

Simon Blackburn:
Ruling Passions

Chapter 5
Looking Out for Yourself
[The Structure of Human Motivation]

The leading questions:

___ **Are we always self-interested, or ought we to be? Or do our desires always involve ourselves in some more subtle way? Are our real concerns masked by faked conformity to the ways people are supposed to be, so that we are typically self-deceived? Do our biological nature condemn us to some concerns, and forbid us others?**

*** Damasio's case studies:**

___ **These patients have lost any normal associations between representing aspects of a situation, and the stable onset of 'affect' or emotion.**

___ **When there is entire absence of affect we have a flat decision-making landscape: one in which no option reliably generates any more emotionally marked attraction or avoidance than any other.**

*** Damasio's claim:**

___ **'Higher-order' decision-making has to harness the limbic system [somatic markers]^{note} to some extent in order to work at all. We have clinical evidence that when the primitive system is disrupted, then the higher-order decision-making system malfunctions.**

Note:

___ Somatic: “relating to or affecting the body, especially the body as considered to be separate from the mind.”

Q: Do you agree that without emotions and without “somatic markers”, we would not even be able to make most decisions?

⇒ Blackburn: “Our emotional disposition and our representations act together to issue in action, with neither apparently able to achieve its results without the other.”

§ The “Economic Man” Model [Psychological Egoism]
___ Economic man’s single-minded principle is that of maximizing his expected utility: of getting the most, for himself, that can be expected by any course of action he could take.

Basic Assumptions:

- (1) Actors pursue goals.**
- (2) These goals reflect the actor’s perceived self-interest.**
- (3) Behavior results from a process that involves, or functions as if it entails conscious choice.**
- (4) The individual is the basic agent in society.**
- (5) Actors have preferences that are consistent and stable.**

- (6) If given options, actors will choose the alternative with the highest expected utility.
- (7) Actors possess extensive information on both the available alternatives and the likely consequences of their choices.

* Three positions on the principle of economic man:

A. This thesis is an empirical truth, describing ourselves as we *are*. Thus, it issues in specific predictions on human actions.

⇒ Psychological Egoism / Biological Egoism

B. This thesis is a normative truth, describing ourselves as we *ought to be*. Thus it issues in recommendations, not predictions.

⇒ Ethical Egoism

C. This thesis is analytic or definitional. It is a principle for imposing interpretations. As such it issues in neither predictions nor recommendations.

⇒ Philosophical Egoism

⇒ Mill: All three.

Mill's view can be described as "the economist's fallacy."

* Blackburn's Critique of Mill:

- (1) (from Butler): We should distinguish having a particular affection, from having an interest in the pleasure arising from its fulfillment.

- (2) The gratification one gets once one's desired goal is achieved, is not itself the object of one's desire. So, it is not for pleasure itself that one acts; it is rather for the outcome that one desires to bring about that one acts.
- (3) Therefore, the principle of self-interest is false. One does not always act for one's pleasure or the fulfillment of one's self-interest.

§ Selfishness and Biology [Biological Egoism]

___ Ever since Darwin there has been a strong tendency to interpret the theory of evolution in terms of a ruthless selfish battle for survival.

* [Dawkins, "the Selfish Gene"]

___ If we wish to build a society in which individuals co-operate generously and unselfishly toward a common good, we must expect little help from biological nature. We are born selfish; therefore, we must try to teach generosity and altruism. We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth, or rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.

Dawkins' view can be described as the "biologist's fallacy."

* Blackburn's Critique of Dawkins:

- (1) We should get rid of the title *The Selfish Gene*. Genes are not literally selfish. They have no brains. They have no way of representing choices to themselves, no way of choosing one

future over another, no cognitive activity of any kind at all.

- (2) Some genes may proliferate because the creatures that have them are ‘ruthlessly selfish.’ Others may do so because the creatures that have them are altruistic and concerned for all the members of their species. It is the creatures, not their genes, that have these characteristics.
- (3) Genetics does not determine, independently of environment, our second-order dispositions (e.g., which language we learn). A human being might be born with a disposition to form the desire to help others if it finds itself in a helpful environment, and to aggression if it finds itself in an aggressive environment.
- (4) Studies show that toddlers are naturally friendly, co-operative, sympathetic to others’ pleasure or distress. It takes culture to brutalize them.
- (5) If genetic theory is to be genuinely explanatory of human behavior and desire, it must not start by distorting what is to be explained.
- (6) In conclusion: Culture matters.

§ Ethical Egoism

___ We *should* always act on the principle of maximizing our own expected utility.

* Blackburn’s Critique:

- (1) The “Hedonistic Paradox”

— Once you set your mind on achieving happiness, you can never really obtain it. One can only be happy when one forgets about being concerned with one's own happiness.

- (2) It is hard to see this ethical principle as more than occasionally applicable. Sometimes the situation of others demands more generous concern.
- (3) There is nothing wrong with the Good Samaritan's head.
- (4) The "invisible hand" hypothesis does not always pan out; there are situations in which there is an invisible boot, ensuring that the same agents do worse than they would under a more generous regime of concern for each other.

[Conclusion]

We have no empirical thesis of psychological egoism worth taking seriously, and no recommendation either.