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# SELFISHNESS, ALTRUISM, AND OUR FUTURE SELVES

Pierre Le Morvan

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In this article, I defend the thesis that selfishness and altruism can be *intrapersonal*. In doing so, I argue that the notions of intrapersonal altruism and selfishness usefully pick out behavioural patterns and have predictive value. I also argue that my thesis helps enrich our understanding of the prudential, and can subsume some interesting work in economic and psychological theory.

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‘Why bother about winter?’ said the Grasshopper. ‘We have got plenty of food at present.’ But the Ant went on its way and continued its toil.

— *From Aesop’s fable ‘The Ant and the Grasshopper’*

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She made and baked the bread. Then she said, ‘Who will eat this bread?’

‘Oh! I will’, said the Duck.

‘And I will’, said the Cat.

‘And I will’, said the Dog.

‘No, No!’ said the Little Red Hen. ‘I will do that.’ And she did.

— *From The Little Red Hen*<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

It’s late. You’re avidly reading a gripping murder mystery. You’re dying to find out who did it, but need to get up early in the morning. You have a couple of hundred pages left, and face a dilemma. Do you stay up for a few more hours and satisfy your pressing desire to know who murdered the heiress, or put the book down, go to sleep, and find out later? If you stay up, you’ll satisfy your desire to know, but at the cost of being dead tired in the morning. If you put the book down now, you’ll have to put off knowing until later, but you’ll feel much more rested and alert tomorrow.

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<sup>1</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for suggesting this epigraph.

45 Examples like this reveal something interesting and important about the nature of selfishness and altruism. Or so I shall argue, so let me begin by saying more about both. Suppose we think of selfishness interpersonally in terms of promoting one's own interest at cost to the interest of others, and altruism interpersonally in terms of promoting the interest of others at cost to one's own.<sup>2</sup> Construing selfishness and altruism in this way, one might argue that the relation in question is essentially interpersonal; that is, only someone in a position to put her interest ahead of others', or theirs ahead of hers, could be selfish or altruistic.

55 I do not dispute that selfishness and altruism can be interpersonal. I intend in this paper, however, to defend a thesis that has gone generally unrecognized, and that may, at least initially, strike many as counter-intuitive or even as incoherent. This thesis is that selfishness and altruism can also be *intrapersonal*. And while many others have discussed the relationship between time and self-interest, it's precisely the intrapersonal conception of selfishness and altruism I offer here that renders my thesis new and distinctive.<sup>3</sup> In defending it, I argue that the notions of intrapersonal altruism and selfishness usefully pick out behavioural patterns and have predictive value. I also argue that my thesis helps enrich our understanding of the prudential, and can subsume some interesting work in economic and psychological theory.

65 Accordingly, the following structure informs the rest of this paper. In section II, I make some clarifications germane to defending this thesis. In section III, I delineate some suppositions required to make sense of how selfishness and altruism can be intrapersonal, and provide a series of examples to illustrate them. I discuss some of the interesting applications of my thesis in section IV, and respond to several telling objections in section V. I conclude in section VI with some synoptic remarks.

## 75 II. Clarifications

Before I proceed to my thesis, it will be useful first to clarify how I shall conceive of interests and interpersonal selfishness and altruism.<sup>4</sup>

80 I acknowledge that there are competing accounts of what interest amounts to. Let me mention three popular ones. On a Hedonistic view, interest is understood in terms of the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. On a Desire Fulfilment view, it is understood in terms of the fulfilment of desires. On an Objective List View (to adapt a Parfitian expression to my purposes), it is understood in terms of the attainment of certain goods (e.g., happiness, knowledge, beauty, etc.) and the avoidance of certain bads (e.g., unhappiness, ignorance, ugliness, etc.).<sup>5</sup> These views themselves come in

<sup>2</sup>I will characterize selfishness and altruism more precisely later.

<sup>3</sup>Important philosophical discussions of time and self-interest can be found in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Butler, Sidgwick, Rawls, Nagel, Parfit, Brink, and others. While I don't have space here to compare and contrast my thesis to the theses found in these works, suffice it to say that no one in the literature has yet construed selfishness and altruism intrapersonally as I do here.

<sup>4</sup>In using the terms 'interpersonal' and later 'intrapersonal', I'm not supposing that only human beings can be persons; if there are non-human moral agents, then these terms apply to them.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. the discussion in Parfit [1984] of these positions.

various versions. When I use the term ‘interest’ in this paper, I mean it in a sense that is neutral between these various accounts. My thesis that selfishness and altruism can be *intrapersonal* does not turn on any one particular account of what interest amounts to, and is consistent with any account that allows for the possibility that one’s present interest could diverge from one’s future interest, a possibility I will explore and defend.

