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# Are human inclinations invariably selfish?

For the purpose of this essay, *inclinations* are defined similarly to tendencies: “the fact that you prefer or are more likely to do a particular thing” ("Inclination"). *Invariably* will be defined as always and absolutely, without exception. However, the word selfishness shifts in meaning when looking through the lenses of different cultures. Therefore, this essay will touch on how these lenses influence answers to this question. It argues that human inclinations are not invariably selfish, though perspectives on them can be. It acknowledges that there are a number of ways an action can be perceived, which is perhaps related to the fact that “selfishness” is not an inherent property of an action but, instead, a human’s projection of how they perceive an action. By considering examples, this essay demonstrates that, while selfish impulses are present in many human inclinations, they are not *invariably* so.

1. Temporal Variations

The etymology of the word “selfish” is that it was first used in the 1600s in the writings of William Struther, minister of the Church of Scotland ("Selfish"). The word was associated with caring only for oneself ("Origin and History"). Struther was a member of the Presbyterian religion, in which selfishness is viewed as a Sin. Given this time period, this belief was significantly interlaced with people's daily lives and going against it would be sacrilege: perhaps leading the concept of “being selfish” to be regarded as something immensely negative, if not feared. However, during the course of social development (particularly seen in the last 20 years) the connotation of this word seems to have shifted.

In line with the development of “self-care” and individualisation, the word selfish has been given additional nuance: akin to “self-*ish*” (see Appendix). Attributes associated with this connotation of the word include positive elements of looking after oneself and demonstrating self-respect. This makes the nuance of the question more complex. If we took the more modern definition, it would be easy to argue that human inclinations are not invariably selfish - this is best illustrated by the fact that the concept has had to be advocated for in recent decades: implying that, if anything, human behaviours were dangerously unselfish!

2. Cultural Variations

The modern definition of selfish is particularly culture-bound; it is in individualistic countries where concepts of looking after oneself are encouraged. In these cultures (for example, US, France, UK, Germany) there is space for "healthy selfishness", viewed positively. This is optimised in the American philosopher Ayn Rand's 1964 collection of essays titled "The Virtue of Selfishness" (Rand and Branden), but has also been emphasised by Nietzsche in the late 1800s, where he advocated for the ideas of self-assertion and the development of one's own values (Richardson 398–438). However, in collectivist cultures (such as China, Arabic countries, and Japan) "selfish" carries deep cultural significance, reflecting engrained social values, and is perceived immensely negatively. Interestingly, the Japanese language has two words for the concept of being selfish, both with notably negative connotations. The fact that the concept of selfishness exists with such power across different countries implies that the human tendency to be selfish is a culturally universal phenomenon. While that might then imply an innate capacity for selfishness in human's inclinations, it cannot be extrapolated from this that human inclinations are *always* selfish.

3. Importance of Intention

The prevalence of such a debate in the definition of the term across cultures does, at least, suggest that humans have a well documented ability to perform 'selfish' actions. However, people still regularly do things which are not done for personal gain, but rather out of feelings of compassion and empathy: where a person's *intentions* aren't malicious. For example, some acts of kindness (such as the instinct to comfort a stranger who you see crying) have no immediate personal benefit, but show how some human actions can also be self*less* rather than self*ish*. Let's consider another example:

*Imagine a scenario where a child comes across a large glass door. Innocently, the child grabs the door handle, not realizing the door's hinges are broken. Suddenly, the glass door comes crashing down, shattering into small pieces. The child lies in the shards of broken glass, unable to move. The child's mother hears a jarring scream and comes running to save her child. The mother rushes into the broken glass, with bare feet, grabs her child, and saves them from the disaster.*

The mother's inclination to put herself in harm's way, to save and protect her child, demonstrates an instinct that is not motivated by personal gain. She consciously put herself at risk for another human being: physically harming herself in the process and, if anything, providing a gain for the child at the cost of herself. This is the opposite of the definition initially given by Struther in the 1600s. Further still, there are countless real-world examples of a remarkably similar level of selfless actions even between those not known to each other in such an intimate way as this (Butler).

However, the pessimistic interpretation of this situation might be that the mother's action was motivated by the instinct to comfort her own emotions, which were aroused by this situation. She felt panicked, which led her to take action to calm those emotions, ultimately saving her child. This suggests that her actions were done for herself. She may have also done it because she wanted to be a "good mother", who heroically saved her child, or to prevent any future negative connotations of her child having seriously hurt themself. These are all "selfish" interpretations of a seemingly "selfless" act, implying instead that even those inclinations which seem selfless are actually selfish.

