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# Self-Interest, Ethical Egoism, and the Restored Gospel

*Darin Crawford Gates*

To what degree, if at all, should self-interest influence the lives of those who follow the restored gospel? In some ways, the gospel seems to completely minimize the role of self-interest, since we learn that we must “lose ourselves” in the service of others, “seek not our own,” and strive to be *selfless*.<sup>1</sup> In other ways, however, the gospel advocates a legitimate focus on our own interest, since happiness and joy seem to constitute the very purpose of our existence.<sup>2</sup> Those who emphasize this latter focus may even come to think that the gospel advocates *ethical egoism*. Indeed, whenever we discuss the moral theory known as ethical egoism in my philosophy courses at Brigham Young University, there are always students who are completely convinced that the gospel is identical to such egoism. The reasoning for this claim might go as follows: ethical egoism holds that we should act *only* in our own interest, where such interest is viewed from an overall and long-term perspective. Furthermore, the gospel teaches that we should act only in harmony with righteousness and that *only* righteousness is in our long-term interest. It follows, therefore, that according to the gospel we should act only in our long-term interest, and so it would seem that the gospel does in fact advocate ethical egoism.<sup>3</sup>

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1. When I speak of “the gospel” in this paper, I am referring to the balance of what is taught in the scriptures and by modern prophets.

2. See 2 Nephi 2:25 and Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 255–56.

3. The argument could be articulated as follows:

(1) We ought to act *only* in our long-term interest. (Ethical Egoism)

## Darin Crawford Gates

I have been interested in the relation between self-interest and the gospel for quite some time. In part, this interest stems from my research on the relation between self-interest and morality in general. I am currently working on a book that examines the relation between self-interest and moral life, with an emphasis on how self-interest functions in relation to various theories of moral obligation. While self-interest cannot serve as the ethical ground of our moral obligations, it can still play an important though limited role in the moral life. Locating that legitimate role takes us to the heart of the most important issues in moral philosophy/ethics: issues concerning the ground, the scope, and the limits of moral obligation.



The first thing to note is that self-interest is not equivalent to selfishness. Selfishness is almost always blameworthy; self-interest, however, is very often not blameworthy in any sense. So, part of my project is to understand the role of morally justified self-interest—or what I call simply *moral self-interest*. Meeting our needs often counts as moral self-interest. An important question is what transforms our actions from moral self-interest to blameworthy selfishness. Furthermore, what is the relation between self-interest and love, or between self-interest and doing what is right because it is right?

My main concern in this essay, however, is to show that while a fairly strong case can be made to say that the gospel involves ethical egoism, in the end the gospel is *not* ethical egoism. As I argue here, they differ in fundamental ways—especially in terms of motivation. While the gospel does teach that attaining joy and happiness is a fundamental purpose of our lives, righteousness requires a type of love that goes beyond self-interest (even broadly conceived). That means that self-interest cannot be our overriding or predominant motive, but it does not mean that all possible awareness of self-interest must be eliminated. Thus, while there is an important role for what we could call righteous self-interest, the gospel cannot be reduced to ethical egoism.

In this paper, I will examine the relationship between ethical egoism and the restored gospel and show that although one can make a fairly strong case for the gospel as ethical egoism, there are overriding reasons that prevent us from equating the two. I will present two main reasons: (1) the gospel and ethical egoism accept different normative *grounds for right actions*, and (2) they contain incompatible accounts of *motivation*. In my analysis as to why the gospel cannot be reduced to ethical egoism, I will also address the closely related claim of *psychological egoism*, since it will be important in my response to the gospel-as-ethical-egoism claim.

### Defining Ethical Egoism

At first glance, one might think it obvious that the gospel is incompatible with any kind of egoism. However, once we clarify what is meant by ethical egoism, we find there are actually fairly convincing reasons for viewing the gospel as ethical egoism. Ethical egoism holds that morality is based on self-interest, though it need not advocate selfishness, if by that term we mean taking advantage of or harming others. Nor need it endorse an indifferent and uncaring attitude toward helping others, since such indifference is most likely *not* in our long-term interest, even from a mortal perspective. If we never care about others, we are less likely to receive help we may need; if we harm or take advantage of others, we may end up in prison; and so on. Thus, for an ethical egoist, there are ample reasons to suppose that being good to others *is* in fact in our long-term self-interest, and therefore such an egoist will likely be quite different from the cold, calculating *egotist* who perhaps comes to mind when we hear the term “egoism.” In fact, it turns out that ethical egoism aligns with most of the principles of common-sense morality such as respect, honesty, beneficence, and following the golden rule—all because it is very probable that following such moral principles best promotes our long-term interest.

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- (2) Only righteousness is in our long-term interest.
  - (3) According to the gospel, we ought to act only in harmony with righteousness.
  - (4) Therefore, according to the gospel, we ought to act only in our long-term interest (from 2 and 3).
  - (5) Any position that holds that we ought to do only what is in our long-term interest advocates ethical egoism.
  - (6) Therefore, the gospel advocates ethical egoism.

It is unusual to find fully developed versions of ethical egoism as a moral theory. Though traces of it may appear in some ancient sources,<sup>4</sup> we find the clearest cases in more modern times. For example, Thomas Hobbes, the famous seventeenth-century philosopher, held a version of ethical egoism. However, fully elaborated versions show up only in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> In the essay “What Is Ethical Egoism?” Edward Regis Jr. outlines the main principles found in contemporary versions of ethical egoism.<sup>6</sup> These principles can be summed up by saying that self-interest

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4. The roots of the theory can certainly be found in Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, who argues that true self-love coincides with the moral life. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he tells us: “If a man were to always devote his attention above all else to acting justly himself, to acting with self-control, or to fulfilling whatever other demands virtue makes upon him, . . . such a person [would be] actually [the truest] egoist or self-lover.” See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Oswald (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 1168b 24. Aristotle concludes that “a good man should be a self-lover.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169a 11. The main essays in the scholarly debate on this issue are Paula Gottlieb, “Aristotle’s Ethical Egoism,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (1996): 1–18; Julia Annas, “Self-Love in Aristotle,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 27, special issue (1989); Charles Kahn, “Aristotle and Altruism,” *Mind* 90, no. 357 (1981); Julia Annas, “Plato and Aristotle on Friendship and Altruism,” *Mind* 86, no. 344 (1977); and Richard Kraut *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). However, it has been a matter of debate whether Aristotle was really an ethical egoist or not, and in the end I don’t think he accepted ethical egoism in the full sense, since he did not actually claim that the ethical life was based on self-interest. His central notion of virtue is extolled not simply because it is in one’s interest, but because it is noble (*to kalos*). Further evidence that Aristotle was not really an ethical egoist comes from *Nicomachean Ethics*, cited above, where he writes, “Therefore, a good man should be a self-lover, for he will himself profit by performing noble actions and will benefit his fellow man. But a wicked man should not love himself, since he will harm both himself and his neighbors in following his base emotions. What a wicked man does is not in harmony with what he ought to do, whereas a good man does what he ought to do.” Nevertheless, we see in some of Aristotle’s thinking something close to ethical egoism.