Let me also clarify how I shall understand *interpersonal* altruism and selfishness. When the interest of others diverges from one’s own, acting altruistically involves acting to promote the interest of others at cost to one’s own interest, whereas acting selfishly involves acting to promote one’s own interest at cost to that of others. A person is *altruistic* to the extent that she acts altruistically, and *selfish* to the extent that she acts selfishly. Interpersonal altruism and selfishness are scalar and thus admit of degrees: the more one acts to promote the interest of others at cost to one’s own the more one is altruistic, whereas the more one acts to promote one’s own interest at cost to that of others the more one is selfish.

What I have specified above are reasonably uncontroversial necessary conditions for being interpersonally altruistic or selfish and for acting altruistically or selfishly. However, in so far as interpersonal altruism and selfishness are not just descriptive but also evaluative notions, the conditions specified above are not sufficient qua non-evaluative. Let me explain. In situations where the interest of others diverges from your own, we can envisage that in at least some such situations you did not act selfishly even if you acted to promote your own interest at cost to that of others. If, for instance, given your love of music, your taking cello lessons benefited you significantly at comparatively little cost to the interest of others, it would seem rather inapt to label you as *selfish* here. Living a moral life involves balancing the interest of others with one’s own. It’s in keeping with common usage that calling someone’s course of action *selfish* is not just to say she acted to promote her own interest at cost to that of others, but that she did so in a morally bad way. Though I will not offer here a formula specifying just when an action (or person) counts as interpersonally selfish because morally bad, I shall suppose that there are at least some such instances.<sup>6</sup> As for interpersonal altruism, I shall not suppose that just *any* instance where someone acts to promote the interest of others at cost to his own is altruistic; it’s far from clear to me, for example, that someone motivated by self-hatred or a lack of self-respect is altruistic when he acts this way. It’s in keeping with common usage that calling a course of action *altruistic* is not just to say someone acted to promote the interest of others at cost to his own, but that he did so in a morally good way. And again, though I will not offer here a formula specifying just when an action (or person) counts as interpersonally altruistic because morally good, I shall suppose that there are at least some such instances.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>This might occur in at least some cases where the benefit one derives is outweighed by the cost to others. How we construe what is morally bad will depend on whether we accept a deontological, consequentialist, or other moral framework; I aim to be as neutral as possible between such frameworks in my use of the term ‘morally bad’.

<sup>7</sup>This might occur in at least some cases where the benefit others derive outweighs the cost to oneself. Once again, our construal of what is morally good will depend on whether we accept a deontological,

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To sum up, when one's interest diverges from the interest of others, one is interpersonally selfish to the extent that one acts, in a morally bad way, to promote one's own interest at cost to that of others, and interpersonally altruistic to the extent that one acts, in a morally good way, to promote the interest of others at cost to one's own.

### III. Intrapersonal Selfishness and Altruism

*Intrapersonal* selfishness or altruism may initially strike one as counter-intuitive or even incoherent notions, for selfishness and altruism may seem essentially interpersonal in so far as they involve promoting one's own interest at cost to that of others, or vice versa. How then could selfishness or altruism be *intrapersonal*? Doesn't 'intrapersonal' mean that we're dealing solely with the person herself, and not with any *others* in relation to which she is selfish or altruistic? In brief, how could someone be selfish or altruistic in relation to herself?

I grant the force of these objections to what we might call *synchronic intrapersonal selfishness* and *synchronic intrapersonal altruism*. I do not dispute that these are incoherent notions, nor that, in so far as selfishness and altruism are relational, neither can occur in a situation involving only a subject herself at one point in time.

If it doesn't make sense to think of selfishness or altruism as being both intrapersonal and synchronic, what about their being intrapersonal and diachronic? I propose that this does make sense, provided that we make some reasonable suppositions, and henceforth when I speak of intrapersonal selfishness and altruism I shall only do so diachronically.

What then are these reasonable suppositions? Let's begin with the self. We can distinguish between our present self, and our future and past selves. For instance, though Karen is numerically the same now as she was ten years ago (that is, though she's numerically the same self over time), she's qualitatively different in so far as she has lost and gained certain features over time, *viz.*, she's now married, a mother, and a director, all of which she wasn't ten years ago. We can think of her self over time as encompassing a series of selves, and we can think of a self encompassing a series of selves by thinking in terms of a modelling strategy—one frequently used in psychology and economics—on which 'a single individual is modeled as many separate "selves," one for each time period' [O'Donoghue and Rabin 1999: 175].

