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The problem of selfishness in modern British moral philosophy

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Selfishness (also called self-love or self-interest) has been one of the central problems in modern British moral philosophy. The aim of this paper is to trace the course of the arguments among modern British moralists and to point out three significant characteristics of their discourse.

Firstly, British moralists largely accepted selfishness. To them, it was either one of the important principles of human nature, or an essential element of their arguments. This was true of writers not only on egoism (Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville), but also altruism (Cumberland, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson), the theory of sympathy (Hume, Adam Smith), associationism (John Gay, Hartley), deontology (Samuel Clarke, Butler, Reid), utilitarianism (Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Sidgwick, Spencer), and idealism (Bradley).

Secondly, many moralists in various ways justified selfishness. Among the most famous arguments in its favor are Hobbes's ''right to self-preservation,'' Mandeville's ''private vices, public benefits,'' Hume's so-called enlightened self-interest, and Smith's ''invisible hand.'' Butler's ''rational self-love'' and Reid's ''sense of interest'' are no less important: Butler and Reid treated selfishness not as a passion or propensity, but raised its status to that of a rational principle.

Thirdly, in the course of these arguments, the restriction on selfishness gradually weakened. It became very difficult to damn selfishness when the moralists were accepting and justifying it. We find this trend, for example, in Sidgwick's arguments. Although he was conscious of the conflict between private and public interest (''the dualism of practical reason''), he could not put any limits on rational self-love.