Ethical Egoism Essay, Research Paper

Ethical Egoism:

In Pursuit of Self-Interest

Ethical Egoism

Ethical Egoism, like all other moral philosophical theories, tries to develop a comprehensive set of rules by which each person should govern their lives. Instead of approaching each daily decision separately and interpreting the correct response, philosophers try to find an overall nucleus of rules that will guide each person in their daily lives. This is obviously not an easy task. Ethical egoism tries to solve the problem in terms of maximizing one?s individual good. Many people would say that being concerned with your own personal good is simply the definition of selfishness, but with an understanding of different types of egoism one can see that what might seem like selfishness is actually an ethical view of self interest.

The theory of ethical egoism, considered here, comes from the ethical reasoning of consequentialism in which the concentration is on the consequences of human actions (Donaldson, Werhane p.3). It is a theory that states, ?It construes the right action as action whose consequences, considered among all alternatives, maximizes my good that is, action that benefits me the most or harms me the least? (Donaldson, Werhane p.3). In other words, it says that what is morally right for a person is what is good for him or herself. People can have all sorts of right or wrong ideas about what is good for them. What one wants is what is really good for him or her, not just what he or she thinks is (Professor James Stieb). More specifically, it says that right actions are those, which promote self-interest, and wrong actions are those, which detract from self-interest. Whatever brings us the greatest degree of good is right. The ethical egoist is not concerned with maximizing the good of the people as a whole, which is the basic definition of utilitarianism (Donaldson, Werhane p.3).

When one considers the theory at face value, there is little that can be said wrong about it. What could possibly be bad about each person devoting their lives to maximizing their own personal good? Is not that what we are all looking for anyway? Do not we all want good lives? In addition, if each person is living in a state, which they consider good, then will this not bring about some universal good as well? Book IV, Chapter II of The Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith, talks about the individual who exerts him or herself, led by an invisible hand, for the pursuit of their own self-interest inevitably promotes the good of society as well. Smith writes,

?It is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of society, which he has in view. But the study of his own advantage, naturally, or rather necessarily, leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to society?By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security: and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be one of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain?led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was in no part of his intentions? (Donaldson, Werhane p.142).

Another appealing aspect of ethical egoism is that it allows each individual to make decisions, which will ultimately make him or her happy. It allows people the freedom to decide what is really good for them. People have the right to do what they feel is going to benefit their good without having the sense that they are doing something wrong. I do not think any reasonable grown adult likes to be told what to do, especially when it conflicts with their pursuit of happiness. In The Elements of Moral Philosophy by James Rachels, the second argument out of the three could not have been put any better when it stated that ??the policy of ?looking out for other? is an offensive intrusion into other people?s privacy; it is especially a policy of minding other people?s business?(p.85). Who knows himself or herself better than each individual person? I am a Roman Catholic; although I am not a practicing one, I feel that after twelve years of catholic schooling I have the capability to choose which set rules and teachings are most suitable for my life. Yet there are some beliefs in my religion in which I do not agree with, such as the opposition to pre-marital sex. If two consenting adults would like to have sexual intercourse in a respectable and safe manner than who is tell them otherwise? Is the church the judge to tell them they cannot or early society who believed sex is only for married adults, in private, for the use of procreation only?

James Rachels, in his arguments against ethical egoism, gives supporting evidence from The Moral Point of View by Kurt Baier that ??Ethical Egoism cannot be correct because it cannot provide solutions for conflicts of interest? (Rachels p.91). In my opinion I would have to disagree with this statement. I do not believe that ethical egoism has to solve conflicts of interest. I believe in a core of ethics that should be the determinants of conflicting interests. Take for example, Baier?s example of B and K and their pursuit of the presidency in a country:

?Let B and K be candidates for the presidency of a certain country and let it be granted that it is in the interest of either to be elected, but only one can succeed. It would then be in the interest of B but against the interest of K if B were elected, and vise versa, and therefore in the interest of B but against the interest of K if K were liquidated, and vice versa??