Let me explain. A self exists (enduring or perduring) over time. Consider the time-span over which this self exists. Within this time-span, let's call 'present self' the self indexed to the present time  $t_0$ , 'past selves' the self indexed to various slices of the self's past (say,  $t_{-1}$  to  $t_{-2}$ , or  $t_{-4}$  to  $t_{-7}$ , etc.), and 'future selves' the self indexed to various slices of the self's future (say,  $t_1$  to  $t_3$ ,  $t_5$  to  $t_{12}$ , etc.). What I'm calling 'past selves' and 'future selves' are not

numerically distinct from the self in question, but rather can be thought of as this very self indexed to a particular slice of time over the time-span through which it exists. It's in this sense that I mean that the self can encompass a series of selves.<sup>8</sup> 190

In this light, let's consider whether we can find intrapersonal analogues of diachronic interpersonal selfishness and altruism. We could find these if the following three conditions can be satisfied: 195

*The Divergence Condition:* there can be a divergence between the self's interest at the present and its interest in the future; 200

*The Cost Condition:* the self can act to promote its present interest at cost to its future interest (as in intrapersonal selfishness) or its future interest at cost to its present interest (as in intrapersonal altruism); 205

*The Evaluative Condition:* there can be cases where the self's acting to promote its present interest at cost to its future interest is morally bad (as in intrapersonal selfishness) and cases where the self's acting to promote its future interest at cost to its present interest is morally good (as in intrapersonal altruism). 210

In sum, when one's future interest and present interest diverge, one is intrapersonally selfish to the extent that one acts, in a morally bad way, to promote one's present interest at cost to one's future interest, and intrapersonally altruistic to the extent that one acts, in a morally good way, to promote one's future interest at cost to one's present interest. 215

So can these conditions be satisfied? To facilitate our discussion, let's consider some examples. 220

*Examples 1 and 2.* The Eager Eater and the Meagre Eater love spicy Indian food. They also suffer from acid reflux disease. At a buffet at an Indian restaurant, the Eager Eater eats all of his favourite dishes, knowing full well that he will suffer heartburn two hours later. To spare himself a bout of terrible heartburn in two hours, the Meagre Eater eats sparingly (though enough to sate his hunger), but forgoes his favourite dishes. 225

*Examples 3 and 4.* The Procrastinator and the Early Bird each have a paper due in two weeks. Working on their papers now would make life easier for them later. The Procrastinator opts to do what she finds more pleasurable in the present, say, playing video games. She continues to procrastinate until she eventually pulls an all-nighter just before the 230

<sup>8</sup>Notice in this connection that to suppose that the self exists (enduring or perduring) over time, that it can encompass a series of selves, and that we can distinguish between our present self and future (or past) selves does not commit one to any one metaphysical account of the self in particular (e.g., whether the self is a non-physical soul, whether the self is constituted by nothing more than a relation of psychological continuity, or whether the self is a three-dimensional or four-dimensional living organism). 235

deadline, resulting in her feeling awfully tired.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the Early Bird works on her paper now, even though she would love to be playing video games with the Procrastinator. She finishes the paper early, so she does not  
 240 have to pull an all-nighter and feel awfully tired in two weeks.

*Examples 5 and 6.* The Sun-Bather and the Sun-Avoider know all about the bad long-term effects of extensive sun-bathing. Both are young and look great with a tan. The Sun-Bather continues to sun-bathe extensively, whereas the Sun-Avoider avoids sun-bathing.

*Examples 7 and 8.* Suppose that health and aesthetic enjoyment are objectively constitutive of a good life, and that regular exercise is necessary to maintaining health. The Exerciser and the Exercise-Avoider both dislike exercising and very much enjoy contemplating great works of art. The Exerciser sacrifices time he could now spend in aesthetic enjoyment in order to exercise and promote his future health, whereas the Exercise-Avoider spends his time in present aesthetic enjoyment at cost to his future health.  
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With these examples in mind, let's now consider whether our three conditions can be satisfied, beginning with the Divergence and Cost Conditions. On a Hedonistic or Desire-Fulfilment conception of interest, our examples illustrate how the Divergence Condition can be satisfied, for in each case there is a divergence between an agent's desire-fulfilment or pleasure attainment or pain avoidance *now* and in the *future*. As for the Cost Condition, on these conceptions, the Eager Eater, the Procrastinator, the Sun-Bather, and the Exercise-Avoider illustrate how someone can act to promote his present interest at cost to his future interest (as in intrapersonal selfishness), whereas the Meagre Eater, the Early Bird, the Sun-Avoider, and the Exerciser illustrate how someone can act to promote her future interest at cost to her present interest (as in intrapersonal altruism). In so far as an Objective List Conception construes interest in terms other than pleasure attainment or desire-fulfilment, it may be less clear that examples 1 to 6 illustrate how the Divergence and Cost Conditions can be satisfied. If, however, health and aesthetic enjoyment count as objective goods, the Exerciser and the Exercise-Avoider examples show how these conditions can be satisfied, and other kindred examples can be generated. Here's how: for an Objective List conception of interest to be plausible in the light of our psychology, it must allow for the possibility that we as individuals may have intrapersonal diachronic divergences in interest that we need (sometimes with difficulty) to resolve even if there are objective goods and bads. To claim otherwise is to suppose a falsely irenic conception of our nature. Given such divergences, the Divergence Condition can be satisfied, and it's quite plausible to hold that the Cost Condition can as well.  
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What about the Evaluative Condition? It too can be satisfied. Take the Exerciser. Suppose his interest matters from the moral point of view, and good health is in his interest now and in the future whether we conceive of his interest hedonistically, as desire fulfilment, or in terms of objective goods  
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<sup>9</sup>Chu and Choi [2005] distinguish between passive procrastination and active procrastination. Passive procrastination, a dysfunctional behaviour, typically leads to negative consequences for procrastinators. By contrast, active procrastination is not dysfunctional and does not typically lead to negative consequences for procrastinators, for they prefer to work under pressure. My example is one of passive procrastination.

