Is Psychological Egoism a Thing?

What always motivates the things we do? Are we often deep down motivated by what we believe to be our self-interests? Psychological egoists believe we do. It is important to note that unlike ethical egoism, psychological egoism is an empirical claim about what kind of motives we have for performing a particular act. Take, for instance, when we give money to charity, or better still a person who enters a burning house to save a child from burning. Are these actions motivated by self-interests?

From a psychological egoist standpoint, they seem to be self-interested actions. This belief begs the question, what is a self-interested action? Basically, it is an action that is motivated by an individual's concern for his or her own interests. As such, most of the things we do are clearly of this kind. For example, we take a drink of water to quench our thirst. We also go to work because we are motivated by the desire to get paid. But is self-interest the motivation behind all the thing we do? Certainly not.

Considering the act of giving money to charity or the person who rescues a child from a burning house, some actions are an indication that people can just behave selflessly. At least from the face of it. A psychological egoist could argue that we give to charity hoping to impress other people and be glorified the same way a person will rescue a child from burning to earn a superhero status or get the warm fuzzy feeling from doing a good deed. Maybe there is some truth behind such thinking. After all it does feels good to be praised for a good deed.

However, it is imperative to note that these praises often come as a side effect of our actions. We do not essentially do the thing we do to get these feelings. To a great many of us,

we act altruistically in most occasions. As such, we tend to put others' feelings before our own. Yet as already noted, a psychological egoist would want to explain actions of these form based on their theory, which is wrong given that their concept is grounded on an untrue justification of human motivation.

Though it could be true that, in some cases, we help people in need to feel saintly and/or avoid feeling guilty, this simply does not hold for most of the cases. Yes, we may feel virtuous after helping people out. But that is just something that comes with our selfless action. At the bottom, psychological egoists believe that we are all quite selfish. They argue that even those we perceive as unselfish act unselfishly to satisfy their own desires. But isn't that what unselfishness is exactly about?

We must not deny that someone is acting selflessly simply because that individual is satisfying his/her desire to help out. In actual fact, unselfish people tend to have that sort of desire. Naturally, many are concerned for others.