5. See Gregory Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 357–68, for an account of Hobbes as a “rule ethical egoist.” One can certainly see a version of ethical egoism in the writings of Nietzsche as well.

6. Edward Regis Jr., “What Is Ethical Egoism?” *Ethics* 91, no. 1 (1980): 50–62. Another excellent account of contemporary ethical egoism can be found in Keith Burgess-Jackson, “Deontological Egoism,” *Social Theory and Practice* 29, no. 3 (2003): 357–85. Other essays defending ethical egoism include the following: Jesse Kalin, “In Defense of Ethical Egoism,” in *Ethical Theory: Classical and*

is the ground of any morally right action. Therefore, because self-interest constitutes the basis of any moral obligation, ethical egoism holds that we ought to do only what is in our long-term self-interest.<sup>7</sup> Other moral theories may emphasize the connection between morality and self-interest, but ethical egoism makes self-interest the *entire* basis of morality.

One popular contemporary version of ethical egoism is found in the writings of Ayn Rand, who, in her book *The Virtue of Selfishness*, argues that for a human being “to live for his own sake means that the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose.”<sup>8</sup> For Rand, our highest moral purpose, and the basis for any moral action, is our own individual self-interest. She writes, “Objectivist ethics [her name for her moral theory] holds that the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own *rational* self-interest.”<sup>9</sup> This does not mean we can just do anything we want in the name of self-interest. Again, ethical egoism is most often said to require that we do what is in our long-term interest.<sup>10</sup> It therefore need not advocate either foolishness or selfishness, if by that term we mean actions that most would consider morally blameworthy, since such actions are not typically in our long-term interest.<sup>11</sup> While Rand herself argues that we

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*Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis Pojman (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Group, 2002); Mark Mercer, “In Defense of Weak Psychological Egoism,” *Erkenntnis* 55, no. 2 (2001): 228.

7. Another typical aspect of ethical egoism is the claim that we have “no *unchosen* moral obligation or duty to serve the interests of others.” Regis, “What Is Ethical Egoism?” 61.

8. See Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), 30.

9. Ayn Rand, “Why Selfishness,” in *The Ayn Rand Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 82.

10. As Rand puts it, “Neither life nor happiness can be achieved by the pursuit of irrational whims. Just as man is free to attempt to survive by any random means, as a parasite, a moocher or a looter, but not free to succeed at it beyond the range of the moment—so he is free to seek his happiness in any irrational fraud, any whim, any mindless escape from reality, but not free to succeed at it beyond the range of the moment, nor to escape its consequences.” Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 31.

11. Russ Shafer-Landau argues that it is hard to conclusively rule out the idea that ethical egoism may well allow for acts such as murder, because such acts may conceivably be in one’s long-term interest. See his chapter on ethical egoism in Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I would simply point out that hardly anyone who espouses ethical egoism would allow for that. So, the argument that ethical

*should* be selfish and that selfishness is a virtue, she does not advocate harming others in the blameworthy ways often connected with selfishness.<sup>12</sup> In any case, she illustrates well the core principle of ethical egoism: namely, that morality is based completely on our own self-interest.<sup>13</sup>

### Philosophical Arguments for and against Ethical Egoism

There are various philosophical arguments that may be presented in support of ethical egoism—though it is true that, as one writer puts it, “the theory is asserted more often than it is argued for.”<sup>14</sup> Some arguments begin with the fact that self-interest is strong in most everyone and conclude with the claim that if everyone takes care of his or her own interests exclusively, then we would all be better off. Of course, as several people have pointed out, such an argument is actually more of an argument for utilitarianism or consequentialism than for ethical egoism, since it argues that we should do what will make everyone better off (and ethical egoism calls that into question).<sup>15</sup>

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egoism would advocate such things becomes something of a straw-man argument. I think there is enough to argue against ethical egoism without resorting to such arguments.

12. She writes, for example: “The basic principle of Objectivist ethics is: no man may *initiate* the use of physical force against others.” Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, 36.

13. Rand also accepts that we have no unchosen obligations to help others. She puts it this way: “As a basic step of self-esteem, learn to treat as a mark of a cannibal any man’s *demand* for your help. To demand it is to claim that your life is *his* property. . . . Do you ask if it is ever proper to help another man? No—if he claims it as his right or as your moral duty that you owe him. Yes—if such is your own desire based on your own selfish pleasure in the value of his person and his struggle.” This quote is from a speech given by John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*, as quoted in “A Defense of Ethical Egoism,” in *The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and in Literature*, ed. Louis P. Pojman and Lewis Vaughn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 569–78. I should point out here that one could accept Rand’s position on capitalism and the free market and yet reject her moral position. That is, one can hold that we are morally obligated to help others—contrary to Rand’s position—but reject the idea that we have the highly stringent types of legal obligations to help others required by the socialism Rand critiques.

14. See James Rachels’s chapter on ethical egoism in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003). One of the more interesting contemporary arguments for ethical egoism comes from Burgess-Jackson, “Deontological Egoism.”

15. See Shafer-Landau, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, 104–5. James Rachels makes this same point; see Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 80.

Another argument is presented by Ayn Rand, who claims that unlike what she calls the “ethics of altruism,” ethical egoism is the only moral theory that takes seriously the value of the human individual. The argument says, “If we value the life of the individual—that is, if the individual has moral worth—then we must agree that this life is of supreme importance.” Unlike ethical egoism, “the ethics of altruism regards the life of the individual as something that one must be ready to sacrifice for the good of others. Therefore the ethics of altruism does not take seriously the value of each human individual.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet another argument for ethical egoism connects self-interest to the notion of good reasons. As one contemporary moral philosopher points out, ethical egoism claims that advancing our interests is necessary if something is to count as a good reason for us to do something. The argument runs: “If you are morally required to do something, then you have a good reason to do it. If there is a good reason to do something, then doing it must advance your interests. Therefore, if you are morally required to do something, then it must advance your interests.”<sup>17</sup> The first premise here is fairly strong since it does seem plausible to say that if something is our duty, we have a good reason to do it. However, there is a serious problem with the second premise, which simply assumes that all good reasons must be grounded in self-interest. On the contrary, it seems clear that we have good reasons to do (or refrain from doing) certain things even if they do not advance our own interests. Think of encountering someone who is choking, having a heart attack, or who has been severely injured—and no one else is around to help. In such cases, we clearly have a reason to help, and such a reason cannot be reduced to the fact that helping advances our own interest. Can we seriously argue that we have *no* reason to help any of these people if helping them in no way benefits ourselves? Furthermore, can we really say that the only reason (or even the *main* reason) why we should refrain from acts that harm others is that such acts are not in our self-interest? Consider the absurdity of saying that the only reason morally heinous actions (such as murder) are wrong is that such acts are not really in *our* interest. It should be intuitively clear that something is fundamentally wrong with such a position.