and bads. Can we envisage how his acting to promote his future interest at cost to his present interest might be morally good? Yes. For if it's in his long-term interest to exercise now to maintain his health, if this promotion of his future interest in some sense outweighs the cost to his present interest (and does not violate other-regarding duties or obligations he may have), then what he has done is morally good given that his interest matters from the moral point of view. The Exercise-Avoider presents us with the converse: given that his interest also matters from the moral point of view, his intrapersonal selfishness is morally bad, for he has acted to promote his present interest at cost to his future interest despite the former being outweighed in some sense by the latter. Note in this regard that we needn't hold that someone's future interest always outweighs his present interest, only that it does *at least sometimes* as supposed in these examples.

Now some may think that my reasoning rests on a fundamental confusion between the prudential and the moral because they conceive of the moral as essentially other-regarding and the prudential as essentially self-regarding. On this objection, the concepts of selfishness and altruism are moral notions, not prudential ones, and so to speak of *intrapersonal* selfishness and altruism and of intrapersonal moral badness or goodness confuses the moral with the prudential.

I shall have more to say about the prudential in section IV, but let me say this for the nonce. I reject the assumption that the moral is essentially other-regarding, and take the moral to encompass both the self-regarding *and* the other-regarding.<sup>10</sup> I am not alone in this regard, for consider how many of the great moral traditions take morality to encompass self-regard: for instance, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, you are to love your neighbour *as yourself*; in the Kantian tradition, you are to act so that you treat humanity, *whether in yourself or in any other*, always as an end and never as a means only; in the Utilitarian tradition, your interest matters as does that of others in the determination of the good. Of course, these accounts differ profoundly in numerous respects, but each in its own way takes the interest of the self to matter from the moral point of view, and thus each in its own way entails rejecting the notion that morality is essentially other-regarding if this means *exclusively other-regarding*.

On these accounts, then, conflicts between one's own interest and that of others are conflicts *within* the compass of morality and not between moral and non-moral interest.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, if the prudential or self-regarding is within the compass of the moral and one's own interest matters from the moral point of view, then selfishness and altruism needn't be regarded as exclusively interpersonal but as intrapersonal as I argue here, and it's quite reasonable to suppose that there can be at least some cases where one's acting to promote one's future interest at cost to one's present interest is morally good, and in at least some cases it's morally bad to act to promote

<sup>10</sup>See Rogers [1997], Hampton [1997], Schmidtz [1997], and Brink [1997a], and the other articles in Paul et al. [1997] for a panoply of reasons to reject the thesis that the moral is exclusively other-regarding.

<sup>11</sup>That there may be conflicts between one's own interest and that of others no more entails that morality is exclusively other-regarding than it is the case that conflicts between the interests of others entails that morality is exclusively self-regarding.



one's present interest at cost to one's future interest. That's all that the Evaluative Condition requires, and if my reasoning above is sound, it can be satisfied in at least some cases whether we conceive of interest hedonistically, as desire fulfilment, or in terms of objective goods and bads, provided we allow for diachronic intrapersonal divergences of interest, the actuality of which is eminently plausible.

#### IV. Applications

I have so far explained and argued for the coherence and plausibility of the notions of intrapersonal selfishness and altruism. Further support for my thesis may be derived from its applications. Notice in this regard that the concepts of intrapersonal selfishness and altruism pick out certain behavioural patterns. The concept of intrapersonal selfishness, for instance, picks out a common pattern instantiated by the Eager Eater, the Procrastinator, the Sun-Bather, the Exercise-Avoider, and other cases. So too, the concept of intrapersonal altruism picks out a common pattern instantiated by the Meagre Eater, the Early Bird, the Sun-Avoider, the Exerciser, and other cases. Paralleling interpersonal selfishness and altruism, intrapersonal altruism and selfishness are scalar and thus admit of degrees: the more one acts in a morally good way to promote one's future interest at cost to one's present interest, the more one is intrapersonally altruistic, whereas the more one acts to promote one's present interest at cost to one's future interest the more one is intrapersonally selfish.

Deploying the concepts of intrapersonal selfishness and altruism also has predictive value: when their present interest and future interest diverge, the intrapersonally selfish can generally be expected to act according to a pattern of promoting their present interest at cost to their future interest; conversely, the intrapersonally altruistic can generally be expected to act according to a pattern of promoting their future interest at cost to their present interest.

