

## Psychology and the Legacy of Hobbesianism: Egoism, Motivation, and the Death of Meaning

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This paper contends that contemporary psychology has frequently deployed, often without explicit historical awareness or attribution, an essentially Hobbesian approach to the conceptualization and explanation of human behavior. This approach offers an account of behavior that reflects an underlying presumption of psychological egoism. The conceptual legacy of Hobbesian egoism is the discipline's frequent reliance on motivational concepts grounded in and guided by the presumption of a fundamental and powerful individual self-interest manifested as an innate and inescapable desire for the maximization of personal pleasure. We argue, however, that the Hobbesian tradition of accounting for behavior in terms of self-interest and the quest for pleasure is unable to adequately account for meaning and intentionality in human behavior because it obviates both meaning and intentionality — except in the crassest operational terms. Indeed, we will argue that because of this, explanations of human action that reflect a philosophical commitment to Hobbesian egoism ultimately entail nihilism, and, therefore, the death of meaning and purpose. The paper briefly argues for an approach in which human beings are understood not as entities impelled by inescapably egoistic motivational forces, but rather as moral agents genuinely capable of intentional action and meaningful social engagement.

It is a testament to lack of theoretical sophistication in contemporary psychology that one readily finds in the pages of its most widely used texts any but the most cursory acknowledgements of the philosophical origins of the discipline's central conceptual conceits. Indeed, given the often brusque treatment that its philosophical roots get in most psychology textbooks, especially those aimed at orienting students to the discipline, it is easy to get the impression that the establishment of Wundt's laboratory in 1879 represents a departure from all previous (psychology-relevant) philosophical thinking — a departure so radical as to be essentially *sui generis*. It is as though we are to believe that the modern discipline of psychology sprang forth Athena-like, full-born and fully formed, from the head of

Zeus, and in such a way as to have inherited little of substance from her progenitor, and thus, to owe him little actual regard. As with Athena and her debt to Zeus, so, it appears, with psychology and the entire Western intellectual tradition.

For example, in his popular introduction to psychology, Kalat (2016) offers this analysis immediately before asserting that psychology begins with the work of Wundt:

The sciences of astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology developed gradually over centuries. At first, all practitioners were amateurs. They worked in medicine, law, or other professions and did research in their spare time. Long before universities began to include these fields as worthy areas of study, the amateur investigators had accumulated a great deal of knowledge. In contrast, psychology began as a deliberate attempt to start a new science. (p. 15)

This view of our disciplinary history overlooks data suggesting that both Wundt and William James resisted the wholesale separation of “psychology” from philosophy. Undeterred by history, in a more terse postulation, Train (2007) simply accounts for the history of psychology by noting that psychology, which she defines as the study of human nature, was “largely developed in the West, since the late nineteenth century” (p. 2).

Granted, there are some thinkers prior to the latter half of the nineteenth century whose speculations are occasionally cited by some authors, but this usually amounts to little more than a backhanded compliment regarding their uncanny prescience in anticipating certain modern, empirically validated discoveries about human nature and behavior. As the historian of psychology Kurt Danziger (1990) remarked, contemporary psychologists tend to unreflectively assume that “psychological events have fixed natural forms, which a few lucky philosophers and an army of systematic investigators have found and labeled” (pp. 334–335). The overall sense one gets in reading the literature of modern psychology is that its practitioners believe that their science functions in an intellectual space all but entirely removed from the primitive ideas and lucky guesses of previous eras, and, as such, is not genuinely beholden to them in any substantive way.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, as a number of critics (see, e.g., Alexander and Shelton, 2014; Cheung and Hyland, 2012; Cushman, 2019; Gantt and Williams, 2018; Martin, Sugarman, and Slaney, 2015; Slife, O’Grady, and Kosits, 2017; Slife, Reber, and Richardson, 2005; Walsh, Teo, and Baydala, 2014) have noted, the intellectual, practical, and moral consequences this sort of disciplinary attitude can be far-reaching indeed.

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<sup>1</sup>For examples of this sort of intellectual glibness as it is manifested in introductory texts, see Licht, Hull, and Ballantyne (2019), Feist and Rosenberg (2019), Coon, Mitterer, and Martini (2017), Plotnik and Kouyoumdjian (2014), and Myers and DeWall (2018), among others. For examples from history of psychology texts, see Richards (2010), Pickren and Rutherford (2010), Saugstad (2018), Sternberg and Pickren (2019), and Goodwin (2015), among others.

Psychology's adoption of an essentially Newtonian worldview as the foundation for its investigatory and explanatory project has been long recognized by scholars attentive to the intellectual history of the discipline (see, e.g., Faulconer, 1995; Furedy, 2004; Gantt, Melling, and Reber, 2012; Gantt and Williams, 2014; Leahey, 1995; Lowry, 1969; Rychlak, 1984; Slife, 1995; Williams, 1995). By "Newtonian" we mean that psychological theory and research has been principally characterized by a quest to provide explanations of human action that invoke mechanical, efficient causal determinism, relying on the operation of universal laws manifest as forces, the effects of which can be described in mathematically precise ways. Indeed, psychology's theoretical commitment to the sort of mechanical explanation that is a hallmark of the Newtonian worldview has "become for psychology a sort of unimpeachable paradigm" (Williams, 1995, p. 63), so much so that almost all "mention of causation in the social science literature relies on a version of Newtonian causation" (Faulconer, 1995, p. 77).