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16. This is the way James Rachels formulates the argument in *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 81–82. Also see the *Ayn Rand Reader*, 80–83, and *Virtue of Selfishness*, 27–28

17. Shafer-Landau, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, 107.



Thus, for ethical egoism, the normative ground of right action consists entirely in the self-interest of the individual agent.<sup>18</sup> Again, this would mean that the only reason helping someone in need counts as a right action is that it furthers our own interest, and that the only reason something counts as a wrong action is because it would have an adverse effect on our own interest. Such claims are highly implausible. We can certainly recognize that there are reasons to refrain from harming others, as well as reasons to help others, even when doing so has no apparent influence—against or in favor of—our own interests.

One argument against ethical egoism that develops this line of reasoning comes from the contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel. In his book *The Possibility of Altruism*, he focuses on the way in which our attitude toward our own needs undermines the claims of ethical egoism. Nagel argues that there is an “objective interest” we attribute to many of our needs and desires and that we are able to recognize an “objective element in the concern we feel for ourselves.”<sup>19</sup> That is, we attribute an objective status to our needs in the sense that we believe such needs give other people reasons not to harm us and, in certain instances, reasons to help us. Such objective interest shows up in the fact that when another person harms us, we not only dislike it, but we resent it. In other words, we think that “our plight [gives the other person] a reason” not to harm us. We, in turn, are able to recognize the legitimacy of extending that

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18. In moral philosophy, the term *normative* refers to what a moral theory says we ought to do (or ought not do)—that is, what counts as right actions. The question of “normative grounds” thus refers to what a particular theory considers to be the basis for right actions: what makes actions good and bad, obligatory or forbidden, and so on. Examples of such normative grounds from some of the most prominent moral theories in our tradition would include maximizing individual well-being or happiness (consequentialism), respect for persons (non-consequentialism), or regard for some other intrinsically good thing as a basis for right actions. Immanuel Kant’s ethical theory is an example of a nonconsequentialist theory that takes respect for rational agency or autonomy as the basis of normativity. See Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79–80. For an analysis of the normative grounds of Kant’s moral theory in comparison with the normative theory of Emmanuel Levinas, see my essay “The Fact of Reason and the Face of the Other: Autonomy, Constraint, and Rational Agency in Kant and Levinas,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 4 (2002): 493–522. On the issue of normative ethics in general, see Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).

19. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 83.

“objective interest” to the needs of others. Thus, if there are others with needs and interests similar to ours, then we can see that their needs and interests deserve the similar objective respect that ours do.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, ethical egoism would undercut the most plausible appeal we might make to others either to refrain from harming us or to help us when such help is desperately needed. As Nagel points out, because “egoism holds that each individual’s reasons for acting . . . must arise from his own interests and desires,” one would be unable “to regard one’s own concerns as being of interest to anyone else, except instrumentally.”<sup>21</sup> Since we can see the absurdity of the situation in which others could not recognize our needs as giving them at least some reason not to harm us (or reason to help us in certain circumstances), there is good reason to believe that the normative claims of ethical egoism are fundamentally wrong.

There are other philosophical arguments against egoism I could give, but I will limit myself to one more that comes from the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant articulates one version of his “Categorical Imperative” that is known as the “Formula of Humanity as an End.” It states that we should treat the humanity in ourselves and others always “as an end and never merely as a means.”<sup>22</sup> This imperative is based on the value of rational agency, which rational beings can recognize in both themselves and others. While we will not go into the full argument here, Kant argues that we can each recognize (at least after due consideration) that all other people have a value or dignity—as an end in themselves. It is this value—often referred to as rational agency—that is the basis of our moral obligations: both the obligation not to harm others and the obligation to help others. Thus, unlike ethical egoism, Kant argues that we have a duty of beneficence.<sup>23</sup> Kant’s notion of acting from duty is

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20. This does not necessarily imply that accepting objective reasons for right actions implies every action must be completely impartial. As some contemporary thinkers have pointed out, though such objective reasons imply universality, such universality does not necessarily imply impartiality. For example, the complete impartiality required by some utilitarian views does not follow from the notion that moral principles must be universal. On this issue, see Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 107–8.

21. Nagel, *Possibility of Altruism*, 84–85.

22. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 80.

23. Concerning duties of beneficence, Kant says it is “the duty of every man to be beneficent, i.e., to be helpful to men in need according to one’s means, for the sake of their happiness, and without hoping for anything thereby.” Kant,

also relevant here, since he argues that we can do what is right because it is right and not simply from a desire for reward or from a fear of punishment. Kant thus presents an important account of why moral obligation cannot be based simply on self-interest.<sup>24</sup>

### The Question of Psychological Egoism

At this point, we need to address the closely related issue of whether it is even possible to care about others for their own sakes in a way that is not based on our own interest. Ethical egoism says that all morality and moral obligation should be based on self-interest. However, an ethical egoist may also accept the further claim of psychological egoism, which holds that all concern for others is really just a concern for oneself.<sup>25</sup>

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*Practical Philosophy*, 453. Thus, for Kant, we have two “obligatory ends,” self-perfection and the happiness of others. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 517–26, 571–72. Kant limits that duty by saying that, to a large degree, we can decide whom to help, how to help, and so forth. Thus helping others is what Kant calls a “wide” or “imperfect” duty, which contrasts with “narrow” or “perfect” duties. Kant says that “imperfect duties” involve “a playroom (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, that the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action.” Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 521.

24. Another philosophical argument against ethical egoism can be found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who provides a penetrating critique of ethical egoism—even though he does not make it explicit that he is doing so. His phenomenological analysis of the grounds of moral obligation (in works like *Totality and Infinity*) shows that moral obligation is not based on the interest of the self, but rather on the recognition of what he calls the “otherness” or “infinity” of the Other. While his painstaking analyses defy simple exposition (since they so often take the form of careful phenomenological descriptions and interpretations of our experience), he basically shows that our sense of obligation comes from the way in which our quite commonly egoistic existence is interrupted by what he calls the “face to face” relation, in which our self-interested activity is called into question by the “face” of another person. Such a “face” is present in its refusal to be contained or reduced to the “same” (which refers to the self), and it invites us into a relation with others that does not fall back into the pulsating egoistic tendencies that are so typical of our actions.