The fact that both interpretations can be drawn, and that there is a lack of sufficient evidence to support one side over the other, speaks to the most important aspect of this argument: an action itself cannot possess the quality of being selfish or selfless. It is the interpretation of that action by others that defines it so.

In other words, it is the observer's interpretation, or cognitive label, which reflects itself upon the action. This kind of argument is evident across Psychology and Philosophy. For example, Schachter's "Two Factor Theory" of Emotion (Schachter and Singer 379-399) states that a person's emotion is the result of both their physiological arousal (eg/ increased heart rate) and their cognitive interpretation (or, label) of the situation. When a person sees a grizzly bear, for example, and feels their heart rate increase, they label that feeling as fear, and run. The bear is not "fear", neither is their heart rate (because the same thing can happen in a different situation: for example, on a date, and the resulting label would be something like "excitement"), nor is their inclination to run. "Fear" is the label prescribed onto the combination of phenomena.

In the same way, a human's inclinations perhaps are not "selfish". Selfish is the label they, or other humans, project onto the inclination and resulting action when interpreting the situation.

Judgements made on the basis of any subjective interpretation, fundamentally, can lead to misunderstanding. This is because an outsider can not fully know the internal mental states of other humans and, similarly, a person can be confused (or ignorant) of their own intentions. This leads to the view that we cannot know whether human inclinations are invariably selfish, because we cannot know the nature of other people's internal mental experience.

4. Warm Glow

Let's examine the concept again, with another real-world example:

*A person gives a portion of their hard earned money to charity.*

On the surface, this looks like the opposite of a selfish act - the person gives away their money at the expense of using that valuable resource for a multitude of personal gains. Some argue that this action might be driven by the concept of a "warm glow". This describes how we as human beings feel, emotionally and psychologically, after doing a good deed: happy, positive, self-righteous, content, praised. In this example, a seemingly selfless action could still be driven by selfish tendencies: doing something out of the desire to feel satisfied with our actions, and to feel like a "good person".

Research shows how participants experience a range of positive emotions after donating money to others (Bianchi et al. 1-23). Some are "self-signaling" in that they tell the individual about how good a person they are, but others come from the awareness of a wider community. The researchers investigated three different forms of positive emotions in relation to the action of donating money:

- Hedonic states (contentment, happiness, joy, pride, - what we most relate to being "selfish")
- Social states (compassion, sympathy, tenderness)
- Epistemic states (awe, thrill, fascination)

In this study, the researchers noticed that the participants' pleasure from giving money was most strongly connected to the hedonic states, as predicted by the pessimistic "warm glow"

interpretation. However, they still experienced a noticeable presence of social states and epistemic states. This means that people donating money was linked to “selfish” positive emotions, like warm glow feelings, however, those were not the only emotions present. Therefore inclinations can certainly *lead* to positive consequences for the self, but is that the same as being selfish*?* Perhaps not.

The implications of this research is that some human *actions* are invariably selfish, whether or not they’re motivated by “warm glow” feelings, and whether or not they appear to be selfless (like giving away money). However, there is still space to hold for the idea that the *inclinations* themselves aren’t selfish, even if the resulting actions derived from those inclinations have a positive self-benefit.

In answer to this, and in their second study, the researchers investigated the emotions that were linked to *motivation,* rather than the resulting action. This is much more comparable to human “inclinations”. They found that it was the social states that led to the participants' action of giving away money, rather than hedonic ones seen previously. This important clarification suggests that, even though the feelings people feel after doing a good deed mainly come from hedonic states, the inclinations themselves do not. They come from the social states, which are considered self*less.*

Therefore, recent psychological research would argue that human inclinations are not invariably selfish, despite any involvement of “warm glow” feelings from the resulting action. Giving money to charity here is one such example of a human inclination deemed to be “not selfish”, and therefore challenges the qualification of “invariably”.