The discipline's endorsement of a Newtonian worldview is, perhaps, nowhere more apparent than in its treatment of the concept of motivation. By "motivation" we mean here the fundamental phenomenon of some animating impulsion behind psychological, affective, or behavioral movement as manifest in all human action. The etymology of "motivation" stems from the Latin, *motus*, "movement or motion" and *motivus*, or "motive power," and suggests that motivation is a broad encompassing concept taking us, really, to the question, "Why is there action, or behavior, at all rather than just stasis?" We note here that the terms, *motus* and *motivus*, used in seventeenth to nineteenth century natural philosophy to account for movement of natural objects, are the roots of the most general concept behind all human behavior, i.e., *motivation*. The naturalistic — and, in this case, Newtonian — legacy of contemporary psychological theory is obvious in its basic terminology.

Drawing inspiration from Newtonian physics, then, contemporary psychological theory has long sought to explain the origins of human behavior in terms of such things as instinctual urges, biological drives, psychological needs, reinforcement contingencies, chemical impulses, environmental stimuli, and other such powerful motivating forces (Gantt and Williams, 2014). As Deckers (2018) notes in his recent textbook, "to be motivated is to be moved into action, or into a change in action" (p. 2) because one has been "induced or moved into action or thought toward some end-state by either the push of a motive or the pull of an incentive or goal" (p. 10). Like the Newtonian proposition that an object at rest that will remain at rest unless acted upon by some motive force compelling it in some way, contemporary psychology similarly understands human behavior as requiring some manner of motive force to impel the individual person to action.

The image of the person as a reactive organism, compelled to act by externally located natural forces, has been one that has captivated theorists and researchers in psychology for a very long time now. However, this Newtonian legacy is not

the only philosophical legacy that has shaped and guided theorizing in the discipline. One of the central conceptual conceits, what Al-Shawi (2006, p. 159) has termed “fundamental philosophical values,” of much contemporary theorizing in the behavioral sciences is psychological egoism, a philosophical assumption (like Newtonianism) that is not only seldom explicitly acknowledged, but is even less frequently explicitly defended. Psychological egoism is the notion that “all human actions when properly understood can be seen to be motivated by selfish desires,” or, more precisely, “the only thing anyone is capable of desiring or pursuing ultimately (as an end in itself) is his *own* self-interest” (Feinberg, 2007, p. 167, emphasis in the original). In its very definition, psychological egoism constitutes a claim about the fundamental nature of human nature, an assertion of psychological fact regarding the originary cause of human action. “It asserts,” Feinberg (2007) states, “not merely that all men do as a contingent matter of fact ‘put their own interests first,’ but also that they are capable of nothing else, human nature being what it is” (p. 167). Furthermore, “universal selfishness is not just an accident or a coincidence on this view; rather, it is an unavoidable consequence of psychological laws” (p. 167). It is in light of such claims that psychological theories of behavior have so often relied on psychological egoism to account for why people do the things they do, seek the things they seek, think the thoughts they think, and desire the things they desire. In other words, psychological egoism is not only ubiquitous, it is comprehensive as well.

Whereas the Newtonian legacy in psychological theorizing maintains human action is compelled by external environmental or internal psychic forces acting on material bodies or psychic phenomena, the legacy of psychological egoism — an explanatory framework inherited from the work of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1651/1996), a contemporary of Newton — asserts the existence of powerful internal (psychological) forces capable of compelling human action.<sup>2</sup> Here we see, perhaps, the roots of contemporary psychology’s obsession with the Nature–Nurture question, as well as its ongoing wrestle over whether mental or physical explanations of human behavior are to be preferred. A central assumption of the Hobbesian explanatory system is that persons are fundamentally self-interested, pleasure-seeking organisms who are relentlessly driven by a congenital desire to maximize gratification and minimize frustration.<sup>3</sup> As Hobbes (1651/1996) argues in his most famous work, *Leviathan*:

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<sup>2</sup>Not surprisingly, at the same time in the development of Enlightenment thought that reason was emerging as a compelling force in human communities and communal action in the political theories of the time that invoked rationality as the basis of the “best” or “right” response to the human conditions of the day (i.e., the forces at work in societies), rationality was invoked as the “best” or “right” response to the conditions present in the inner environment of the psyche.

<sup>3</sup>It is important to note here that psychological egoism is not a theory about what ought to be the case in human affairs, nor is it a claim about how we ought to best pursue our own interests. Arguments concerned with those questions are the province of what is known as “ethical hedonism” (Feldman, 2004). However, we note that there has long been a type of “ought” built into reason and rationality itself.

Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way of the later. The cause whereof is, That the object of man's desire, is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure for ever, the way of his future desire . . . . So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death. (p. 70)

In other words, happiness — meaning, for Hobbes, pleasure as defined by the individual in consequence of personal sensory or intellective experience — is the ineluctable aim that undergirds all human endeavors, a continual quest to secure the gratification of desire after desire as each arises and by the most efficient and timely means possible.

