ETHICAL EGOISM Essay, Research Paper

In ethics egoism entails that the individual self is either the motivating moral force and is, or should, be the end of moral action.

Egoism divides into both a positive and normative ethic. The positive ethic views egoism as a factual description of human affairs, that is people are motivated by their own interests and desires. The normative ethic is that they should be so motivated.

Positivist egoism: Psychological Egoism

The positivist egoist, whose theory is called psychological egoism, offers an explanation of human affairs, in effect a description of human nature, which he or she believes to be wholly self-centred and self-motivated. In its strong form the theory asserts that people always act in their own interests, even though they may disguise their motivation with references to helping others or doing their duty.

Opponents exploit counter-factual evidence to criticize the theory-surely, they claim, there is a host of evidence supporting altruistic or duty-bound actions that cannot be said to engage the self-interest of the agent? Psychological egoists may then attempt to question the ultimate motive of acting benevolently towards others; they may retort that seemingly altruistic behavior necessarily has a self-interested component, that if the individual were not to offer aid to a stranger, he or she may feel guilty or may look bad in front of a peer group. At this point psychological egoism’s validity turns on the question of moral motivation. But since motivation is inherently private (an agent could be lying to him or herself or to others about the original motive), the theory shifts from a theoretical description of human nature, one that can be put to observational testing, to an assumption about human nature. It moves beyond the possibility of empirical verification and the possibility of empirical negation (since motives are private), and therefore it becomes a closed theory. A closed theory is a theory that rejects competing theories on its own terms and is non-verifiable and non-falsifiable. If psychological egoism is reduced to an assumption concerning human nature, then it follows that it is just as valid to hold a competing theory of human motivation, psychological altruism for example. Psychological altruism holds that all human action is necessarily other centred and other motivated. A parallel analysis of psychological altruism results in opposing conclusions to psychological egoism, and again arguably the theory is just as closed as psychological egoism. If both theories can be validly maintained, it follows that the soundness of either or both must be questioned.

A weak version of psychological egoism accepts the possibility of altruistic or benevolent behavior, but maintains that whenever a choice is made it is by definition the action that the agent wants to do at that point. A wants to help the poor, therefore A is acting egoistically; if A ran into a burning building to save a kitten, it must be the case that A wanted to save the kitten. Defining all motivations as what the agent wants to do remains problematic: logically the theory becomes tautologous and therefore empty of providing a useful, descriptive meaning of motivation. It says that we are motivated to do what we are motivated to do. Besides which, if helping others is what A wants to do, then to what extent can A be continued to be called an egoist?

David Hume in his Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (Appendix II-Of Self Love) offers six rebuttals of psychological egoism (the ’selfish hypothesis’). Firstly, it opposes such obvious moral sentiments that engage in a concern and motivation for others such as love, friendship, compassion, and gratitude. Secondly, psychological egoism attempts to reduce human motivation to a single cause, which is a ‘fruitless’ task-the “love of simplicity?has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy.” Thirdly, it is evident that animals act benevolently towards one another, and if it is admitted that animals can act altruistically then how can it be denied in humans? Fourthly, the concepts we use to describe benevolent behavior cannot be meaningless; sometimes the agent obviously does not have a personal interest in the fortune of another, yet will wish him well. Any attempt to create an imaginary interest, as the psychological egoist attempts, will prove futile. Fifthly, Hume asserts that we have prior motivations to self-interest; we may have, for example, a predisposition towards vanity, fame, or vengeance that transcends any benefit to the agent. Finally, even if psychological egoism were true, there are a sufficient number of dispositions to generate a wide possibility of moral actions, allowing one person to be called vicious and another humane, and the latter is to be preferred over the former.

Normative Egoism: Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism is the theory that the promotion of one’s own good is in accordance with morality. In the strong version it is held that it is always moral to promote one’s own good and it is never moral not to promote it. In the weak version, it claims that whilst it is always moral to promote one’s good, it is not necessarily never moral not to do so-that is, there may be conditions in which the avoidance of personal interest may be a moral action.