In the light of such patterns, let me adumbrate some of the interesting applications of my thesis. I will divide these applications into those more broadly concerned with prudential theory, and those more narrowly with economic and psychological theory.

##### *A. Applications in Prudential Theory*

I argued earlier against the assumption that the moral is exclusively other-regarding and for the idea that the prudential falls within the compass of the moral. In fact, my thesis that selfishness and altruism can be intrapersonal flows from a broader thesis according to which an important class of the prudential can be usefully understood as the intrapersonally moral. Though I do not have space to defend this broader thesis here, let me nonetheless highlight some of the ways in which positing intrapersonal selfishness and altruism enriches our understanding of the prudential which, in the

philosophical literature, has been significantly undertheorized when compared to other-regarding morality.<sup>12</sup>

Let's begin with prudence as a virtue. Traditionally taken as a cardinal virtue, we may characterize it generally as an ability to recognize and follow the most sensible course of action.<sup>13</sup> The vice of imprudence we may characterize as the corresponding inability. In contemporary philosophical usage, however, 'prudence' is typically used more specifically to mean the pursuit of self-interest; so much so that 'prudential' is typically used interchangeably with 'self-interested'. As Nagel pointed out, however, 'in the most general sense we can perfectly well speak of prudence (or its absence) in cases where the interest of the agent is not in question' [1970: 36]. For instance, when one manages another's investments or concerns oneself with a child's future interest, one's conduct can be judged as prudent or imprudent. Prudence in the broadest sense involves foresightful wisdom; as such, it's not necessarily self-regarding, though it's now typically understood this way.

Howbeit, our notions of intrapersonal altruism and selfishness help illuminate the foresightful wisdom of self-regarding prudence and its lack thereof in its corresponding opposite of imprudence. When her future interest diverges from her present, the self-regardingly prudent person manifests intrapersonal altruism in acting to promote her future interest at cost to her present interest in a morally good way, as for instance when her future interest in some sense outweighs her present interest. In doing so, she parallels an interpersonal altruist who does similarly with respect to the interest of others in relation to her own. Of course, it's not the case that one's future interest *always* outweighs one's present (any more than the interest of others always outweighs one's own); but, if it does, the self-regardingly prudent person has the foresight and discernment to act accordingly.

By contrast, the self-regardingly imprudent person manifests intrapersonal selfishness in acting to promote his present at cost to his future interest in a morally bad way. In doing so, he lacks foresight and discernment, and he too parallels the interpersonally selfish person.

If prudence is the queen of the virtues, such related virtues as temperance, patience, and determination, in so far as they involve a capacity to act for one's future interest at cost to one's present interest in a morally good way, can also be usefully elucidated as manifestations of the broader character trait of intrapersonal altruism. Conversely, intemperance, impatience, and impersistence can be usefully elucidated as manifestations of the broader character trait of intrapersonal selfishness.

To the extent that proper self-concern is integral to self-regarding prudence, intrapersonal altruism illuminates this concern as well. Just as we can distinguish different scopes of interpersonal altruism according to the extension of the self's sphere of concern to others (e.g., is this sphere limited to her family and friends, or does it extend outward to those she does not know, perhaps even to those distant in space and time whom she will never know?), so too we can distinguish different scopes of intrapersonal altruism

<sup>12</sup>I develop this broader thesis in 'The Prudential as the Intrapersonally Moral' (a work in progress).

<sup>13</sup>Cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary's* first definition of 'prudence'.

430 according to the extension of the present self's sphere of concern to her  
 future selves (e.g., is the present self concerned only with near-future selves  
 or with far-future selves as well?). Conversely, intrapersonal selfishness and  
 interpersonal selfishness instantiate parallel failings: in the former, the  
 present self fails to extend her sphere of concern to her future selves, in the  
 435 latter, the self fails to extend her sphere of concern to others.

In sum then, our notions of intrapersonal altruism and selfishness help  
 enrich our understanding of the prudential via parallels with interpersonal  
 altruism and selfishness.

#### 440 *B. Applications in Economic and Psychological Theory*

My thesis also has a number of subsumptional applications in economic and  
 psychological theory. I shall focus on two: Akerlof's model of procrastina-  
 tion and Ainslie's account of akrasia.

##### 445 *Akerlof's Economic Model of Procrastination*

Building on research on psychological salience by cognitive psychologists such  
 as Nisbett and Ross [1980], Borgida and Nisbett [1977], and others, the Nobel  
 laureate economist George Akerlof [1991] provided a model of procrastination  
 450 that he applied to such varied social problems as drug abuse and inadequate  
 savings. On this model, procrastination 'occurs when present costs are unduly  
 salient in comparison with future costs, leading individuals to postpone tasks  
 until tomorrow without foreseeing that when tomorrow comes, the required  
 action will be delayed' [1991: 2]. Akerlof argued that persistent drug abuse and  
 455 inadequate savings (among other problems) could be understood on his model  
 as cases where, as in procrastination, individuals accord undue salience to  
 present costs compared to future costs, thereby postponing until later and later  
 giving up the use of drugs or saving for the future.