It is perhaps important to note here, as many defenders of psychological egoism would, that presuming all human behavior to be motivated by self-interest does not mean that all human behavior is overtly selfish or manifestly self-serving in every instance. Indeed, many theorists who endorse psychological egoism readily accept that people commonly act in solicitous, benevolent, and prosocial ways.<sup>4</sup> The argument they would offer is that because helping other people, being courteous to them, and sharing with them typically produce in us pleasant experiences, it makes perfect sense that people would engage in such acts in order to increase their chances of maximizing their overall individual happiness — or, at least, minimize their chances of experiencing frustration or pain. After all, being nice to other people can not only make you feel good (largely, it would seem, because of the good things reflected back to the self from those other people as a norm in most societies), it also reduces the likelihood that they will do things that will irritate you or obstruct you in the pursuit of your own ends. Accordingly, “no psychological egoist denies that people sometimes do desire things other than their own welfare — the happiness of other people, for example; but all psychological egoists insist that people are capable of desiring the happiness of others only when they take it to be a *means* [direct or indirect] to their own happiness” (Feinberg, 2007, p. 167). Thus, because psychological egoism embodies a foundational claim about the origin, nature, and ultimate purpose of human action, per se, it follows that “purely altruistic or benevolent actions and desires do not exist; but people sometimes appear to be acting unselfishly and disinterestedly when they take the interests of others to be means to the promotion of their own self-interest” (Feinberg, 2007, p. 167).

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<sup>4</sup>The term “prosocial” is increasingly employed in contemporary psychological research in lieu of the term “altruism” or “altruistic.” The principle reason for the widespread use of “prosocial” rather than “altruistic” to describe other-directed helping behavior seems to be that the latter term implies that such behavior arises (or, at least, can arise) out of genuinely selfless and other-interested grounds, whereas the former term implies that while helping behavior may be beneficial to another person (or to society as a whole) it is actually grounded in self-interest.

*Some Manifestations of Psychological Egoism in Contemporary Psychology*

Carrying forward the intellectual project of philosophical forebears such as Hobbes, many psychologists have been strong advocates for an egoistic perspective; though, as noted earlier, they are seldom explicitly aware of or acknowledge their Hobbesian inheritance. Psychological theorists as diverse as Freud, Skinner, Maslow, Rogers, Ellis, Perloff, Cialdini, Seligman, and Buss, among others, have each offered their own accounts of human behavior that rely upon the assumption of psychological egoism, or “material self-interest,” as a fundamental “motivational given” (Cialdini, 1993, p. vii). Indeed, Hoffman (2000) claims that contemporary research in psychology occurs entirely in a context of “knowing full well that however much a person cares about others, when the chips are down, the individual thinks of himself first” (p. 1). In other words, the reality of psychological egoism is not something to be postulated as a possible conceptual starting point, a basic philosophical assumption about the nature of human nature, but rather is something taken as a fact of human nature that is not open to dispute in any serious way. Egoism, then, is perhaps able to undergird so many obviously divergent theories of motivation and behavior because it is seldom acknowledged as a philosophical assumption, and thus, is seldom subjected to any real, sustained critical scrutiny (Slife, 2000). Rather, it is taken to be just the ways things are, and thus, necessary to any adequate explanation and understanding of human behavior (see, e.g., Deckers, 2018, especially Chapter 2). As Reeve (2015) states, “The study of motivation and emotion reveals what people want and why they want it. It literally reveals the contents of human nature” (p. 22).

The irony of such a statement is, of course, that it suggests that even before any serious study of motivation or emotion begins, we can somehow be assured that such study will reveal to us “the contents of human nature,” and that those contents will be revealed as consisting essentially of “wants” and reasons for wants. In other words, it is already pre-established that psychological egoism is at the core of human nature. Indeed, what Reeve (2015) asserts here, and what is echoed throughout much of the literature of contemporary psychology, is in fact not rationally or empirically demonstrated facts of the world at all, but rather only assumptions about human nature — assumptions with fairly specific origins and genealogy in the history of ideas. It is also the case that there are a host of cogent rebuttals and viable alternatives to this assumptive theoretical mass (see, e.g., Adams, 2006; Babula, 2013; Feinberg, 2007; Flescher and Worthen, 2007; Gantt, Reber, and Hyde, 2013; Gantt and Thayne, 2014; Hills, 2010; Mansbridge, 1990; Post, Underwood, Schloss, and Hurlburt, 2002; Scott and Seglow, 2007). Nonetheless, a great deal of what passes for fact-based analysis of human behavior, as well as much that informs common clinical practice, is grounded in psychology’s Hobbesian legacy of assuming psychological egoism among the body of facts of our human nature.

