Egoism

An Introduction

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Ethical subjectivism presents a fundamental challenge to the very possibility of establishing an adequate moral theory. Subjectivism is the claim that words like “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad” express nothing more than positive or negative feelings one may have toward some thing or activity. Relativism goes one step further to claim that because different people have different feelings about ethical issues, there is no way to establish universal ethical standards. But, such a subjectivist theory cannot be a moral theory since it denies what every moral theory must provide—universal, objective standards of right and wrong, good and bad.

Another interesting and popular challenge to the possibility of a moral theory is another form of subjectivism in ethics known as egoism, though the question whether it is or is not an ethical theory is not as obvious as in the case of ethical relativism.

In discussing egoism we need to distinguish psychological egoism from ethical egoism. Psychological egoism is the theory that, as a matter of fact, all human actions are and must be selfish. The theory says nothing as to what we ought to do, and so, strictly speaking, does not qualify as an ethical theory at all. Ethical egoism, on the other hand, is the normative theory that, although it is possible to act either selfishly or unselfishly, one ought to act from a selfish point of view (the “is-ought,” “description-prescription” distinction again). Although psychological egoism is not a moral theory, it is often associated with ethical egoism in the sense that it is often used in support of ethical egoism, and most ethical egoists are psychological egoists as well. Of course, the connection between the two is irrational; if all human actions must be selfish, with no possible alternative, what sense does it make to advise someone that he or she ought to act in a self-centered manner? Any normative position as to what one ought to do presupposes that alternatives exist, that one is free to do one of several things, and whatever one has done, one could have done otherwise. Morality, in other words, presupposes that
human beings are not completely determined in everything they do but can exercise free choice.

Irrational or not, there is a historical connection between psychological and ethical egoism. A good example of a psychological egoist is Thomas Hobbes. Another example is the contemporary psychologist B. F. Skinner. Typical of psychological egoism is the connection between hedonism, determinism, and a theory of human action as automatic stimulus-response mechanism. If I am extremely thirsty, my body causes me to feel a sense of desire for the glass of water in front of me, and this causes me to decide to drink the water, which, in turn, causes me to move my hand toward the glass, grasp it, raise it to my lips, and drink it.

This is a rather naive version of egoism. It does not take into account the obvious fact that human beings, and possibly even some of the higher animals, are capable of resisting acting on the impulse of the moment when this would have long-term detrimental effects. But this does not eliminate egoism; it only forces it to become more sophisticated. For the egoist need not be a deterministic hedonist for whom all action is of the automatic stimulus-response variety. The egoist can distinguish short-term desire and the more desirable long-term self-interest. No matter how thirsty I am I will refrain from drinking the water in front of me if I believe it is poisoned or polluted and apt to make me sick. But for the more sophisticated egoist this is not a contrast between self-interest and acting according to moral principle, but simply that between short- and long-term self-interest. Since long-term self-interest requires the use of reflection and calculation, it is often called enlightened self-interest. Persons who are both selfish and intelligent will not act on impulse. Nor will they appear to be overtly or openly selfish but will instead deliberately cultivate an image of likable, concerned, disciplined, law-abiding citizens precisely in order to get ahead, whether in business, politics, or whatever.

An interesting variety of ethical egoism, which combines the psychological slant of psychological egoism with a social/political dimension, is the position popularly known as “might makes right.” This view is represented by Friedrich Nietzsche, though an older version can be found in Thrasymachus, a contemporary of Socrates, who held that justice is simply what is in the interests of the stronger.

One obvious practical problem faced by egoists is whether they have the power or ability to always get their way. If everyone is an egoist, and there are always conflicts among individuals’ selfish interests, then there will exist
competition among people, and in general the stronger will get their way while the weaker will either have to submit or else try to band together to defeat the few stronger individuals. Thus, there will be an important difference between the egoism of the “stronger” and that of the “weaker.” It will be in the interest of the stronger to do what they like and force others to do likewise. It will be in the interest of the weaker, on the other hand, to suppress their selfish desires and to do what they are told to do. This can be understood as a variety of enlightened self-interest. If I am a peasant, it is not in my self-interest to pay the king sixty percent of my annual harvest, but it is even less in my self-interest to have my head removed, which is the penalty for refusal to pay the annual “tax.” Looked at in this way, doing the right thing (that is, following enlightened self-interest) is simply to do what the strong and powerful believe is in their self-interest (and what they command us to do). Might is right.

The alternative to this form of servitude on the part of the weak is to band together to prevent such tyrannical action by mutual consent. What is odd about such a view is that it makes ordinary morality sound bad, that is, undesirable, or at best, the lesser of two evils. It also devalues such morality as being the result of weakness and fear of those who are stronger. It is, as Nietzsche put it, a “slave morality.” It has the extremely odd consequence that the best thing is to be able to do the wrong thing, while the worst is to have to do what is right.

Suggested Further Reading