25. Psychological egoism is a descriptive claim about human nature, whereas ethical egoism is a prescriptive, normative claim. The former says we cannot but act from motives of self-interest; the latter says that we should only act on self-interest. One can accept both psychological and ethical egoism, but psychological egoism is not entailed by ethical egoism. Ayn Rand, for example, is an ethical egoist but not a psychological egoist.

That is, every act is wholly motivated by self-interest.<sup>26</sup> If psychological egoism were true, then true charity would be impossible. Even though the claims of psychological and ethical egoism are distinct, it is important to analyze psychological egoism, because the claim that we can care about others in a way that is not based on our own self-interest will be at the heart of the effort to show that the gospel is not ethical egoism.

One argument for psychological egoism says that all actions aim to produce a sense of pleasure, satisfaction, or peace of mind and are thus actually based on self-interest. A story from the life of Abraham Lincoln illustrates this argument. Supposedly, Lincoln argued in support of such egoism during a carriage ride with another gentleman.<sup>27</sup> During the ride, Lincoln told the driver to stop so that he could help some little piglets stuck in the mud. When his companion responded that his act seemed to contradict psychological egoism, Lincoln responded that even that act was for his own self-interest since, if he had not helped, it would have bothered his conscience and ruined his peace of mind all day. To this, one might respond that if failing to help would have bothered him so much, then that shows he actually did care about them.<sup>28</sup> While such a response is not foolproof,<sup>29</sup> it does certainly show that just because we

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26. Psychological egoism is sometimes stated as the claim that every human action is selfish and at other times as the claim that every action is inescapably based on self-interest—though not necessarily selfishness. In either case, psychological egoism implies that it is not possible to care about others for their own sakes. Those who argue for psychological egoism don't usually distinguish between selfishness and self-interest, but it is important to do so. Not all actions done for our self-interest are selfish, if by *selfishness* we mean actions that are considered by most people to be morally blameworthy. Nevertheless, one could still be a psychological egoist who holds that all actions are based on self-interest. So while not all actions would be selfish, this version of psychological egoism would still hold that there are no altruistic acts—that is, no acts of concern for others that are *not* based on concern for self.

27. Quoted from the *Springfield (Illinois) Monitor* by F. C. Sharp in *Ethics* (New York: Appleton Century, 1928), 75. As cited in Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism" *Ethical Theory*, 79–90.

28. Otherwise, it would not have bothered him if he didn't help. This is Joel Feinberg's response. See Feinberg, *Ethical Theory*, 523–24.

29. Perhaps he was conditioned to help animals when he was younger—on pain of being punished, for example. Thus, although there may be other reasons he felt guilty (than because he did have a genuine concern for the pigs), I would say that his response is quite strong compared to many cases in which people feel guilty for not helping.

gain satisfaction from helping others does not necessarily imply we do not genuinely care about them.

One common argument used in support of psychological egoism says that we always do what we value most. As one psychological egoist put it, “We never intentionally follow a course of action that, from the point of view of our self-regarding ends, appears worse than another open to us.”<sup>30</sup> However, even if it were true that we always choose to do what we value most, this does not prove that psychological egoism is correct. Just because I wouldn’t choose some option unless I valued it more than the other options available to me at the time does not imply that I value that option so highly because of what it will do for me. It could just as well be that I value it most because it benefits someone else or because I know it is the right thing to do. Recognition of what is morally right cannot be reduced to self-interest. As Francis Hutcheson, one of the great Scottish “moral sense” philosophers, points out: we can tell that certain actions are right even when they in no way benefit us, and we can tell that certain actions are wrong even when they in no way harm us.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the assumption that we value an option only because of what it will do for us begs the question in favor of psychological egoism. Of course, one might ask why we would ever be good, if it were not for the benefit (at least in the sense of satisfaction, peace of mind) that we get when we do what is right. Doesn’t that prove psychological egoism? We can respond that we do indeed need some positive, confirmatory sense that what we are doing is right. Why else would we think we are doing what is right? It is true this will usually be an affirmative state of mind or feeling that confirms the rightness of the action, but that does not mean the only reason we did it is because of a perceived sense of benefit that comes from such an awareness.

Nevertheless, we can appreciate the tenacity of similar arguments for psychological egoism. For example, if we think about why we choose to become connected to others in our lives—why we date those we date, why we marry the person we marry, why we seek out certain friends—it can be tempting to accept psychological egoism. Think about the reasons we choose to be with such people. Perhaps they are enjoyable to be around; or we feel at home with them; or they are attractive, interesting,

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30. Mark Mercer, “In Defense of Weak Psychological Egoism,” 228.

31. Francis Hutcheson, “An Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil,” in *The British Moralists 1650–1800*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Cambridge: Hackett Press 1991), 261–99.

intelligent, and inspiring; or they simply meet our needs in some way. Does this not show that we care about others only because they meet our needs, desires, and interests? I think the answer is no, and one of the best ways to refute this claim is through a careful introspective analysis of our own experiences.<sup>32</sup>

Since it is perhaps impossible to know the motives of others with certainty, introspection is crucial in this matter. Of course we can be mistaken about what our exact motives are in any given instance, and sometimes we engage in self-deception about our motives.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, I submit that we cannot be wrong in every case. For instance, would it make sense to say that we know with certainty what anger or hate is like—based on our own experiences of being motivated by such feelings—but that we are not sure if we have ever felt motivated by genuine love or concern for another? If our knowledge of the existence of genuine dislike for others (as well as genuine selfishness) is itself based on our introspection of our own motives, then why can we not know (based on similar introspection) that we can also feel genuine love for others? Why would we be so certain of the existence of such negative emotions but not be certain of the existence of positive emotions that seem equally genuine? Of course, there is no perfect method to determine the precise make-up of our motives, but I think we know enough to tell (at least sometimes) whether we truly care about someone, as opposed to detesting or even being indifferent to him or her. At least some of the time we are correct judges of our own motives.<sup>34</sup>

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32. One thing I should point out here is that love for others that is based on meeting our own needs is not always selfish. C. S. Lewis makes this point when he distinguishes between what he calls “need-love” and “gift-love.” As he writes in *The Four Loves*, “We must be cautious about calling Need-love ‘mere-selfishness.’ *Mere* is always a dangerous word. No doubt Need-love, like all our impulses, can be selfishly indulged. A tyrannous and gluttonous demand for affection can be a horrible thing. But in ordinary life, no one calls a child selfish because it turns for comfort to its mother; nor an adult who turns to his fellow ‘for company.’” What Lewis refers to as “Gift-love” is precisely the type of pure love that is found in charity, which involves loving others not simply because of what they do for us. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960, 1988), 2.

33. On this issue, see C. Terry Warner, *Bonds That Make Us Free: Healing Our Relationships, Coming to Ourselves* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain Press, 2001).

