically, but never choose to.

Rather, humans are **only capable** of selfishness.

It is a claim about human nature.

An unavoidable consequence of psychological laws.



THE END OF MORALITY?

1. Morality demands that we sometimes act altruistically.
2. If egoism is true, altruism is impossible.
3. If altruism is impossible, it cannot be our moral duty to act altruistically.
4. Egoism is true.
5. Therefore, it cannot be our moral duty to act altruistically.



IS PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM TRUE?

Are there any examples where people **do** desire things other than their own welfare?



SOME (SEEMINGLY) UNSELFISH ACTS

- Giving to charity
- Building shelters
- Volunteering at a soup kitchen
- Donating organs
- Giving blood
- Check out: <http://carnegiehero.org/>

How would the egoist reply?





THE EGOIST'S REPLY

People desire the happiness of others *only when it is a means to their own happiness.*

People only *appear* to act unselfishly.

REASONS IN SUPPORT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- a. **My motives.** Every action of mine is prompted by *my* motives/desires/impulses, not anyone else's. Whenever I act, I am always pursuing my own ends.

- b. **Pleasure.** When a person gets what he wants he characteristically feels pleasure. So, what we really want is our own pleasure.

MORE REASONS IN SUPPORT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

- 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 enjoy the pleasures of a good conscience. [cf. Plato]

- d. **Moral Education.** We acquire good behavior only by using reward and punishment.

(A) “EVERY ACTION OF
MINE IS PROMPTED BY *MY*
MOTIVES OR DESIRES, NOT
ANYONE ELSE’S.
WHENEVER I ACT, I AM
ALWAYS PURSUING MY
OWN ENDS.”

1. Whenever you do something, you are motivated by your strongest desire.
2. Whenever you are motivated by your strongest desire, you are pursuing your self-interest.
3. Therefore, whenever you do something, you are pursuing your self interest.

WHY ARGUMENT (A) FAILS:

It rests on a confusion.

The egoist claims:

All my motives for action are *my* motives.

What the egoist doesn't prove:

Every voluntary action is prompted by a motive of a *particular kind*—i.e., a selfish one.

(B) “WHEN A PERSON GETS
WHAT HE WANTS, HE
TYPICALLY FEELS
PLEASURE. SO, WHAT WE
REALLY WANT IS OUR OWN
PLEASURE.”

Our successful actions might be *accompanied* by feeling pleasure.

Does this prove that the *aim* or *objective* of every action is to get pleasure for oneself?

WHY ARGUMENT (B) FAILS:

The following inference is mistaken:

- The fulfillment of our desires is accompanied by pleasure.
- Thus, the *purpose* (or motive) is always pleasure.

(C) “OFTEN WE DECEIVE
OURSELVES INTO
THINKING THAT WE
DESIRE SOMETHING FINE
OR NOBLE WHEN WHAT WE
REALLY WANT IS TO
THOUGHT WELL OF BY
OTHERS OR TO ENJOY THE
PLEASURES OF A GOOD
CONSCIENCE.”

While our actions may often look moral, Kant warned that "from this we cannot by any means conclude with certainty that **a secret impulse of self love**, falsely appearing as the idea of duty, was not actually the true determining cause of the will."

In short, people deceive themselves.

WHY ARGUMENT (C) FAILS:

Wouldn't an altruistic person get pleasure from helping others?

That people get pleasure from helping others suggests they have the *desire* to help others.

THE DROWNING PIGS

Some piglets had gotten into a pond and were in danger of drowning. Lincoln called the coach to a halt, jumped out, ran back, and lifted the little pigs to safety.

Lincoln said:

“That was the very essence of selfishness. I should have no peace of mind all day had I gone and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs.”



THE LESSON

The **unselfish** person **would get pleasure** from her altruism.

This is **because she desires the good** of other people (or animals).



(D) “WE ACQUIRE
GOOD BEHAVIOR
ONLY BY USING
REWARDS AND
PUNISHMENTS.”

Seemingly altruistic desires are merely instrumental to egoistic ones.

We come to believe that we must be concerned with the interests of others **in order to gain rewards and avoid punishment** for ourselves.

WHY ARGUMENT (D) FAILS:

Punishment and reward are useful for inculcating good behavior.

But we should be wary of people who do the moral thing only out of fear of pain or love of pleasure.