Although there are many examples with which we might illustrate some of the ways in which the assumption of psychological egoism is manifest in contemporary psychology, we will briefly explore only two: needs and authenticity. The language of biological, psychological, emotional, sexual, and social needs is pervasive in contemporary psychological theory and psychotherapeutic practice (see, e.g., Fall, Holden, and Marquis, 2017; Lehmler, 2018; Nolan, 2012; Sharf, 2012). Indeed, psychopathology, emotional distress, sexual confusion, depression, and a host of other therapeutic issues are often explained primarily, if not solely, in terms of unmet or conflicting needs of one sort or another. As one widely cited text maintains, “*emotional pain* is a response to an injury that *prevents or violates the fulfillment of the basic human needs of being loved, safe, and acknowledged*” (Timulak, 2015, p. 2). Thus, “joy comes when our fundamental needs are fulfilled, and suffering comes when they are violated or not fulfilled” (Timulak, 2015, p. 2). On such a view, then, “considering what needs are unmet is a crucial part of the therapist’s work” (Timulak, 2015, p. 4), as well as exploring with the client viable ways in which to meet those needs or resolve conflicts between competing needs. Of course, various therapies differ — often widely — on exactly how best to go about such explorations, what precise needs are considered most important, and what successful outcomes for the therapy will actually look like.

However, despite such differences, most therapeutic approaches are united in a basic commitment to the notion that at the psychological core (and, presumably, the ontological core as well) of all human beings reside various sorts of needs innately possessed of energetic force that can not only drive their behavior, but produce it. At the same time, we can be assured that when the point — the telos — of the behavior is not achieved, either because the behavior production is insufficient, or the world is too resistant, the result will be a frustration focused around the object of that drive, and which will generate pain, suffering, and even pathology. Given this grounding presumption, then, the central aim of psychotherapy becomes assisting individuals in more effectively identifying their own needs, determining how best to gratify those needs, and facilitating a general understanding in which individuals come to see themselves and others as need-driven (i.e., psychologically egoistic) beings — in the hope that this innate process of need to drive to satisfaction can be pursued more effectively. Of course twenty-first century sensitivity would consider the language we have used here, terms such as needs, drives, frustrations, and satisfactions much too crass, harking back, as it does, to the nineteenth and twentieth century language of many of psychology’s founding figures. More contemporary language would speak not in terms of needs, but rather of rights; not of satisfaction, but rather of expression and authenticity; not of drive, but rather of identity; not of frustration, but rather of suppression. The terms may change, but the model and its Hobbesian heritage are intact and clearly recognizable.

As suggested above, intimately related to the conceptual framework of needs and need fulfillment is the notion of the authentic self — as well as related

concepts such as self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-discovery, and so on. In essence, the authenticity that we are describing here can be characterized as “reflecting the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise” and “having awareness of, and trust in, one’s motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions” (Kernis, 2003, p. 13). According to Kernis (2003), “authenticity involves knowledge of one’s needs, values, feelings, figure–ground personality aspects, and their roles in behavior” (p. 13), the achievement of which constitutes “optimal self-esteem.” In such a view, psychological disorders and emotional suffering are “the precise opposite of successful self-realization” (Petersen, 2011, p. 5). Thus, to be an authentic self is to have clearly identified one’s central needs and to have released oneself from doubt and fear so as to most fully embrace those needs and experience the joy, psychic integration, and behavioral wholeness such an embrace is thought to provide. Authentic living is, then, to place oneself at the center of a psychological, emotional, and moral (even spiritual) drama where the needs of the self and their fulfillment are of primary importance in conducting one’s life and understanding oneself. Any therapy whose principle aim is to assist clients in discovering the unmet needs that compel their behavior and feelings so that they might embrace those needs, and thereby become an authentic self, is necessarily a therapy comfortably rooted in the assumption and aims of psychological egoism. It is an “ism” in the literal and historical sense of a guiding dogma or over-arching explanatory construct. The ego, based solely on its own nature, is taken to have both explanatory and impulsive power. As such, its interests are to be favored on both the individual and societal levels.

Authenticity is, in short, the ethos of self-discovery, self-realization, and self-acceptance — a manifestation of what Robert Bellah and other scholars have termed the worldview of “expressive individualism” (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985; Harskamp and Musschenga, 2001; Wilkens and Sanford, 2009). This is a perspective that “worships the freedom to express our uniqueness against constraints and conventions” in such a way that “freedom becomes the rationale for reducing any responsibilities perceived as limitations to my personal autonomy or fulfillment, whether those responsibilities are social, moral, religious or family duties” (Wilkens and Sanford, 2009, p. 28). However, as advocates of this view are quick to point out, this view is not to be seen as encouraging a narcissistic obsession with one’s self — or, for that matter, with myopic, antisocial, and self-indulgent arrogance. Indeed, as one influential therapist has recently written, “Authentically loving one’s self is distinguished from selfishness or narcissism” insofar as authentic self-love “is giving to others while giving to one’s self; narcissism is a self-centered, maladaptive, grandiose, and inauthentic preoccupation with one’s self” (Irvani, 2017, p. 24). “Self-love becomes good,” Clough (2006) writes, “when people who want to be treated decently treat others decently; when people who want security seek the security of others as well; when people want to be appreciated show appreciation; when people who want to be



treated justly act justly; and when people who want to be cared for care for others” (p. 29). We note, however, the absence of any fully developed treatment of just how such a happy manifestation of self-development might come about, or how it can be instigated so that it happens on purpose, or how it might prevail as a life strategy when it is difficult (if not impossible) to see how such benign self-interest might triumph even when the route to ultimate self-satisfaction becomes unclear and strewn with obstacles — rather than with rich opportunities.