34. For an interesting essay on why we are often biased in favor of psychological egoism, see H. Palmer, “Deeming Everyone Selfish,” *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 113–25.

To take a common example, think of a time when you saw someone who was injured. Perhaps this person fell down the stairs, slipped on the ice, or was involved in a serious traffic accident. Is it not the case that you felt a genuine concern for such a person? It is simply too much of a stretch to say that in such instances we care about that person only because we will benefit from such concern or that such concern is based only on some interest we have. We can tell, if we think about it, that in many such instances we do experience genuine concern and love for others for their own sakes.<sup>35</sup>

Often we detect the relevant difference between various motives by noticing the transition from those motives based mostly on self-concern to those based predominantly on concern for another person. Let me illustrate with an example from my own experience. One afternoon my wife called me at work to ask if I could check whether my daughter's piano music had been left in my car. At first, I will admit, I was irritated because I had just sat down to do some much-needed work after having taught two separate two-hour courses, and in order to check on the piano music, I would have had to walk a considerable distance to the car. My initial motivation to help was based mostly on not wanting my wife (or daughter) to be upset with me if I did not help. I suppose it was also based on the fact that they had helped me in the past and that I would want them to help me in similar future situations. While these were not the worst motives, neither were they based predominantly on a genuine concern or love for my wife or daughter; the focus was mainly on my own self-interest. However, after going all the way to the car and not finding the music, I called my daughter, who then began to cry because she urgently needed that music for a recital. At that moment, my motivation changed, and I almost instantly felt a genuine concern for her and her situation. No longer was I helping grudgingly or thinking about how my unwillingness to help might get me in trouble with my wife or daughter. My predominant motive changed to one of love and compassion; my whole focus became her happiness. I became, as the scripture says, "filled with love."<sup>36</sup> Thus, I believe that if we carefully attend to our

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35. Some might say that in such instances we really care only about ourselves—thinking what it would be like if such a thing happened to us. But just because we cannot understand another's suffering unless we have experienced pain ourselves, it does not follow that in being concerned for others we are simply concerned for the possibility of our suffering similarly.

36. See, for example, Alma 38:12; 2 Ne. 4:21; 3 Ne. 17:6; and Alma 36:20. A statement from President Dieter F. Uchtdorf is relevant here. He stated: "The



own experience, we can all find there are times when our predominant motive has been a genuine concern for others.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, we have more than introspection to rely on. We also have evidence from the behavior and testimony of individuals who seem to act for the sake of others and who often report that they do act for the sake of others without thinking of their own interests. Psychological egoists will have to discount both sorts of evidence. However, as Russ Shafer-Landau points out, while it is true that sometimes people are deceived about their motives, and sometimes we misinterpret behavior, it would be problematic to discount all such evidence.<sup>38</sup>

### Minimal Awareness of Self-Interest

I think one reason people are often persuaded by psychological egoism is that it may be true we rarely act without at least some awareness of our

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more we allow the love of God to govern our minds and emotions—the more we allow our love for our Heavenly Father to swell within our hearts—the easier it is to love others with the pure love of Christ. As we open our hearts to the glowing dawn of the love of God, the darkness and cold of animosity and envy will eventually fade.” Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Merciful Obtain Mercy,” *Ensign* 42, no. 5 (2012): 75–76, available at <http://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/05/the-merciful-obtain-mercy?lang=eng>.

37. Some egoists will of course claim that any concern for others is always based on subconscious (or unconscious) self-interested motives that would nullify any claim of genuine concern for others, but such an appeal is highly dubious. Here I would agree with Gregory Kavka, who, when speaking about the serious difficulties of positing such subconscious or unconscious motives, states: “If one’s ground for asserting the existence of such motives or beliefs is that ‘they must be there, or else the agent would not have performed the action,’ one has confused the necessity of having some motivation with the necessity of having a self-interested motive, that is, one has fallen back into Tautological Egoism. Or if one posits the existence of such motives solely because they are needed to save Psychological Egoism, one is treating that doctrine as a dogma, rather than as a genuine empirical hypothesis subject to disconfirmation by evidence.” Gregory S. Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 55. Thus, as Kavka further states, “The psychological egoist, then, if honest, is forced to acknowledge that insofar as agents themselves can tell, some of their actions are motivated by non-self-interested desires.” Kavka, *Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory*, 54. For Kavka’s discussion of what sociobiology contributes to the discussion of altruism, see pp. 56–64. See also Elliott Sober and D. S. Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

38. Shafer-Landau, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, 101–2.



own interests. This is quite different, however, from the psychological egoistic claim that we care about others only because of what we get out of it. It may be that we rarely act without some self-interested motive.<sup>39</sup> But even if this is true, it does not mean that we do not genuinely care about others for their own sake or that we care about people only as a means to our own happiness or self-interest.<sup>40</sup> The presence of minimal self-concern in such moments does not imply that all other-directed concern is really just self-concern. Furthermore, in order to establish that we can be genuinely concerned for others, we do not need to show that we are completely concerned for others (in the sense that we have absolutely no awareness of any of our own needs). As long as there is some genuine concern, then the claim of psychological egoism cannot be correct. It is true that in our relationships with others there is a fine line between wanting them to be happy for their own sake and wanting them to be happy so that we can be happy, or so that we can get what we need or want out of the relationship. Nevertheless, there is a real distinction. It is the fine line between various degrees of loving another person as a means to some end we desire and loving another person for his or her own sake. The latter is a real possibility borne out by legitimate experiences we have all had. Such genuine concern is not nullified, even if there is a minimal self-awareness constantly at work in our consciousness. Before we return to this question, however, let us turn to the argument for and against the gospel as ethical egoism.

### **The Scriptural Argument for and against Ethical Egoism**

To what degree, then, do ethical egoism and the gospel coincide? From a scriptural perspective, we can find much that would seem to support the claim that the gospel advocates ethical egoism. To begin with, it seems clear that the very purpose and goal of our existence is our eternal happiness. Earlier, I alluded to Lehi's profound statement in 2 Nephi 2:25

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39. Perhaps this is not true. Perhaps there are times when we are completely unaware of any possible interest we may have. If this is possible, it is likely that such occurrences are rare. Nevertheless, let us proceed on the assumption that we always act with at least some self-interested motive.

40. Again, think of instances in which someone does something heroic that involves great risk to self. Just because that person is aware—in the moment of heroism—that he or she could sustain injury or great harm does not take away from the very genuine concern he or she may have for the individual being rescued.

that we exist so “that [we] might have joy.”<sup>41</sup> This same idea is echoed in various ways over and over again in the teachings of all modern prophets and apostles. To cite just one of many examples from recent general conference talks, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated:

If only we could look beyond the horizon of mortality into what awaits us beyond this life. Is it possible to imagine a more glorious future than the one prepared for us by our Heavenly Father? . . . Those who come unto Christ, repent of their sins, and live in faith will reside forever in peace. Think of the worth of this eternal gift. Surrounded by those we love, we will know the meaning of ultimate joy as we progress in knowledge and in happiness. No matter how bleak the chapter of our lives may look today, because of the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we may hope and be assured that the ending of the book of our lives will exceed our grandest expectations.<sup>42</sup>

Certainly statements such as this are intended as an appeal to our desire for long-term happiness and interest.