Moral education is successful when people do right acts *simply because they are right.*

BAD ARGUMENTS

- a. **My motives.** Every action of mine is prompted by *my* motives/desires/impulses, not anyone else's. Whenever I act, I am always pursuing my own ends.
- b. **Pleasure.** When a person gets what he wants he characteristically feels pleasure. So what we really want is our own pleasure.
- c. **Self-Deception.** Often, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we desire something fine or noble when what we really want is to thought well of by others or to enjoy the pleasures of a good conscience.
- d. **Moral Education.** We acquire good behavior only by using reward and punishment.

NON-HEDONISTIC EGOISM?

- Not all human motives can be reduced to just one: pleasure.
- The egoist might allow **happiness** (Mill), **self-fulfillment** (Aristotle), or **power** (Hobbes, Nietzsche).
- All people are *self-interested* but not merely hedonistic.



“UNCLEAR LOGICAL STATUS OF THE THEORY”

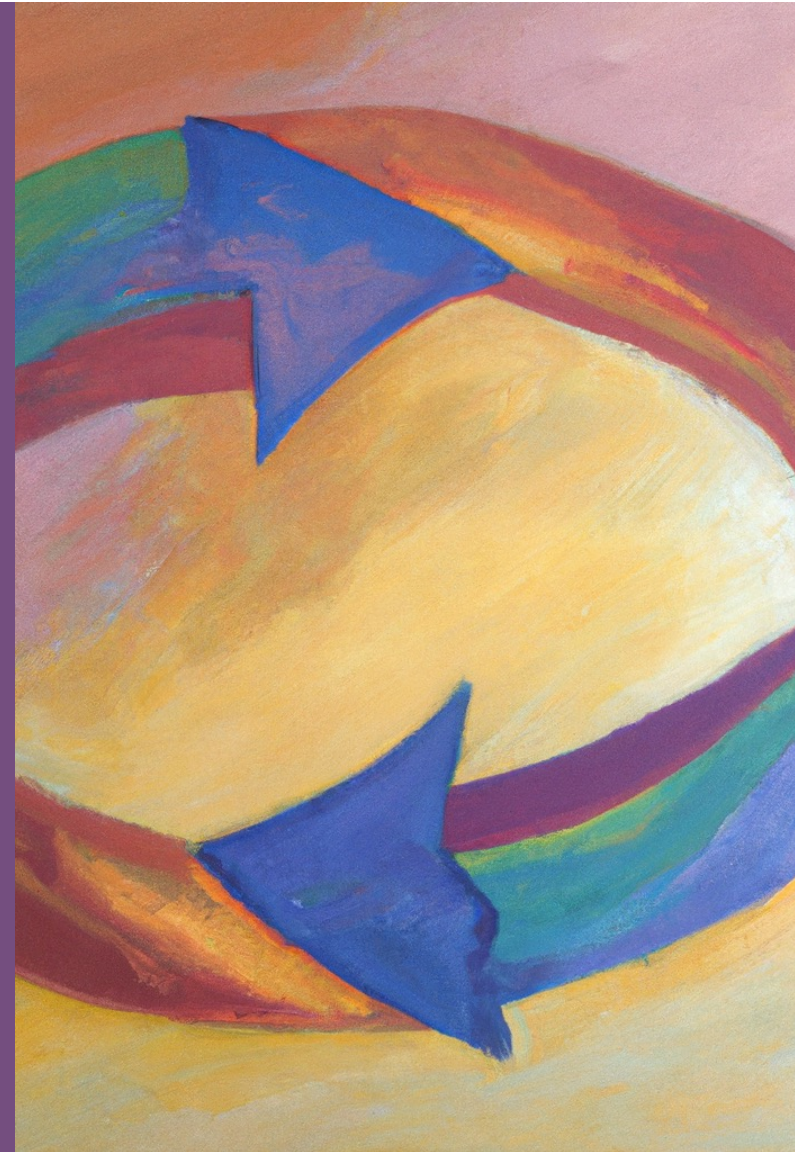
Does the truth or falsity of psychological egoism depend entirely on the *meaning* of the words in which it is expressed?

ANALYTIC STATEMENTS

Truth is determined solely by the meanings of the words.
Immune to empirical evidence.

Examples

- All bachelors are unmarried
- All effects have causes
- Providence is the capital of Rhode Island, or it is not.



