Reading/Study Questions for James Rachels' *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, continued

Chapter Five

1. Why does psychological egoism constitute a challenge to morality? What does the general concept of morality presuppose that psychological egoism threatens? (How might psychological egoism figure in a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against morality? This last question requires you to think beyond what is explicit in Rachels' work.)

2. What is the thesis (that is, the main claim) of psychological egoism?

3. What was Thomas Hobbes' contribution to the theory of Psychological Egoism? Explain in as much detail as you can the two examples of Hobbes' work cited by Rachels. Are these definitions by Hobbes convincing? What does Rachel's conclude about Hobbes' accounts?

4. The first general argument in favor of psychological egoism considered by Rachels says that in every voluntary action, the person (the 'agent') must always be supposed to be doing what he or she most wants to do, and thus that any altruistic act is really just a case of the person doing what he or she most wants to do. Hence, there is not really anything moral in the action if by ‘moral’ we mean independent of the person’s (agent’s) interests. What two specific flaws does Rachels diagnose with this argument? Does psychological egoism have any responses for these objections raised by Rachels? What distinction lies at the heart of Rachels' second problem with psychological egoism?

5. How does the distinction figuring in the previous question regarding the first argument for psychological egoism figure in the second argument for it considered by Rachels at the end of §5.3?

6. Why might it be said that the second argument for psychological egoism in §5.3 gets the cart before the horse with regard to desires and pleasure?

7. What kinds of confusion are there regarding the simplicity of psychological egoism? What is the effect of clearing up the confusion between *self-interest* and *selfishness*? What is the relation between pleasure and self-interest, and how does this affect the argument for psychological egoism?

8. What does Rachels mean in §5.5 when he writes that "the theory's immunity from refutation is its deepest flaw"?

9. What does it mean to say that a theory is 'untestable'? Can you construct a test case for psychological egoism?