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My apologies for not making class on Wednesday. One of the things I wanted to do on Wed. was to review the "reinterpretation of motives" issue. Since I have to start with the arguments this coming Monday, I thought that I would take this opportunity to say a few words about reinterpretation.

Some people believe that psychological egoism is true because we can always reinterpret the motives for people's behavior. That is, for every action that seems to be from an unselfish motive, we can provide a selfish motive for the action. X gives Y a gift. This may seem unselfish, but we can offer a variety of selfish motives to explain the behavior. X believes that he will be rewarded in the next life for the good deeds he does in this life. X wants to please Y, so that Y will do X a favor at a later date. X doesn't want Y to be mad at him. Etc.

The problem for this view is that having a second possible motive for the action DOES NOT make the second motive the correct one. The only conclusion we can draw from the fact that we can propose both selfish and unselfish motives for all our actions is that one or the other explains the action, but we don't know which interpretation is the accurate one.

This is what makes the determination of actual motives so important to this discussion. We cannot always tell what it is that motivates someone, but in many cases we can be, I think, quite sure about the actual motivation of another. There are many factors that come into play when we determine the motives of people, among them body language, tone of voice, inappropriate affect, patterns of behavior, language clues, and so on.

Since I believe that we can tell what motivates someone (in at least some cases) on the basis of experience (rather than theory), I can also say that on some occasions (not very many or not nearly as many as you might think) I have determined by experience that someone has acted with an unselfish motive. I have also found on some occasions (again, not very many) that I actually act with unselfish motives. (If you can learn when your motives are really selfish, but you've been seeing them as unselfish, you will have learned one of the great lessons of life.) These instances serve as counter examples to the claim that all of our actions are the product of selfish motives. I cannot convince you, of course, that there are such counter examples. You will have to have the experience of someone acting without strings attached or without a hidden agenda. But, when you do, you will have the counter example that you need to deny psychological egoism.

Bill