

This essay will argue that unselfish behaviour does generally benefit people, and therefore is in one's self-interest. It will then address the subsequent relation between ethics and self-interest, regarding how ethical behaviour is motivated and how it affects us.

There appear to be personal advantages to acting unselfishly (here taken as 'putting others' interests first'). Following the extract quoted in the question, Sidgwick lists multiple ways that unselfish behaviour may increase one's happiness. He states that we get bored of selfish pleasures, wider concerns bring a sense of 'elevation and enlargement', and acting on feelings of sympathy makes us happy in a more meaningful way. While these points may seem anecdotal, there is fair scientific grounding in the main idea they convey, that acting well makes us happy with ourselves. Patricia Churchland describes how we as naturally social creatures from birth develop to value and adopt pro-social behaviour, with attitudes in society reinforcing this. This feeds into the development of our 'conscience', which in general terms makes us feel proud when we perceive that we act rightly, and guilty when we don't. This is why most want to feel that they are a good person – we are biologically predisposed to value ethical behaviour and character. It should be noted that there is a clear link between pro-social (unselfish) and ethical behaviour, as both are closely related to helping others and displaying communal values. There is nothing necessary about this happiness-unselfishness link, and the proposed benefits are generally contingent on one's emotions and external consequences. However, these points do suggest that anyone who has a conscience and/or values how they are perceived by others will likely benefit from behaving unselfishly.

This general rule does have its limitations of course. In cases of what Churchland terms 'scrupulosity', agents drive themselves to behave ethically in excessively stringent ways – for example giving away almost all of one's income to charity, at the expense of one's family. While this may be seen as morally right by the strictest act utilitarian standards, many would consider it excessive. Such behaviour is clearly not in one's self-interest, and therefore the idea of 'being unselfish' raised in the question must be taken to mean in some sort of moderation in order to actually produce benefits for the agent.

An interesting point of Sidgwick's argument is the apparently contradictory idea that selfish behaviour, aimed by definition at our self-interest, might actually be opposed to it. To resolve this, Sidgwick references the idea of 'enlightened self-interest' – that unselfish behaviour actually brings us greater happiness, but selfish people do not realise this. There are various reasons one may not realise this and act accordingly – it demands longer term, less zero-sum thinking, and often relies on reciprocation of good behaviour by others. This concept can be found particularly in Ancient Greek traditions of virtue ethics, where being a good ('virtuous') person is a necessary part of leading the best life one can. This classical conception of the 'good life' as requiring ethical behaviour helps answer the question of whether unselfish behaviour makes us happier. While happiness may not be guaranteed for every unselfish person, there is a repeated theme across societies that the best life requires being unselfish. Therefore, if one is striving to attain this, acting unselfishly and ethically is likely one's best bet, as Rosalind Hursthouse put it.

The benefits of unselfish behaviour do not alone establish that ethical behaviour (which is largely synonymous with unselfish behaviour in general terms) is caused by self-interest. Such a link would presuppose that all behaviour is aimed at our perceived benefit, or at least that all apparently ethical behaviour is. As it stands, a person could still act ethically out of a purely altruistic motivation, with the increase in happiness merely a side effect. To determine the answer to the second question, we must understand what motivates ethical behaviour, and whether this is directed at a self-interested purpose.

While some have traditionally upheld that ethical judgements and behaviour ought to be made out of reason alone, this seems incompatible with more modern understanding of how ethical judgements are commonly made. Robert Sapolsky illustrates how it is primarily emotional response

that drives ethical judgements. While reason has a role, for example in post-hoc justification of reactions, or determining the best course of action to satisfy moral instincts, it is not the foundation of moral values. This is why the psychopath can rationally determine the ethical response to a scenario according to a variety of normative theories, but may regardless stand back impassive – without emotional ethical instincts we have no reason to value ethics in the fundamental way most do. It should be acknowledged that science only tells us what ‘is’ and not what ‘ought to be’, however I feel it is still worth understanding the psychology behind ethical judgements made by most people, rather than just what normative theories demand. This is more reflective of how most make ethical judgements, which, I feel, is more relevant to this question.

Indeed, it seems difficult to see how reason alone, even if it could determine the right course of action as according to a normative theory, could motivate an individual to perform this. If the will, as many psychologists describe, is determined by desire and a belief about how that desire is best satisfied, it seems that whatever reason’s solution to the right action in a given scenario, only a desire can provide the *why* in why we should perform the act. Some may argue that they make ethical judgements according to reason alone, for example via Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which according to him provides the unconditional ‘ought’ as to what one should always do without the need for a contingent end that one is trying to achieve in acting by the CI. However, Philippa Foot states that the ‘binding force’ we often feel in regards to morality is likely a result of the strictness of ethical teachings and feelings of conscience, thus making the strength of ethical feeling a learned concept. This is a more compelling explanation for ethical judgements, as it is more psychologically realistic, and acknowledges the feelings like compassion or justice that are often cited as explanations for ethical behaviour, rather than an impassive duty to conform to one’s rationally derived ethical code.