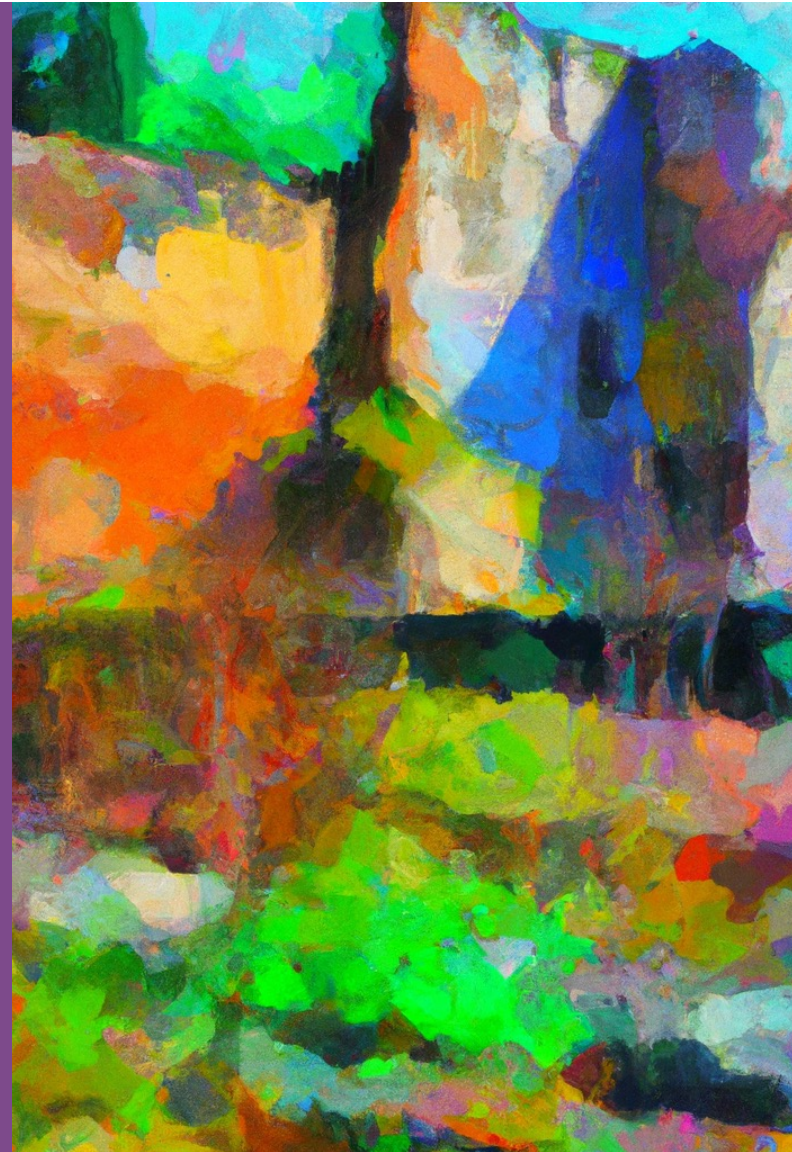
SYNTHETIC STATEMENTS

Truth or falsity does **not** derive solely from the meanings of the words.

Truth or falsity is established by **facts of experience**.

Examples

- It is raining in New Jersey now.
- All bachelors are neurotic.