One troubling implication of these ideas for psychology is that persons come to be viewed as selfish organisms, inescapably driven to seek gratification by the various needs and drives that define them. Granted, some theoretical formulations do allow for some measure of personal agency (e.g., rational choice theory, expressive individualism, humanism, etc.) — at least, insofar as the particular means by which particular needs are fulfilled is a matter of individual choice. However, even in such formulations the possibility of not being driven by self-interest and the interminable quest for gratification is denied from the outset by the underlying (and, typically, unquestioned) presumption of the fundamental and essential status of psychological egoism. In other words, even if some measure of free choice is permitted by the particular theory or therapy in question, it is still always the case that we are never free to be *otherwise than* fundamentally self-concerned. In the end, only one motive — self-seeking — accounts for all of our varied thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as the structure and meaning of our relationships with one another. Selfless giving of oneself on behalf of another, investment in the welfare of another person with no thought for reciprocation or return on that investment, honestly and straightforwardly devoid of strategic or covert self-concern, is simply not permitted as a genuine possibility in human relationships, no matter how loving, intimate, or committed we may feel or how much we may wish or think them to be genuinely selfless.

Ultimately, the presumption of psychological egoism requires that all relationships be understood as deceptive and manipulative, or at least unavoidably insincere, attempts to secure for oneself the satisfaction of one’s (conscious or unconscious, physical or psychological) own desires or personal exigencies. No matter how loving or altruistic a given act of caring and compassion for another might seem on the surface, no matter the depth of the sharing and the giving that might be involved, the logically necessary implication of psychological egoism is that all such acts arise solely out of — and in the end serve only — individual self-interest. Indeed, Hobbes (1651/1996) asserted this view as a “Law of Nature” when he wrote:

For no man giveth, but with intention of Good to himselfe; because Gift is voluntary; and of all Voluntary acts, the Object is to every man his own Good; of which if men see they shall be frustrated, there will be no beginning of benevolence, or trust; nor consequently of mutuall help; nor of reconciliation of one man to another; and therefore they are to remain still in the condition of *War*. (p. 105)

For a more contemporary version of this view, recall Hoffman's (2000) claim cited above: "however much a person cares about others, when the chips are down, the individual thinks of himself first" (p. 1). We might further add here that Hobbes' point is an ontological one; that is, it reflects a foundational claim about the fundamental essence or nature of human nature. For Hobbes, egoism is rooted deeply in our human nature, and as such, it is not something we might just slip into when the "chips are down," so to speak. Rather, up or down, we must always play the chips for our own benefit because by the very constitution of our human nature we cannot do otherwise.

### *Instrumentalism*

A further implication of granting the ontological reality and hegemony of psychological egoism among the sources of efficacious human action is that other people are reduced to being one or another of only three types of objects. Once the premises of psychological egoism have been granted, other people — like all other objects we might encounter in the world — are capable of being present to us only as: (1) opportunities for gratification, (2) sources of possible frustration, or (3) items of indifference who are, as such, unworthy of our regard or concern. As Fowers (2010) notes, this "propensity to limit our understanding of human activity to the employment of strategies or techniques in pursuit of ends that are independent of . . . means is called *instrumentalism*" (p.103). Instrumentalism represents a vision of both human thought and behavior that "emphasizes efficiency or effectiveness of means as the predominating picture of rational thinking and action" (Bishop, 2007, p. 82). On this view, rooted as it is in psychological egoism, all of our behaviors, including and especially our interactions and relationships with others, are characterized in terms of an overarching means–ends rationality whereby the significance of any behavior or relationship is understood solely in terms of its instrumental value (i.e., as means) to the individual actor. In other words, a given behavior is rational and meaningful only insofar as it serves as an effective means for obtaining some personally desired and personally satisfying outcome.

Upon reflection it is clear that in the instrumental perspective such things as civility, caring, sharing, and treating others justly are taken to be important insofar as they constitute particular means by which one secures for oneself the benefits of being treated with civility, kindness, solicitude, and justice. In such a perspective, other people are not to be respected and honored or cared for as ends in themselves, but rather are to be used, however indirectly and unconsciously, as means to obtaining for oneself respect, honor, and care. When human nature is conceived in this way, and human relationships are seen through this lens, it becomes all but impossible to distinguish any difference at the most fundamental, ontological level (i.e., the deepest level of our being) between the relationship one

might have with a dear friend or spouse or child from the relationship one might have with one's stockbroker or dentist. In reality, under the intellectual regime of instrumentalism, relationships with persons bleed inevitably into relationships with inanimate things, with any consumable objects that might offer utility in the satisfaction of one's desires. The only sustainable distinction is a quantitative one wherein other people matter more than other consumable objects simply because their potential as sources of personal gratification are so much more extensive and varied than other objects. Although, particularly, perhaps in the current age of inexhaustible availability of goods and services, even this distinction in favor of real persons may be eroding significantly, particularly among certain cultures and generations.

### *Authenticity*

The definitive effect of instrumentalism on personal relationships is to render our human relationships inauthentic. The inauthenticity at issue here is not the sort that has become a rallying point for contemporary culture as it attaches intrinsic value to an individual's being and acting authentically in accord with a pre-existent nature that defines what each individual uniquely needs and is. This larger contemporary mantra of authenticity is not, however, unrelated to the more mundane sort we mean to address here.