In this situation many will say that ethical egoism can provide no solution to the problem of conflicting interests. If B does not win the election or liquidate K, then B is not maximizing his good and get the best he can out of the situation. However, if K is beaten in the election or is liquidated then K is obviously not fulfilling his best interest. This example brings up a great number point by Joseph Betz. Betz believes in a ?Basic, Settled Ethics,? and through this core of ethics comes gray areas, which have debating issues. So if both B and K are pursuing to fulfill their maximum happiness, which is right? Well one can see that the conflicting interests, according to Betz, would be a ?gray area? of self-interest. Betz says that, ?I do not claim that gray areas inviting discrimination and argumentation do not emerge from the black and white of this settle, core ethics, but that we judge of the gray by referring from the black and white of the background of the settle, moral certainty? (Donaldson, Werhane p.40). The gray area is that it is in the self and best interest of B and K to liquidate each other in order to win the election. The black and white of the settle core ethics (it is wrong to kill) would judge of this gray area (self-interest); therefore one can assume that the gray area of liquidation is wrong.

Adam Smith, viewed as the father of modern economics, wrote in his book The Wealth of Nations ?It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interests. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love?? (p.18). Smith?s butcher, brewer, and baker example is a self-interest behavior. Amartya Sen states that ?The butcher, the brewer, and the baker want our money, and we want their products, and the exchange benefits us all? (Donaldson, Werhane p.13). With this in mind, the pursuit of maximized happiness of B and K to win the election is certainly not wrong and in no way disproves the speculation of ethical egoism just because the theory can not solve a conflict of interest such as that. On another level if it were, in the best interest of a chemical company to dump their toxins in the local river because it is cheaper than disposing the toxins properly, other ethics theories would come into play to solve the problem. The conflicts of interests here would be the chemical company saving a buck by dumping illegal substances in the river and the local people?s opposition because of the health problems and living creatures in the surrounding area. Ethical egoism would rightfully say that parties are correct in pursuing their own happiness (saving a buck), but in the gray area of their self-interest (dumping toxins in the river) would be judged by the black and white. This happens just as if the local police are over their heads in a hostile situation. Once they are out of their league another overpowering body will come in to supersede.

Psychological egoism is a branch of egoism in which it is the claim ?that humans by nature are motivated only by self-interest? (http://truth.wofford.edu/~kaycd/ethics/egoism.htm). With this understanding, many will say that people always act in their self-interests, even though they may disguise their motivation by helping others. If I helped my friend out of trouble, I may feel happy afterwards. It is this happiness that is the motive for my actions. Psychological egoism basically says, ?any act, no matter how altruistic (not strictly self-interested, but includes the self-interests of other as well) it might seem, is actually motivated by some selfish desire of agent? (http://truth.wofford.edu/~kaycd/ethics/egoism.htm). If psychological egoism were true, then ethical egoism would seem to be redundant. If people inevitably were incapable of acting other than for their own self-interest, then there would be no need to urge them to do so (http://ethics.acusd.edu/e2/ChapterFour.html). Why would theorists come up with a theory that humans already are prone in doing?

The theory of altruism can be put into the same category as James Rachel?s third argument in favor of ethical egoism. His argument was that ?Making other people the objects of one?s ?charity? is degrading to them: it robs them of their individual dignity and self-respect?(Rachels p.85). Altruism is very demeaning like Rachel?s argument. Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth century German philosopher, argued that altruism is demeaning because it is a ?morality of the weak, amorality for slaves, for the herd, and for those who were afraid to assert themselves? (http://ethics.acusd.edu/e2/ChapterFour.html). Nietzsche goes on to say, ?altruism is for people who value themselves so little that they put other people ahead of their own selves.? Moreover it is deceptive in that it takes a weakness, failing to value oneself, and turns it into a desirable quality, altruism (http://ethics.acusd.edu/e2/ChapterFour.html).

Since the beginning of time each individual had to rely on his or herself to live each day. No one else was going to hunt food for them or raise as many cattle and crops as they can to make a buck. Would it be their fault because someone else did not have the drive to work as hard and make their life as he or she saw fit? Living in the extremely cynical world that we do today, most people would agree that many people to act in their self-interest. Some are prone to act more selfishly than ethically, considering the world we live many are acting in the egotistical yet ethical way of self-interest. The United States? economy is a dog-eat-dog system. Thousands of entrepreneurs take their risk opening their own business to offer to society, and very few make it because someone else may have beaten them at the idea or has cornered the market. It is not wrong that another has another has made it because of their self-interest in hard work to make money to get the lifestyle he or she has always wanted or maybe it is just to put food on the table every night for their family. Whatever the reason, one can see that everyone is egotistical in his or her own way, but there is nothing wrong in pursuing our very own happiness.

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