An appeal to our interest can further be found in the way many gospel principles are often presented. Take the principle of forgiveness, for instance. It is often emphasized that one of the main reasons we should forgive others is so that we ourselves may be forgiven, so that we ourselves may find peace—since being unforgiving often harms us more than it harms those we need to forgive. The same could be said for the principle of sacrifice, since we are taught that sacrifice will bring us great blessings. We are further taught—and it is certainly true—that gratitude is essential for our happiness, because without it we will always be unsatisfied and we will fail to appreciate what we have been blessed with. Other examples could be given to support the idea that the goal of gospel principles is our long-term interest. The doctrine of restoration in

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41. Joseph Smith also said: “Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God.” Smith, *Teachings*, 255–56; see also Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:134–35 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). Another statement made by the Prophet concerning “self-aggrandizement” is sometimes used to support the idea of the gospel as egoism. We will look at that statement later in the paper.

42. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Infinite Power of Hope,” *Ensign* 38, no. 11 (2008): 22–23, available at <http://www.lds.org/ensign/2008/11/the-infinite-power-of-hope?lang=eng>.

the Book of Mormon illustrates this as well. As Alma states, “That which ye do send out shall be returned unto you again” (Alma 41:15). He elaborates in his sermon to his son Corianton: “Therefore, my son, see that you are merciful unto your brethren; deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually; and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward; yea, ye shall have mercy restored unto you again; ye shall have justice restored unto you again; ye shall have a righteous judgment restored unto you again; and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again” (Alma 41:14). Such gospel principles, and many others, can easily be read as supporting ethical egoism, since they seem to show that we are to follow such principles because it is in our long-term interest.

Certainly, the message of the gospel alerts us to the many ways in which our actions undermine, damage, or (in some extreme cases) destroy our long-term interest and happiness.<sup>43</sup> Giving in to pride, selfishness, or self-justifying anger can actually frustrate what we would acknowledge as our long-term interest and happiness. Think, for example, of a quarrel with a loved one in which we cling to some point of dispute out of pride, when in fact the damage done to our relationship—as a result of what is said in anger—is far worse than actually losing the argument, or giving in and swallowing our pride.<sup>44</sup> Again, there is no question but that doing what is right (striving to live a righteous life) is

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43. In this regard, we find an interesting thought expressed by Bishop Joseph Butler, the renowned eighteenth-century Anglican theologian/philosopher, who argues (in his famous *Fifteen Sermons at the Rolls Chapel*) that from the moral point of view, we ought to act in our real self-interest. Butler claims that if “self-love” means doing what is truly in our long-term interest, then we need more self-love, not less. The way in which the principles of the gospel often appeal to our long-term interest certainly resonates with Butler’s point that we need more self-love in the world, because true self-love means acting in our real, long-term interest and prevents “numerous follies,” as Butler would say. However, the type of self-love he is referring to is not selfishness. Furthermore, Butler is not an ethical egoist, because he holds that benevolence is an independent principle that cannot be reduced to self-interest. See Butler, “Fifteen Sermons,” in Raphael, *British Moralists 1650–1800*, 368.

44. This is not to say that every position one takes in some dispute is held due to improper pride. There can of course be righteous disagreement. However, I would guess that a majority of arguments in our relationships are based on improper pride. On this issue, Orson Scott Card had some important insights. See “Analyzing a Quarrel Over ‘Nothing,’” *Mormon Times*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/705373733/In-the-Village-Analyzing-a-quarrel-over-nothing.html>.

in fact in our long-term interest, and in this sense the gospel certainly accords with ethical egoism.

### **The Normative Grounds Objection to the Gospel as Ethical Egoism**

Despite the areas of convergence outlined above, there are several significant problems with attempting to equate the gospel and ethical egoism. The first problem concerns the question of what constitutes the normative grounds of moral obligation; the second concerns the question of what constitutes righteous motives. Let me preface the analysis of these two problems by noting that, from a gospel perspective, any moral imperatives must certainly focus on becoming like God. As Jesus states in 3 Nephi 27:27, “What manner of men [and women] ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am.” Thus, if God is love (1 John 4:8), then we must strive to love like God loves. This recognition that we are to become like God should give pause to anyone tempted to accept the gospel-as-egoism claim.

Let us now look at the question of normativity. In terms of the normative grounds for rightness, egoism’s claim that an action is right only because it contributes to one’s overall self-interest is problematic. The fact that it benefited or blessed another person has no bearing on the rightness of that action—except insofar as his or her happiness is bound up with our happiness.<sup>45</sup> While it is difficult to say definitively what constitutes the normative grounds of righteous actions, it is quite clear we cannot say the only thing that makes an action right is that it is in our own interest. If that were true, then when we serve others, the rightness of such actions would consist solely in the fact that they serve our own interest. Surely that cannot be correct. The weight of multitudes of scriptures speak against this. As we will see in the next section, for instance, such an idea would undercut the possibility of charity—the pure love of Christ.

Consider each of the gospel principles mentioned above (forgiveness, gratitude, sacrifice, and so on), each of which is often advocated in conjunction with how it will benefit us. There is no question, for example, that gratitude is one of the most important keys to happiness.

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45. Several people have made this point that ethical egoism gratuitously bases the rightness of actions only on the self-interest of the agent performing the action. As Samuel Scheffler puts it, such a position “gives the wrong explanation of other regarding norms.” See Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 126. Also, see the chapter on ethical egoism in Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy*.

It is correctly emphasized that being grateful will bring us peace and happiness. However, we have a moral obligation to be grateful that is not simply based on the fact that gratitude will make us happy. We should be grateful because there is something right in responding in such a way when others have done something for us. Our obligation to be grateful also impacts our obligations to serve others. This is illustrated well by King Benjamin's discourse in the Book of Mormon. As John Welch points out in his analysis of the logic of King Benjamin's speech:

Benjamin based moral obligation on the fact that, by serving his people, he has put them in his debt—a debt they ought to repay by serving others and by thanking God. For example, the question of why one should care about others or give freely to another is one of the most basic issues of moral philosophy. It is a question King Benjamin's speech answers like no other. Benjamin's logic of love, service, and charity is cogent, thorough, and persuasive. He offers at least eight answers to this crucial and persistent question of ethics and morality.<sup>46</sup>

The first of these answers is that “we should serve one another because we have received benefits from the service of others.”<sup>47</sup> Notice that we are not obligated simply because of the fact that showing gratitude is in our interest, since it will bless us—even though that is true. We are obligated to show gratitude regardless of the benefit it brings us. The same could be said for each of the other gospel principles listed; what makes the act right is *not* simply that it is in our interest. Ethical egoism cannot allow for such a possibility, since it bases moral normativity entirely on self-interest.