Meanwhile we need to return to the necessary connection between instrumentalism and inauthenticity in human relationships which is an important part of the legacy of Hobbesianism. The fight to keep instrumentalism at bay within our culture, so as to allow for genuine relationships at all, is a most important, and an increasingly difficult one. Once the instrumental implications of psychological egoism are drawn out it becomes clear that many of the ways we conceptualize the nature of sexual intimacy and relationships, along with their aims and meanings, as we encounter them in contemporary psychology reflect a fundamentally instrumental worldview. It is common to suggest that individuals possess — and are possessed by — certain sexual needs,<sup>5</sup> and that these needs are continuously pressing for satisfaction in one way or another such that individuals must find some outlet, often by effectively managing their sexual relationships with similarly driven persons, in order to obtain satisfaction of sexual desires (see, e.g., Muise, Impett, Kogan, and Desmarais, 2013; Toates, 2014). Indeed, the dimension of sexual needs

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<sup>5</sup> We recognize here that contemporary discourse, especially in the social sciences and among those who are on the front lines of cultural evolution on this topic, does not make as much use of the term or concept of sexual "needs" as was the case in the recent past. Rather, one hears more of orientations, identities, or other terms essentially carrying the weight of and standing for the sexual in one's life in all its forms and manifestations. Clearly, however, there is an inertia or impulsion, or animating force to sexuality that has all the essential qualities of the motive force of sexual needs as conceived of even four centuries ago in Hobbes' own time.

and desires is often taken to be among the most important — if not *the* most important — of all the dimensions of need, and, as such, it constitutes the defining psychological feature of individual identity (Lehmiller, 2018). Unfortunately, if the instrumentalist picture painted by the assumption of psychological egoism is true, then our most intimate and personal forms of social and moral relationship are in fact merely elaborate instances wherein we use one another as individual sexual means for attaining individual sexual ends — and we do so because we must and cannot do otherwise. We should note that most often we do not overtly or purposely use people, of course, because that would be too crass; but when properly understood, once instrumentalism is at the core of our complex hedonic makeup, there really is no other adequate way to describe the sexual relationship. After all, what does one do with “instruments,” but use them? Consequently, psychological egoism reduces us to puppets or minions of our sexual needs, always and inescapably engaged in a deceptive and manipulative social and interpersonal dance whose purpose never rises above the level of attaining physical and emotional gratification — even if in the guise of being true to our sexual identity or nature. The only role available for human agency in such a view is that afforded to a perpetually hungry diner standing before an elaborate buffet table. She can choose to eat whatever she happens to desire, and she can eat as much as she desires. However, the one thing that is not available to her, and never can be, is to give up her place at the table, to share or give away her food to another, and to do so out of genuine love and concern, no strings (conscious or unconscious) attached.

Even though instrumentalism — at least as it is typically encountered in mainstream psychological theories — seems to preserve a sense of human agency, because it is firmly rooted in psychological egoism, the reality of human agency does not go “all the way down,” so to speak. It stays at the superficial level of having options — but one of them must be chosen. One cannot opt out of the game — unless one wants to live inauthentically by ignoring the psychological and biological reality of one’s being. Ultimately, despite an array of possible means from among which one might choose to seek the gratification of the desire, the one facet of psychological, emotional, social, and moral life over which one can exert no control, and in which one cannot actively participate in any meaningful way, is the bedrock fact of fundamental self-interest. This constitutes the foundational internal principle of motivation Hobbes provides to explain human events in a manner every bit as deterministic as the external principles proposed by Newton in explanation of the non-human world. However, in the case of human actions, only if persons were in some fundamental sense genuinely capable of both intending and acting otherwise would it then be possible for there to be any genuine meaning in their intentions and actions. For our acts to *mean* something requires that there be genuine possibility *and* intention born of our own essential agentic being-in-the-world. Insofar as contemporary psychological theories of all stripes invoke the sorts of psychologically egoistic accounts of behavior that

constitute the Hobbesian metaphysical legacy, they necessarily deny the possibility that human behavior can be other than self-interested, and, thus, render understanding human behavior, in any way that does not rob it of any inherent meaningfulness, impossible. After all, if Hobbesian psychological egoism is true, then selfishness is selfishness — and so is altruism, and so is compassion, and so is love, and so is friendship, and so on through the entirety of human relational action. Any meaningful conceptual distinction among these deeply human concepts simply disappears.