If we construe procrastination as a manifestation of intrapersonal  
 460 selfishness whereby, in postponing tasks, one acts to promote one's present  
 interest at cost to one's future interest in a morally bad way, Akerlof's model  
 can be subsumed by our broader account; similarly, 'anticrastination' can be  
 construed on our account as a manifestation of intrapersonal altruism  
 whereby, in tackling tasks now, one acts to promote one's future interest at  
 465 cost to one's present interest in a morally good way.<sup>14</sup>

##### *Ainslie's Account of Akrasia*<sup>15</sup>

Citing considerable empirical evidence, George Ainslie [1992, 2001] has  
 argued that we can understand akrasia or weakness of will (and related

<sup>14</sup>Notice that procrastination and 'anticrastination' are not just descriptive but evaluative notions. Procrastinating and anticrastinating are morally bad or good in so far as they harm or promote future interests that in some sense outweigh present ones.

<sup>15</sup>I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for pointing out the relevance of Ainslie's work on akrasia to my thesis and for a reference to Protagoras. It's an interesting question whether Ainslie explains akrasia or explains it away, for consider Socrates's denial of akrasia in *Protagoras* (356) where he in effect explains it away as an error in judgment (as opposed to a breakdown of will), where one takes rewards close in time to be larger than those more distant in time even if they're really the same or smaller in magnitude.

problems such as addiction) in terms of hyperbolic discounting where people (and other higher organisms) regularly form preferences for smaller but earlier alternative rewards.<sup>16</sup>

As an illustration of his thesis, consider a smoker who knows smoking is bad for her in the long term, however pleasurable it may be in the short term. She therefore wants to quit. Let's call a *choosing-time* an occasion when she has the chance to smoke and must decide whether or not to do so. Prior to a choosing-time, she prefers the option of not smoking. When a choosing-time approaches, however, the 'attractions of smoking come to loom larger than those of good health, as when the smaller of two buildings comes to overshadow a larger one behind it when the spectator moves up closer' [Elster and Skog: 20].

Ainslie thus explains this kind of diachronic akrasia as a hyperbolic discounting where earlier but smaller rewards are chosen over larger but later alternative rewards. His account of akrasia is applicable, moreover, not just to what we might deem as objective bads such as smoking, but also to putative objective goods as well. If, say, aesthetic enjoyment is an objective good, one could manifest the hyperbolic discounting of akrasia by opting for smaller but earlier amounts of it over larger but later ones.

Like Akerlof's model of procrastination, to which it has affinities, Ainslie's account of akrasia can be subsumed by our account by taking it to be a manifestation of intrapersonal selfishness where the self acts to promote its present or near term interest at cost to its future interest in a morally bad way.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, *enkrateia*, or strength of will, can also be subsumed by our account by construing it as a manifestation of intrapersonal altruism where the self acts to promote its future interest at cost to its present or near term interest in a morally good way.<sup>18</sup>

### V. Some Objections and Replies

Having argued for the plausibility of my thesis and demonstrated some of its interesting applications, let me now defend it against some telling objections. I consider below seven such objections to which I offer replies.

*Objection 1.* As an anonymous referee for this journal put it, 'Disregard for my future interests might be described without too much strain as a kind of selfishness, but where the disregard is reckless or extreme we are apt to think of the behaviour as self-destructive rather than selfish. And my careful

There are important issues concerning moral internalism and externalism that I cannot address here given space constraints. Let me say that my thesis is compatible with either moral internalism or externalism depending on the auxiliary hypotheses we conjoin to it concerning moral motivation.

<sup>16</sup>The point is not merely that there is a discount rate as there is with exponential discounting, but that the discount rate declines at a greater rate in the short run than in the long run.

<sup>17</sup>To characterize the will as weak is to evaluate it negatively, and if this weakness results in a failure to act on interests that matter from the moral point of view, then it is morally bad.

<sup>18</sup>To characterize the will as strong is to evaluate it positively, and if this strength results in promoting interests that matter from the moral point of view, then it is morally good. Such *enkrateia* may at least sometimes take the form of the 'temporal binding' explored by Elster [1979] where one takes steps in advance to forestall future changes of preference to worse alternatives, akin to the way Ulysses lashed himself to the mast to withstand the temptation of the Sirens.