Thus, it seems clear that moral judgements and actions are driven fundamentally by emotion and desire. The significance of this with regards to the question is it implies that ethics may be driven by self-interest if feelings and desires are always directed to self-interested ends. Many classic utilitarians, although not Sidgwick himself, subscribed to the theory of psychological hedonism – that an agent’s desires are all ultimately aimed at increasing their pleasure and avoiding pain, with their actions being driven to satisfy these desires. It is clear that empathy, the feeling which most often provides the motivation for ethical behaviour, makes us want to help – the question is why we want to do so: whether it is because of the positives produced for us by helping, or helping for its own sake - altruism.

Critiques of psychological hedonism, or more broadly psychological egoism, have a long philosophical history (and a more recent scientific one.) Joseph Butler argued that we have to distinguish between the satisfaction of and object of a desire for a certain action. He stated that the happiness gained from the satisfaction of a desire, which we might suppose is the self-interested end of acting out of that desire, often necessitates having some end other than our own happiness as the object of the desire. This is because he argued that happiness can only consist in the enjoyment of things which we by our nature we are disposed to enjoy, and which are largely directed at objects other than oneself. On this more nuanced understanding of motivation, altruistic motivation for ethical behaviour (with wanting to help others as one’s goal) is possible. This suggests that self-interest is not always a motivating factor for action, including ethical action. Furthermore, many interviews with individuals we typically perceive to have acted with great moral courage, such as protectors of Jews from Nazis, among others, point to the role of one’s character, or perception of character, in ethical action. Such people explain their acting ethically as it simply being who they are, and to them there is no other choice. Acting ethically in such a case is out of altruistic motivation, as such individuals instinctively acted to relieve the pain of others even at cost to themselves.

Psychological egoism may respond that the behaviour was unconsciously motivated by the self-interest of future satisfaction of altruistic values. However, this was clearly not the conscious

intention of the altruistic action, and the difficulty with drawing discussion into the area of unconscious motivation is that it is largely unfalsifiable. Furthermore, in an ethical discussion it seems more relevant to look at one's conscious intentions, as it is these that indicate the ethical character of the agent. Unconscious motivations are involuntary, and moral responsibility (in terms of intentions) is evaluated typically by what one voluntarily chooses to do in the situation.

However, Neera Badhwar does describe how there is a link with self-interest to be made in cases of altruistic action. It is done in order to help others, but in the process it helps the agents to affirm their personal values and altruistic goals, giving a sense of satisfaction. The satisfaction of these values, as Butler pointed out, can only come from performing acts with the ultimate intention of helping others, or else they would not be being true to altruistic values. Therefore, self-interest can't be a consciously motivating factor in their actions. However, the benefits of altruistic action in affirming personal values, among the other aforementioned benefits of unselfish behaviour, means that such actions will likely have been in their self-interest, if not motivated by it. This again shows that ethics is indirectly a matter of self-interest in that even altruistic ethical actions will often bring personal benefits, especially for more ethically disposed agents. However, in cases of altruistic ethical behaviour it is not the self-interest that consciously motivates the behaviour.

While there are cases of altruistically motivated ethical behaviour, it is also clear that ethical behaviour may not be so motivationally 'pure' –seemingly ethical actions may be done because the agent wants to feel good about themselves, or be seen as a good person (therefore done at least partially out of self-interest.) Therefore, we can address whether such behaviour actually is ethical, thus allowing self-interest a further role in ethics. Here it does seem to matter how one judges the moral worth of an action, a process typically divided into by consequences, character, or intentions (although with one's ethical values and criteria grounded in emotion as described before.) If the ethical agent is consciously motivated by self-interest, their actions may not be considered as ethical by deontologically or virtue theory-minded people. A further point is that the self-interested agent may be limiting the benefits made possible by performing what they judge to be ethical action. For example, being actively guided by self-interest may limit personal feelings of pride in their actions and character. However, it still should be acknowledged that in such cases it is possible for people to act for what they perceive to be 'good' in order to serve their self-interest, although this does not account for all ethical actions. This provides another possible link between self-interest and ethics, although not a necessary causal one.

In conclusion, the prosocial disposition found in most human nature means that unselfish and ethical behaviour is intimately tied to our self-interest, particularly that of the general desire to be good people. However, the nature of intentional motivation for ethical behaviour means that this is not necessarily done out of concern for this self-interest, and that unselfish motivation, as well as action, is possible. Therefore, ethics is indirectly related to self-interest, but is not reducible to it.

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