In the imaginary construction of a world inhabited by a single being, it is possible that the pursuit of morality is the same as the pursuit of self-interest. What is good for the agent is the same as what is in the agent’s interests. Arguably, there could never arise an occasion when the agent ought not to pursue self-interest in favor of another morality. Whilst it is possible for the creature to lament previous choices as not conducive to self-interest (enjoying the pleasures of swimming all day and not spending necessary time producing food), the mistake is not a moral mistake but a mistake of identifying self-interest. Presumably this lonely creature will begin to comprehend the distinctions between short and long run interests. However, it can be countered that in this world duties still apply; (Kantian) duties are those actions reason dictates ought to be pursued regardless of any gain or loss to the self or others. The deontologist asserts another moral sphere, namely impartial duties, which ought to be pursued. The problem with complicating the creature’s world with duties, is defining an impartial task in a purely subjective world. Impartiality, it can be retorted, can only exist where there are competing selves, otherwise the attempt to be impartial in judging one’s actions is a redundant exercise.

If we move away from the imaginary construct of a single being’s world, ethical egoism comes under fire from more pertinent arguments. In complying with ethical egoism, the individual aims at his or her own greatest good. Ignoring a definition of the good for the present, it may justly be argued that pursuing one’s own greatest good can conflict with another’s pursuit, thus creating a situation of conflict. In a typical example, a young person may see his greatest good in murdering his rich uncle to inherit his millions. It is the rich uncle’s greatest good to continue enjoying his money, as he sees fit. Accordingly conflict is an inherent problem of ethical egoism, and the model seemingly does not possess a conflict resolution system. With the additional premise of living in society, ethical egoism has much to respond to. Obviously there are situations when two people’s greatest goods, their own self-interests, will conflict, and a solution to such dilemmas is a necessary element of any theory attempting to provide an ethical system.

The first resolution proceeds from a state of nature examination. If, in the wilderness, two people simultaneously come across the only source of drinkable water a dilemma arises if both make a claim to it. With no recourse to arbitration they must either accept an equal share of the water, which would comply with rational egoism (i.e., it is in the interests of both to share, for both may enjoy the water and each other’s company, and if the water is inexhaustible, neither can gain from monopolising the source), but a critic can maintain that it is not necessarily in compliance with ethical egoism. Arguably, the critic continues, the two have no possible resolution and must therefore fight for the water. This is often the line taken against egoism, that it results in insoluble conflict that implies or necessitates a resort to force. The proffered resolution is therefore an acceptance of the might is right principle, that the stronger will take possession and thereby gains proprietary rights. But ethical egoism does not have to logically result in a Darwinian struggle between the strong and the weak; the two could co-operate (as rational egoism would require) and thereby both could mutually benefit. Against the critic’s pessimism, the ethical egoist can retort that each can recognize that their greatest interests are served more through co-operation than conflict.

A second resolution to seemingly intractably moral dilemmas concerns the fears of critics that ethical egoists could logically pursue their interests at the cost of others. This however is a misreading of ethical egoism and an attempt to re-insert the might is right premise and thereby chastise the theory on the basis of a straw-man argument. In the case of the rich uncle and the greedy nephew, it is not the case that the nephew would act ethically by killing his uncle. The confusion results from conflating ethics with personal gain and criticising personal gain from another ethical standpoint that condemns murder. A counter-argument is that personal gain logically cannot be in one’s best interests if it entails doing harm to another: doing harm to another is to accept the principle of doing harm to others as being ethical (i.e., equating to one’s own best interests), whereas reflection on the principle shows it to be illogical on universalist criteria. If the nephew were to attempt to do harm to further his interests, he would find that his uncle, or others, would do harm in return, and the argument returns to the conclusion of the first resolution: either accept the principle of might is right (which in most cases would be evidentially contrary to one’s best interests) or accept that co-operation with others is a more successful approach to improving one’s interests.

A third resolution entails the insertion of another standard-rights. This incorporates the conclusions of the first two resolutions by stating that there is an ethical framework that can logically be extrapolated from ethical egoism. Rights incorporate boundaries to behavior that reason or experience has shown to be contrary to the pursuit of self-interest. However, the logical extrapolation is the difficult bit. Whilst it is facile to argue that the greedy nephew does not have a right to claim his uncle’s money, because it is not his but his uncle’s, and that it is wrong to aggress against the person of another because that person has a legitimate right to live in peace (thus providing the substance of conflict-resolution for ethical egoism), the problem lies in the intellectual arguments required to substantiate the claims for the existence of rights and that they are somehow intricately connected to the pursuit of individual’s greatest good.