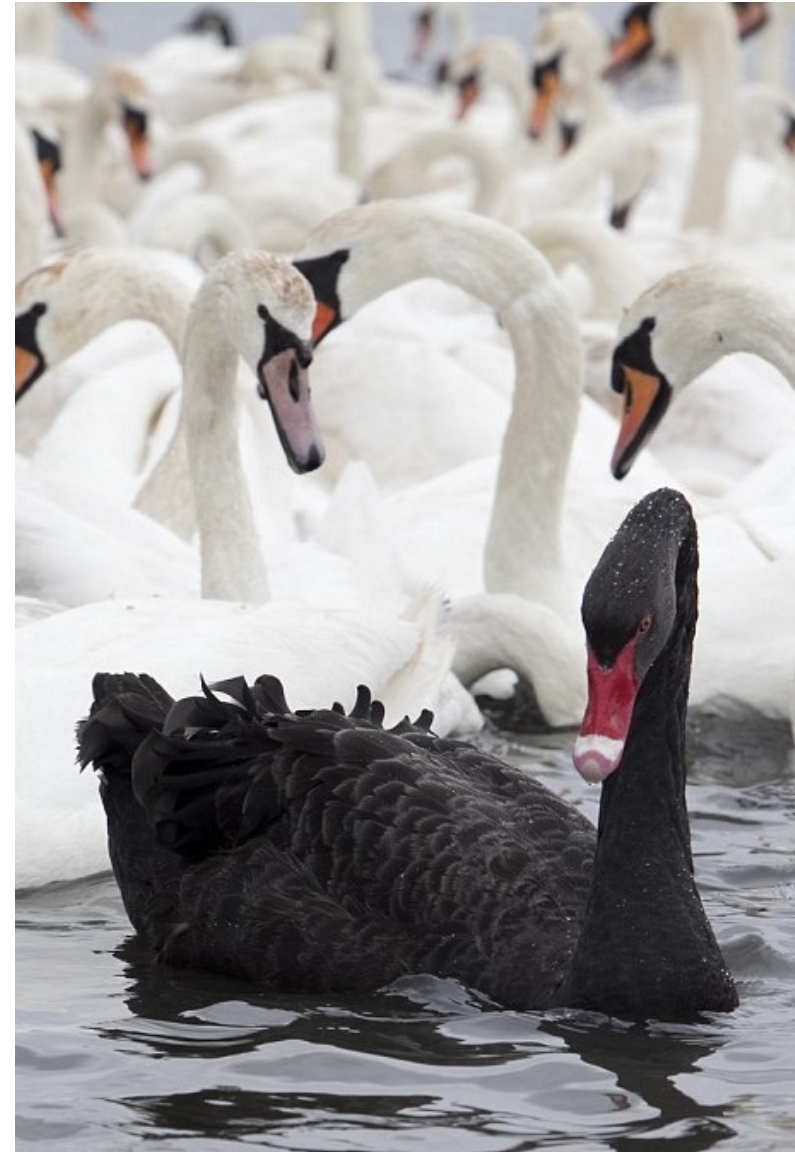


EMPIRICAL HYPOTHESES

- A type of synthetic statement.
- Generalizations from experience.
- Commonly made in science.

Examples

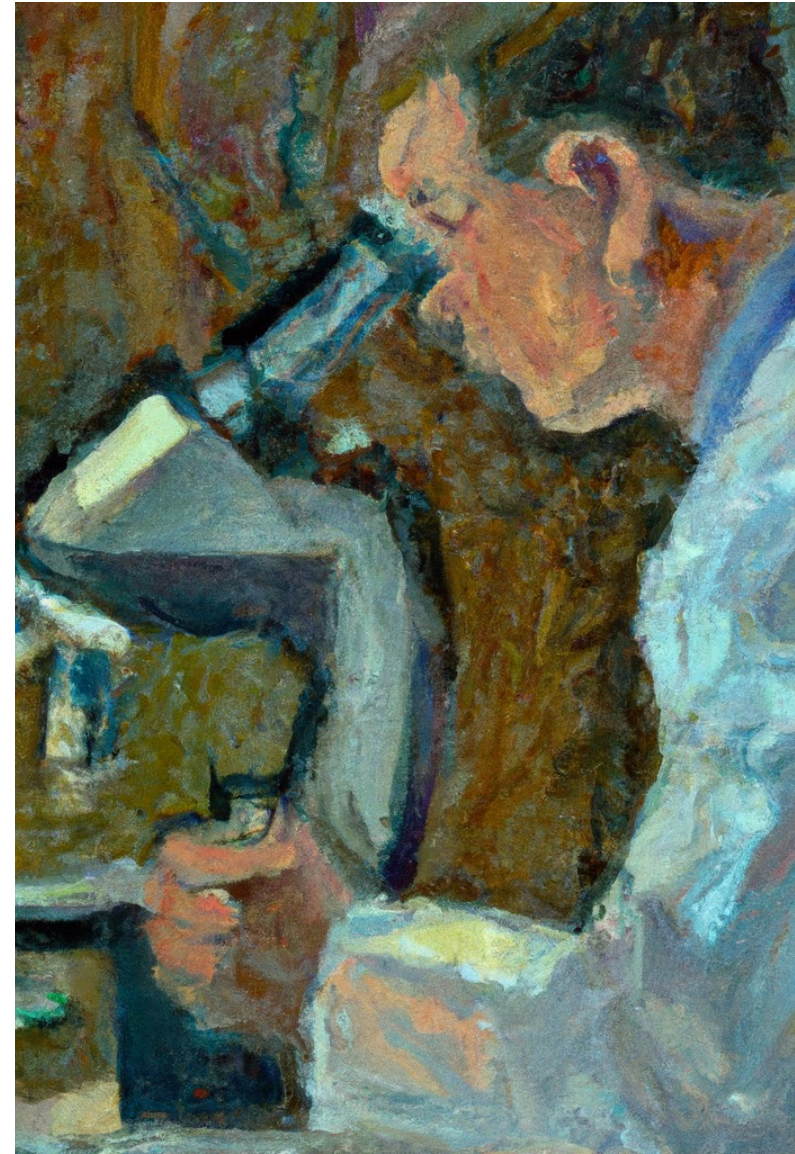
- All swans are white.
- Smoking causes cancer.
- All released objects heavier than air fall.