### **Righteousness and Love Unfeigned: The Motivational Objection**

The most significant problem in considering the gospel as ethical egoism concerns the issue of motivation, since ethical egoism makes self-interest both the normative basis *and* our governing and ultimate motive.<sup>48</sup> The question is whether self-interest *should* be our ultimate and governing motive, according to the gospel. Does it follow that the main reason we should be righteous is that it is in our long-term interest? It is true the gospel teaches that we should live a righteous life and that only such a life is in our long-term interest. Does it follow, however, that the reason

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46. John W. Welch, “A Masterful Oration,” in *King Benjamin's Speech: That Ye May Learn Wisdom*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 77–82, quotation on 77.

47. Welch, “Masterful Oration,” 77.

48. See Regis, “What Is Ethical Egoism?” 52.

we should lead a righteous life is that it is in our long-term interest? Would it pose a problem if self-interest served as our main motivation for being righteous?

Some clarification is needed here, since the way we use the term *righteousness* often allows an ambiguity. We sometimes call actions righteous if they do not violate the commandments—whether in the sense of commission or omission.<sup>49</sup> This sense refers to external compliance or, as we say, the letter of the law. But the meaning of *righteousness* certainly goes beyond this sense of the term, since it implies that certain motives must be present in actions (in cases of doing good) or nonactions (in cases of refraining from doing harm or evil). Think, for example, of how Jesus says our righteousness must “exceed” that of the scribes (Matt. 5:20). It requires that we have (or strive to have) a pure heart. A central feature connected with having a pure heart is the motive of charity.<sup>50</sup> As we read in 1 Timothy 1:5, “Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, as Mormon tells us, we should seek charity—the pure love of Christ—so “that we may be purified even as he is pure” (Moro. 7:48).

Is such motivation compatible with ethical egoism? Ethical egoism certainly advocates caring about other people if such actions are in fact the only way to bring about our long-term interest. This is why ethical egoism may well require us to develop good relations with other people, since such relations are in our long-term interest. But while ethical egoism may proscribe acts that are selfish in the most blameworthy sense, it still allows one’s motivational focus to center entirely on one’s own interests or well-being. It is highly doubtful, however, that caring about others because doing so is in our long-term interest captures what it means to have such a pure heart.

Of course, a proponent of the gospel as egoism might respond that if acting from pure motives will bring about our greatest long-term happiness, then having pure motives is just what we should seek to

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49. Furthermore, the notion of a “righteous” action includes both the morally permissible and the morally obligatory, as well as those actions that are good to do but not, strictly speaking, required. Sorting this out would, however, need to be the topic for another essay.

50. Of course, the purity of our hearts is one of the major points of emphasis given by the Savior in both the Sermon on the Mount and the Temple Sermon given to the Nephites.

51. Another relevant scripture is Moroni 7:6–9, where Mormon tells us that righteousness requires “real intent of heart.”

have—because that is in our long-term interest. In this way, a sophisticated egoist might argue that the motive objection fails to refute the gospel-as-ethical-egoism claim because we can simply include having such pure motives as a means to long-term interest and happiness. But this raises two questions: (1) Would such motives actually be *pure* motives? (2) Would such a mind-set actually bring about the desired end? In regard to the first question, there would be something impure about seeking to attain a pure heart only because it is best for us. We are told that righteousness requires “love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41), but there would be something feigned about loving others only because—or even predominantly because—that is in our best interest. This does not mean that the gospel precludes all self-interest from our motives, but it does mean that long-term self-interest cannot be our predominant motive.<sup>52</sup> Thus, what is involved in becoming righteous and having a pure heart goes beyond the governing self-referential structure of ethical egoism.

The second question points to a related problem: if self-interest remains our predominant motive, this may well block the very possibility we are trying to attain—namely acquiring a pure heart. If that is the case, our effort would fall prey to an analogue of the paradox of hedonism, the idea that the “single-minded pursuit of happiness is necessarily self-defeating” and that we need to somehow not think about the fact that we want to be happy if we truly want to be happy.<sup>53</sup> Thus, trying to have a pure heart *because* it is in our long-term interest will likely *not* bring about such a pure heart. Truly having a pure heart requires a limitation on the self-referential mind-set of ethical egoism. It requires that we genuinely let go of thinking that we should care about others *because* doing so would be in our long-term interest. Attaining a pure heart means we will not always be the center of our world in the way ethical egoism prescribes. It requires that we forget ourselves—not in the sense that we have absolutely no awareness of our needs and interests, but in

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52. There are certainly righteous motives that focus on our own needs and in which our predominant concern is ourselves. Not all righteous acts must be focused on others.

53. Joel Feinberg writes: “An exclusive desire for happiness is the surest way to prevent happiness from coming into being. . . . The single-minded pursuit of happiness is necessarily self-defeating, for *the way to get to happiness is to forget it*; then perhaps it will come to you.” Joel Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism,” in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2008), 520–32.



the sense that the interests of others are (often) more important to us than our own needs and interests. Then other people will really matter to us in a way that disrupts the governing grip of self-interest.

Of course, developing this love for others may not always be an easy thing to do. This is why we need divine power to influence our motives. It is why we are told to pray “with all the energy of heart, that [we] may be filled with this love” (Moro. 7:48). This is not to say there is nothing we can do to initiate such a change in our motives. We can focus our minds on others’ needs or desires; we can think about the worth of other people;<sup>54</sup> we can try to change our motives when we realize we are acting more out of a concern for our interests than out of a genuine concern for others. And we can pray “with all the energy of heart.” Ultimately, though, our hearts are purified by the Spirit of God and the redeeming power of the Atonement of Christ. So, acting from our long-term interest as our predominant motive may actually prevent us from attaining the object of our long-term interest, if such a result can come about only through divine instrumentality. The love that righteousness requires cannot be reduced either to a desire for our self-interest or to a desire to have a pure heart because that is in our long-term interest.

Again, it may be that we almost always act with some awareness of self-interest,<sup>55</sup> but that is very different from saying either that everything we do is based entirely on self-interest or that such awareness prevents us from having a genuine concern for others. Since genuine concern for others is compatible with some self-concern, it follows that righteous motives—let us say, for example, the pure love of Christ—would not require the complete absence of any possible awareness of self-interest. Furthermore, we may certainly have righteous desires for our own long-term happiness (the object and design of existence). It is just that all our actions cannot be entirely governed by or based on that desire for

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54. Terry Warner provides some important insights on what we can and cannot do (by our own initiative) to bring about a change of heart. See *Bonds That Make Us Free*, ch. 11, especially pp. 222–25.