525 and assiduous preparations for my own future comfort, even at the cost of  
the satisfaction of some of my present desires, do not strike me as altruistic.  
I fail to see why altruism is a better descriptor than prudence here'.<sup>19</sup>

530 *Reply.* Let's begin with the point about selfishness. Consider a case of  
interpersonal selfishness where a parent pursues his own interest to the  
extreme or reckless disregard of the interest of his children. We can envisage  
without too much strain that such extreme or reckless interpersonal  
selfishness could be destructive to his children. Paralleling this, a reckless or  
535 extreme intrapersonal selfishness (as in, say, drug abuse or promiscuous sex)  
can also be self-destructive. To be sure, probably most cases of either  
interpersonal or intrapersonal selfishness do not result in the destruction of  
others or oneself, but in extreme or reckless cases this can happen.

540 As for the point of why (intrapersonal) altruism is a better descriptor than  
prudence here, my claim is not that it is, but rather that the former helps  
illuminate the latter. Consider as an analogy an account that seeks to  
explicate justice in terms of fairness; fairness is not proffered there as a better  
descriptor than justice but as one that illuminates the latter, and we are not  
545 thereby being asked to chose between them. So too, I have argued, with  
prudence and intrapersonal altruism. Of course, if one is accustomed to  
thinking of altruism only in interpersonal terms as has typically been the  
case in the literature, intrapersonal altruism may strike one as odd. But as I  
have argued in this paper, there are good reasons to hold that it's a not only  
coherent but plausible notion.

550 *Objection 2.* Suppose we think of someone's interest in terms of well-being  
or eudaimonia. If so, should not this interest be ascribed to the enduring self  
rather than to time-indexed selves? Consider, for instance, Aristotle's claim  
that eudaimonia can be ascribed to a person only over the course of his or  
her lifetime. Whether or not this is so, the interest of my future selves is also  
555 the interest of my present self, given the continuity of selfhood. In the cases  
you describe, the conflicts do not seem to be between interests understood in  
a eudaimonic sense of the enduring self. Rather, they seem to be between  
episodic interests understood in a hedonic sense or in a desire-fulfilment  
sense.<sup>20</sup>

560 *Reply.* A question worth posing here is whether, on a eudaimonic or well-  
being conception, interest remains constant in such a way that there can be  
no divergence whatever between present and future interest. Let's call this  
the 'No-Divergence Thesis'. This objection turns on this thesis, a view which  
strikes me as very implausible given our psychology. For it seems to me that  
565 any plausible eudaimonic or well-being conception of interest must allow for  
the possibility that one might sacrifice some of one's present well-being for  
future well-being or vice versa. Recall our earlier example involving health  
and aesthetic enjoyment. Suppose each is constitutive of well-being. Suppose

570 <sup>19</sup>In fairness to the referee, s/he raised this objection in the context of an earlier draft where I hadn't yet  
adequately worked out the relevance of my thesis to the prudential, and had mischaracterized the relation  
between them. The referee's perspicuous comments helped me to see this more clearly. I think this objection  
still worth discussing, given how it helps clarify my thesis.

<sup>20</sup>I owe this objection to Dana Radcliffe.

the time that I take to exercise now in order to stay in shape for the future requires taking time away from present activities that provide me with aesthetic enjoyment. I'm in effect sacrificing some of my present well-being for my future well-being. It's not hard to multiply examples such as these. Accepting my thesis concerning intrapersonal selfishness and altruism requires rejecting the No-Divergence Thesis, and it seems to me that the latter is false on any plausible eudaimonic or well-being conception of interest. Worth bearing in mind here is that ontological continuity of selfhood does not entail that what constitutes the self's interest remains static or unchanging.

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*Objection 3.* Is intrapersonal selfishness even possible? Surely no one could consider or act to promote *only* their current over their future interest.

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*Reply.* To be sure, *absolute* intrapersonal selfishness may be rare, but it's not impossible. Consider, for instance, a heroin user who, in pursuing new highs, increases her intake to the point where she dies of an overdose. This, of course, is an extreme case where someone pursues her present interest at the cost of all her future interest. In order to survive (let alone lead a flourishing life), one must act to promote at least *some* of one's basic future interest (e.g., the need for water, food, shelter, avoidance of toxins, etc.). Therefore, some minimal degree of intrapersonal altruism seems required for survival.

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In the example above, suppose the heroin user's intent was not suicide. Consider now a case of a suicide who, out of some transient emotional pique or upset, deliberately overdoses on pain-killers and dies as a result.<sup>21</sup> Again, we have an extreme case of someone pursuing his present interest (say, putting an end to his present emotional pique or upset) at the cost of all his future interest.

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We should remember anyhow that, just as interpersonal selfishness and altruism are scalar notions and so admit of degrees, so too are intrapersonal selfishness and altruism.

*Objection 4.* Consider the case of the Scrupulous Saver. He works hard for years, saving every penny he can, and makes all kinds of sacrifices of his present interest for his future interest. He retires, and dies before he can enjoy the fruits of his long labour. You would describe this as a case of intrapersonal altruism. But in so far as altruism is relational, there must be at least two relata. The putative 'future selves' never came to be, so how can they serve as relata of the Scrupulous Saver's putative intrapersonal altruism?