IS EGOISM FALSIFIABLE?

It claims to be a scientific theory of human motives.

But can this view be scientifically tested?



HOW TO TEST EGOISM?

We can point to (seemingly) unselfish behavior.

- E.g., Hobbes and the beggar; Lincoln and the pigs.
- Other cases: martyrs, saints, patriots, etc.

The egoist will reply:

These people are primarily motivated to promote their own happiness and ease their own conscience.

THE STRATEGY OF REINTERPRETING MOTIVES

If the egoist refuses to accept examples like these,
what *would* count as evidence?

Could any **conceivable** behavior count as evidence
against it?

The theory seems *irrefutable*...

...but that's a flaw.

COUNTEREXAMPLE?

A soldier throws himself on a grenade to prevent others from being killed.

The egoist will say:

He threw himself on the grenade because he **could not bear to live with himself** afterwards if he did not do so.



THE FALLACY OF THE SUPPRESSED CORRELATIVE

Certain words operate in pairs.

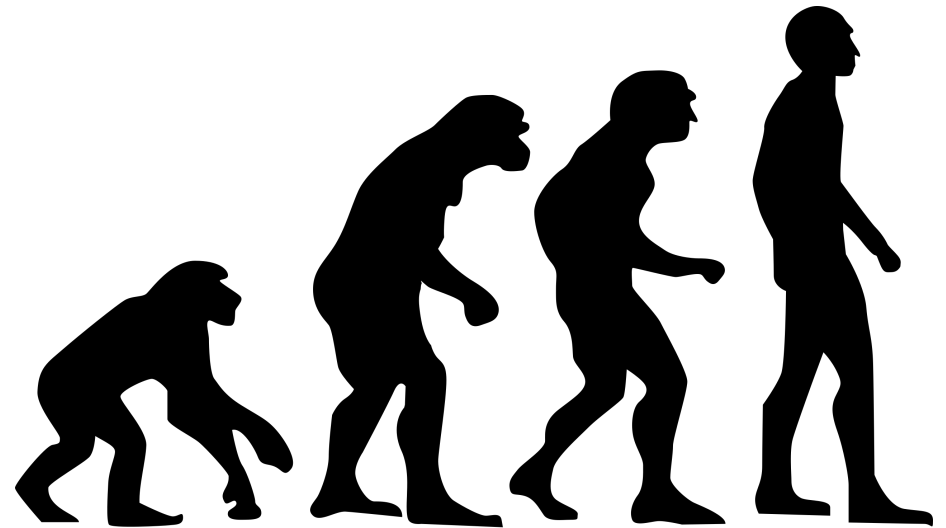
- E.g., “selfish-unselfish”, “good-bad”, “large-small”.

If we cannot conceive of what it would be like to be bad, then we cannot understand what it means to call something good.

Does the egoist define “selfish” in a way that makes “unselfish” inconceivable?

AN EVOLUTIONARY ARGUMENT AGAINST EGOISM?

Is natural selection likely to have given us
purely egoistic motives?



A FINAL THOUGHT: THE PARADOX OF HEDONISM

The single-minded pursuit of happiness is a bad way to achieve happiness.

The way to get happiness is to let it “sneak up” on us.

We must focus on other things, which may then lead us to happiness.

GOOD OLD NEON

By David Foster Wallace

My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. It's a little more complicated than that, maybe. But when you come right down to it it's to be liked, loved. Admired, approved of, applauded, whatever. You get the idea. I did well in school, but deep down the whole thing's motive wasn't to learn or improve myself but just to do well, to get good grades and make sports teams and perform well. To have a good transcript or varsity letters to show people. I didn't enjoy it much because I was always scared I wouldn't do well enough. The fear made me work really hard, so I'd always do well and end up getting what I wanted. But then, once I got the best grade or made All City or got Angela Mead to let me put my hand on her breast, I wouldn't feel much of anything except maybe fear that I wouldn't be able to get it again. The next time or next thing I wanted. I remember being down in the rec room in Angela Mead's basement on the couch and having her let me get my hand up under her blouse and not even really feeling the soft aliveness or whatever of her breast because all I was doing was thinking, 'Now I'm the guy that Mead let get to second with her.' Later that seemed so sad.