Furthermore, inasmuch as psychological theories of human action deny the possibility of human agency or intentionality in the generation of motives — i.e., especially non-self-interested motives — such theories cannot escape a virulent form of nihilism in both intellectual and cultural life. If human agency is not, in some fundamental sense, inherent in human action and intention by virtue of the fundamental ontological status of human beings as moral agents, if our various intentions and acts are just derivative of necessarily egoistic drives or needs, it becomes difficult to legitimately ascribe meaning to any human behavior or social relationship in more than a purely subjective, self-deceptive sense. Unfortunately, once the conceptual door is shut on the possibility of genuine agency and meaning in our psychological accounts of human action and intention (or motivation), the only conceptual/intellectual door left open is the one that leads to nihilism, or the death of meaning. In other words, once the possibility of making meaningful moral distinctions between one behavior and another, between one form of life and another, is erased — because all seemingly important distinctions are held to be just variations on one fundamental theme (i.e., psychological egoism) — then the vitality of meaning itself is snuffed out. Ultimately, the only meaning that can be ascribed to any given act is that it is a manifestation of the self-same thing as every other human act: the relentless pursuit of self-interest. And, when there is only one possible meaning to which every possible act reduces, then no particular act possesses any real meaning or difference because there is, in the final analysis, nothing to fundamentally distinguish any one act from any other, no substantive difference that could differentiate an act as meaningful in itself, as *otherwise than*. The reduction of all behavior to mere instances of a congenital and unrelenting psychological egoism is, therefore, the very death knell of meaning.

### *Intentionality*

As we have suggested, it should not be surprising that psychologists often consider psychological egoism to be a fact of human nature, particularly given the idea's pervasive manifestation in our modern culture of consumerism, individualism, and a generally instrumentalist approach to interpersonal and social relationships (see Bellah, et al., 1985; Fowers, 2010; Wilkens and Sanford, 2009). After all, as human beings, we psychologists are as enmeshed in the cultural

worldview of the modern West as anyone (our cloak of scientific objectivity notwithstanding), a cultural worldview deeply rooted in the Enlightenment thinking of such figures as Hobbes and Newton. Thus, our questions, our research methods, and our theoretical accounts both instantiate and reflect back prior — though usually unacknowledged — biases about how the world works, what it means to be human, and just why things must be as they appear to us. Nevertheless, while all inquiry must begin from certain basic philosophical assumptions, it is possible to bring such assumptions into the light and subject them to critical examination — both in terms of their general plausibility and their impact on the conceptual and empirical adequacy of the explanations they encourage (Slife, Reber, and Richardson, 2005; Slife and Williams, 1995). However, it must be understood that to the extent that the assumption of psychological egoism remains a hidden bias informing our research, theory, and practice, it simultaneously blinds us to other possibilities that flow rationally from it, and prevents us from taking up in our work understandings that might offer more compelling fruitful analyses of human actions and relationships. We firmly believe that such analyses can be shown to be richer and more revelatory of the essence of our nature as the kind of beings we are.

This is not the forum for a fully detailed explication of an alternative to traditional psychological theories of human action that invoke motive forces of the sort found in Hobbesian conceptions of the self, of which psychological egoism is an important type. However, a brief survey of some of the key features of any such alternative is certainly possible in this forum and revelatory of some important implications. Any alternative to the Hobbesian approach to behavioral explanation must begin with an alternative to the concept of self-interested egoism that serves as the fundamental motive force at the heart of the Hobbesian model. The role of any such motive force is to account for human action — usually in the sense of moving a person from behavioral stasis to behavioral action or from one action to another. An alternative core concept that can adequately account for human action without relying on some mechanism such as a motive force is “intention.” We use intentionality here in a sense consistent with the work of the early phenomenologist, Franz Brentano (1838–1917), and more fully developed by his student, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In the use of “intentionality,” we do not refer to the common sense of the word, which is generally understood merely as a behavioral choice or action emerging at the end of a period of conscious rational deliberation. In the phenomenological tradition, intentionality means that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something *as* something. All mental activities have objects. And, in a broad sense, all mental activities, by their very nature *as* consciousness, because of this innate intentionality, “make sense” of the lived-world. Absent intentionality, consciousness could only register the world and note the existence of its own ideas, but it could not make sense of the world *as* something; that is, as it really is. In its more developed form, in more recent

phenomenological and hermeneutic thought, intentionality refers to the fact that consciousness — the ego — never acts in a pure, or detached, sense disconnected from the world, but that it is always contextual at the same time it is individual and telic (Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson, 2003; Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon, 1999; Taylor, 1985).

Intentionality, in this sense, is the idea that human action is always actively directed toward the accomplishment of a purpose important to the person. It is precisely in this special kind of engagement with the world that intentional consciousness plays the role that “motivation” has traditionally played in explanations of behavior, in that it renders an account of the well-spring of human action. The human aspect of “motivation,” however, as derived from its Newtonian and Hobbesian roots, is a much more passive process. Motivation is employed, in general, to explain how objects are moved (to some thought, feeling, or action) without their active participation — or, even necessarily, their awareness. The concept of intentionality arises from, and thus brings with it into any theory or explanation, the foundational presumption that human beings are by nature, and from the beginning, meaning-making, participatory, moral agents. Charles Taylor’s (1985) analysis of strong and weak evaluation, for example, suggests that human beings qua human beings are capable of making “weak evaluations” — that is, our human capacity to evaluate ideas, courses of action or states of affairs, rendering judgments of a truly meaningful sort about the worth, and even the moral valence, of particular acts or desires. Taylor argues persuasively that we are also capable of making “strong evaluations,” wherein we are able to recognize and judge the objects of our “weak evaluations” (e.g., ideas or possible courses of action) as to their comparative, or even absolute, worth — i.e., as being more or less worthy than others we might have or cultivate, or as being morally proper and perfective of the sorts of beings we are or should be. This aspect of our human nature is the very heart of the possibility of meaningful agency and the type of deliberation and adoption that has always been associated with human intentionality and freedom. Only if human beings are, at some fundamental level, the sorts of beings who act on their intentions and evaluations for reasons related to worthiness, rather than the sorts of beings who are only acted upon, whether by implacable external forces or inescapable internal ones, can an account of their actions be offered that escapes the egoistic determinism that is the Hobbesian legacy present in so much contemporary psychological theory.