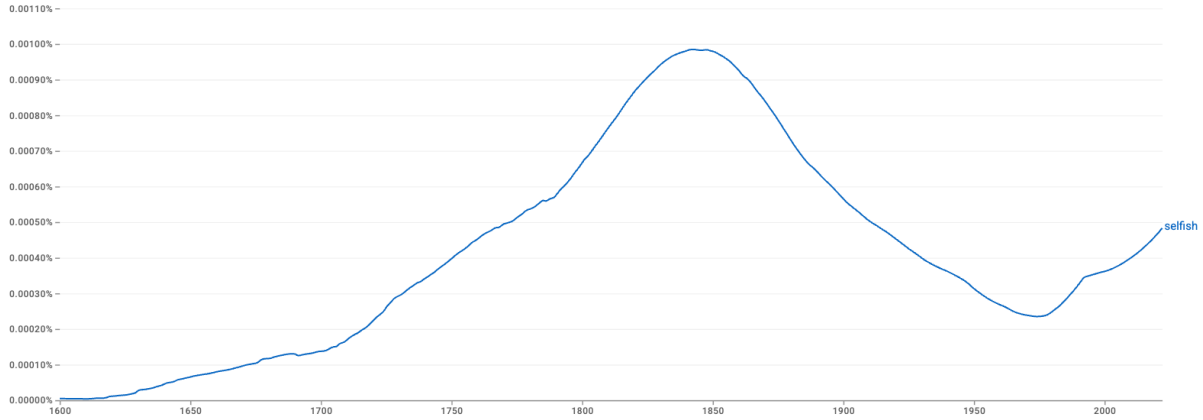
5. Face Validity

“Face validity”, in Psychology, is a test of accuracy that relies upon whether the item to be tested “appears” to be correct, based upon a general knowledge and experience of the world. This might look like gathering 100 people’s response to the question. Although it would be wrong to guess what those might be, it is reasonable to assume it would not be unanimous, since the question begs a layered analysis, rather than a simple yes or no. Answers could vary depending on the definition used, culture, philosophy, or motivation. In fact, the very prediction that there is debate in the answer can itself be taken as evidence that human inclinations are not *invariably* selfish: emphasising, again, the qualification of “invariably”.

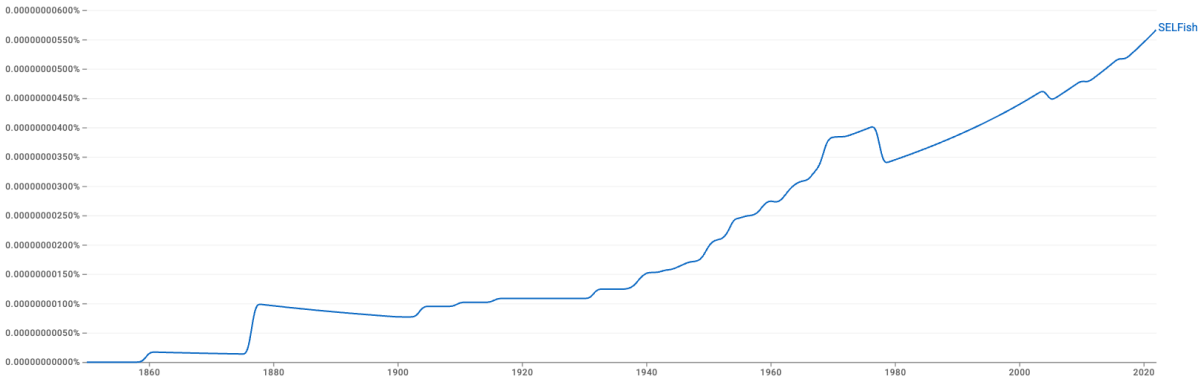
## 6. Conclusion

Human inclinations are not invariably selfish. Bianchi et al. shows that an action can have "selfish" results, however the motivations were not linked to the feelings associated with selfishness. The question discussed throughout this essay can take many different standpoints, but one thing that has arisen clearly is selfishness is likely not an objective property of any action, but instead the interpretation from an observer. For that reason, it would be unsupported to say human inclinations are *invariably* selfish. The more reasonable position is that humans, evolutionarily, are inclined to act out of a position of self-interest which, viewed pessimistically, may be taken as "selfish". However, as argued, this far from encompasses the entire scope of all human inclinations, be those past, present, or future; hypothetical or realised.

# Appendix




Changes in the usage frequency of the word “selfish” in literature from **1600-2022**, taken from Google Books and accessed via https://books.google.com/ngrams




The recent rise in a more modern, nuanced, word “SELFish” in literature from **1850-2022**, taken from Google Books and accessed via https://books.google.com/ngrams

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