55. Something about this sort of claim does seem persuasive. Even in those cases where people choose a course of action that they recognize is not in their long-term interest, it does seem plausible to say that the action does not appear worse than another option open to them. Perhaps they know (in some sense) that the action is not really in their long-term interest, but their minds are so clouded with anger or some other passion that the action does indeed “appear” as the best option at the time—though if they considered the long-term effect, it would be clear the action is really worse than another open to them.



happiness. That is the problem with ethical egoism. Thus, while it is true that only righteousness is in our long-term interest and that we ought to act only in harmony with a righteous life, it does not follow that the main reason why we ought to perform righteous actions is because they are in our long-term self-interest. The gospel clearly does not teach that everything we do should be done from the predominant thought of how it will bless ourselves. That is why the gospel and ethical egoism diverge. Righteousness thus involves more than doing what is right from motives of self-interest. On the other hand, the gospel does not require that we eliminate any possible thought of our own interest. In fact, it both permits and encourages us to hope for our own glorious future.<sup>56</sup>

Because righteous motives are compatible with some awareness of self-interest, Truman Madsen can say that “we are to be egoists in the sense of the Divine”:

A religion which makes central the concept of love, as does the religion of Christ and therefore of Joseph Smith, we might assume, would not be egoistic. But in one important sense it is. The Prophet speaks on this issue as follows: . . . Some people denounce the principle of self-aggrandizement as wrong. It is a correct principle that may be indulged upon only one rule or plan—and that is to elevate, benefit and bless others first. If you elevate others, the very work itself will exalt you. Upon no other plan can a man justly and permanently aggrandize himself.<sup>57</sup>

While this statement supports the idea that we can legitimately call the gospel *egoist* in some sense, I do not think it supports the claim that the gospel is ethical egoism. First, the Prophet does not say that our primary motive in attempting to elevate others can be our own exaltation. In this context, self-aggrandizement certainly does not endorse caring about others only because doing so will exalt us. It does not imply that when we are in the service of others, we are (or should be) only in the service of ourselves (to rephrase Mosiah 2:17). The quote on permissible self-aggrandizement does, I think, imply there is nothing wrong with having some sense that serving

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56. As President Uchtdorf says, “The things we hope *in* sustain us during our daily walk. They uphold us through trials, temptations, and sorrow. Everyone has experienced discouragement and difficulty. Indeed, there are times when the darkness may seem unbearable. It is in these times that the divine principles of the restored gospel we hope *in* can uphold us and carry us until, once again, we walk in the light.” Uchtdorf, “Infinite Power of Hope,” 23, italics in original.

57. Truman G. Madsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Ethics,” in *Perspectives on Mormon Ethics: Personal, Social, Legal, and Medical*, ed. Donald G. Hill Jr. (Salt Lake City: Publisher’s Press, 1983), 36–37.

others will bless us. Thus, it is one thing to elevate others when our own exaltation is our predominant motive, but quite another thing to elevate others because genuine love for them is our predominant motive. If we look at what the Prophet Joseph said about charity and love, it is not really plausible to claim that he advocated ethical egoism in the sense defined in this paper.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

We have seen that, in the end, the gospel cannot be equated with ethical egoism. While it is true that we should live only in harmony with righteousness and that only a righteous life is in our long-term interest, it does not follow that the complete reason we should live such a life is because it is in our long-term interest. If ethical egoism were limited simply to the claim that we should do only what is in our long-term interest, this moral theory might be compatible with the gospel. However, as ethical egoism is understood in contemporary moral philosophy, it includes several other claims that are not compatible with the gospel.<sup>59</sup> The gospel does say we ought to do only what is in our long-term

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58. For example, he taught, “Until we have perfect love we are liable to fall; and when we have a testimony that our names are sealed in the Lamb’s book of life, we have perfect love, and then it is impossible for false Christs to deceive us.” Smith, *Teachings*, 9. For other excellent statements by the prophet on charity and love, see *History of the Church*, 3:304; 4:165, 227.

59. One other problem with equating ethical egoism and the gospel concerns the ethical egoist claim that we have no unchosen obligations to serve the interests of others. See Regis, “What Is Ethical Egoism?” 50–62. While the gospel certainly focuses on the importance of agency in our obligations, this view does not seem entirely compatible with the gospel. For ethical egoism, we would have no obligation to help someone whose life was in peril, even when helping that person would pose no serious threat to ourselves. An ethical egoist might agree that we should help in such a case *if that is what we value doing*. However, the rightness of such an act would not be based simply on the fact that we might value it. It would be right because it is worthy of valuing. The question of helping in cases other than such easy rescue scenarios is more controversial. However, it is still in perfect harmony with the gospel to speak of an unchosen obligation to serve others. As Elder Dallin H. Oaks put it, “Service is an imperative.” Elder Oaks made this statement in a 2010 address at the Women’s Conference at BYU. See Marianne Holman, “Elder Oaks: Service Is an Imperative for True Followers of Jesus Christ,” *Church News*, May 1, 2010, available at <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/59292/Elder-Dallin-H-Oaks-Service-is-an-imperative-for-true-followers-of-Jesus-Christ.html>. While it is doubtful the gospel would

interest—if we define that interest as living a righteous life. However, as we have seen, ethical egoism differs in important ways from the principles of the restored gospel.<sup>60</sup> It differs in terms of what it proposes as the normative basis of right actions, and it especially differs from the gospel's emphasis on righteous motives. The necessity of having a pure heart accentuates the distinction between the gospel and ethical egoism. Genuine righteousness requires a type of love that is not reducible to acting from the primary motive of self-interest. However, it is important to note that this does *not* mean there cannot be righteous self-interest. Part of the reason we should do what is right is because it makes us happy. Self-interest simply cannot be the complete and governing principle in the gospel as it is in ethical egoism. Thus, allowing self-interest to exert such an unconditional force in our motivational life would likely prevent us from living a genuinely righteous life.<sup>61</sup>

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support the view that others can demand our help (in such nonemergency, non-easy-rescue cases), there are times when our actions would be blameworthy if we failed to help, even if we had made no prior commitment to do so.

60. Going back to the argument outlined in note 3, the problem is in premise (5) since, as we have shown, the claim "Any position that holds that we ought to do only what is in our long-term interest advocates ethical egoism" turns out to be false.

61. A related (and complicated) issue would, of course, be just what the relation is between meeting our needs and meeting others' needs. How, that is, within a gospel framework, do we adjudicate our needs and the needs of others?