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*Reply.* The objector provided an example of intrapersonal altruism. Consider a parallel interpersonal example: Scrupulous Saver II works hard for years, saving every penny she can, and makes all kinds of sacrifices so that she can create an endowment fund by 2020 for the education of impoverished children. Before any money is disbursed from the endowment fund, a nuclear conflagration destroys humanity. What she did was still

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<sup>21</sup>I thank one of the anonymous referees for this journal for this suggestion.

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presumably interpersonally altruistic even if, in the end, no future children benefited from her actions. Inter- and intrapersonal altruism can obtain with *expected* beneficiaries, not just with *actual* beneficiaries. That is, actual beneficiaries are sufficient but not necessary for diachronic inter- and intrapersonal altruism; expected beneficiaries can fill the bill as well.

*Objection 5.* Altruism implies that persons are ontologically separate such that benefactor and benefited are distinct. Consequently, altruism does not result in automatic compensation to the benefactor. But in the case of your putative intrapersonal altruism, benefactor and benefited are not distinct, and there is automatic compensation to the benefactor since the present self is numerically identical to future selves. So is this really altruism?<sup>22</sup>

*Reply.* The ontological separateness the objector describes differentiates interpersonal from intrapersonal altruism. To suppose, however, that a condition necessary for interpersonal altruism is necessary for altruism *tout court* is to beg the question against my thesis. Furthermore, even though the benefactor and benefited are not distinct given the continuity of selfhood, there is still a parallel to interpersonal altruism, for the present self does not benefit *now* from what the future self may benefit from *later*.

*Objection 6.* In supposing that altruism and selfishness can be intrapersonal, are you not positing sub-personal agents that are indexed to slices or segments of time and that have interests? But it's highly problematic to posit such sub-personal agents, for there is no non-arbitrary way of distinguishing one from another.<sup>23</sup>

*Reply.* Speaking of persons or selves indexed to slices or segments of time is a convenient *façon de parler* when discussing intrapersonal altruism and selfishness. My thesis, however, does not require that one must posit sub-personal agents. What it does require is that someone's interest *now* could diverge from her interest *in the future* such that she can promote one at cost to the other. And to deny this, as I have argued, would be to accept a falsely irenic conception of our psychological nature.

*Objection 7.* You refer to altruism and selfishness as being character traits, and claim that the notions of intrapersonal selfishness and altruism pick out behavioural patterns and thereby have some predictive value. But isn't all this undercut by Doris [1998, 2002] and Harman [1999] who have argued that social science research indicates that human behaviour is better explained by appealing to situational factors rather than to traits of character?<sup>24</sup>

*Reply.* If Doris and Harman are right, the problem they pose applies not just to my thesis but to *all* accounts positing character traits, including virtually all work done so far by philosophers in moral psychology and virtue ethics. I am not, however, convinced they are right, for the studies

<sup>22</sup>Brink [1997b] inspired my formulation of this objection.

<sup>23</sup>Brink [1997b] also inspired my formulation of this objection. I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for this reference.

<sup>24</sup>I owe this objection to James Stacey Taylor.

they invoke rely on experimental situations that do not clearly obtain in non-experimental settings.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, to apply to our discussion a point that Appiah [2008] makes very well in discussing the threat to positing virtues posed by Doris/Harman type Situationism, we should not overstate the threat it poses to positing such character traits as intrapersonal selfishness and altruism. Situationism doesn't show that that we aren't better off by being intrapersonally altruistic or worse off by being intrapersonally selfish, and to posit such character traits requires no special assumptions about how widespread or deep these traits may be. And though the research they invoke may cast doubt on the robustness and prevalence of other-regarding virtues such as generosity, these findings don't by themselves call into question the robustness and prevalence of intrapersonal selfishness and altruism.

## VI. Conclusion

I began this essay with two quotations, the first from Aesop's 'The Ant and the Grasshopper', and the second from *The Little Red Hen*. The grasshopper in the first story, and the duck, cat and dog in the second, nicely illustrate intrapersonal selfishness. The industrious ant and hen, by contrast, nicely illustrate intrapersonal altruism; their refusal to share the fruit of their labour also illustrates how intrapersonal altruism does not guarantee interpersonal altruism.

In any case, I hope to have shown above that the notions of intrapersonal altruism and selfishness are not only coherent but plausible, and have a number of interesting applications.

Now, to get back to that mystery ...<sup>26</sup>

*The College of New Jersey*

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<sup>25</sup>For criticisms of their cases, see Kupperman [2001], Sreenivasan [2002], and Montmarquet [2003].

<sup>26</sup>I'm deeply indebted to Katherine Le Morvan, Dana Radcliffe, James Stacey Taylor, Melinda Roberts, Rick Kamber, Morton Winston, Consuelo Preti, Irfan Khawaja, Robert Talisse, John Robertson, and two anonymous referees for this journal for their insightful and helpful comments on earlier drafts.



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