In short, then, what is required to render a non-reductive, meaningful account of human action is to give up an entire worldview, one in which persons are conceived of objects that, in a way fundamentally similar to all other objects in the natural world, in order to be moved, must be acted upon, and are thus subject to motivating forces operating independent of their active participation or assent, and even, most often, outside their awareness. Within this worldview it is also axiomatic that motivating forces acting on sentient human beings — possessed

as we are with innate needs and desires for pleasure — the moving forces will be effective when and only when the movement is oriented toward the pleasure and augmentation of the self and the fulfillment of its ineluctably pleasure-seeking orientation. Psychological egoism reduces the “weak evaluations” spoken of by Taylor (1985) to mere automated sensitivity to hedonic tone, and his “strong evaluations” to merely the subjective registering of hedonic amplitude. In place of such a Hobbesian, hedonistic worldview, we offer an alternative worldview in which persons are understood as first and foremost active moral agents capable of intending, by nature always engaged in the active, constructive process that gives meaning to human action because it instantiates both intentionality and possibility — i.e., the possibility of being *other than* self-interested, and of being and doing *otherwise than* — in a world of genuinely meaningful social and moral relationships.

This is not to say that human beings are not, or cannot be, self-interested in their intentions, purposes, or reasons for acting. The alternative we propose here is not one that seeks to counter the presumption of psychological egoism by advocating for some vague notion of a psychological pan-altruism. Rather, we argue that to “be human” is to be able to “take up” certain possibilities, to “give oneself over” to them in an active, meaning-making, agentic fashion, whether those possibilities be self-interested ones, selfless ones, or what have you. What is being argued here is that to be human is to be a meaning-making moral agent who, though constrained — i.e., “contextualized” — in important ways by the natural world and its operations, as well as the social and historical worlds we each inhabit, is nonetheless the sort of being who incorporates both constraint and possibility in intentions and actions. Further, all of this happens within the flowing stream of consciousness engaged always in both strong and weak evaluation. Thus, action and intention are not understood as independent of the realities of the social, moral, or physical world. They are, rather, the appropriation of those realities by moral agents for moral and meaningful purposes (see, e.g., Martin and Sugarman, 1999; Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson, 2003; Tallis, 2011; Taylor, 1985).

Taking intentionality as an alternative starting point it is possible to see a way beyond the problematic implications of psychological egoism. Rather than getting bogged down in interminable arguments about whether human motives are fundamentally egoistic or fundamentally altruistic — as the stuff of many critical discussions of psychological egoism do (see, e.g., Schroeder and Graziano, 2015) — the assumption of agency allows us to see both selfish and unselfish actions and motives as distinct possibilities that are meaningfully present to us in all of our relationships. In other words, because we are moral agents living in a world constituted by its rich relational possibilities and meanings, we are the sorts of beings who are both continuously invited to “take up” certain meaningful relational possibilities and who are also continuously “giving ourselves over” to certain meaningful relational possibilities. We are, thus, the sorts of beings



who are always already dynamically situated in a constantly unfolding world of meanings and possibilities, of enticements and constraints, and, as such, we are constituted by those meanings and relationships even as we contribute to and constitute them. In fact, it is this very dynamic, agentic, and contextually situated understanding of personhood that is meant when we speak of human intentionality and contrast it with the psychological concept of motivation.

Furthermore, this view of personhood rejects the notion — inherent in any egoistic account of human nature — that to be human is first and foremost to be an isolated, individual self that looks out on a world of objects (both human and otherwise) possessing only instrumental value as potential sources of gratification or frustration for the individual Self. Rather, the perspective we are (briefly) articulating here is one in which to be human is to always already be a fundamentally social being, relational, and moral “all the way down” (Gantt and Williams, 2014). In fact, in this view, human agency only makes sense within a genuinely relational context of shared meanings and possibilities, of shared obligations and responsibilities, of shared understandings and histories. As this sort of being, then, we are always situated in moral contexts wherein we can take up the relational possibilities of those contexts in ways that are self-serving, manipulative, deceptive, or objectifying, or we can give ourselves over to the moral demands of our relationships in such a way as to “be for the other” (Williams and Gantt, 2002), engaging them in honest, compassionate, charitable and self-forgetting ways. Because this view understands human nature, at its most basic ontological level, in terms of intentionality and genuinely relational being, it allows us to escape the overly narrow and confining conceptual straight-jacket of psychological egoism. In so doing, it permits us to see human actions and relationships in ways that do not reduce them to mere objects, just variables in some manipulative, self-serving hedonic calculus — a calculus that, because it accounts for all human interactions only in terms of an underlying and inescapable instrumentalist rationality, ends only in the death of meaning.

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