THE MORAL POINT OF VIEW
Kurt Baier

Introduction, H. Gene Blocker

In the reading that follows, the contemporary philosopher Kurt Baier argues that egoism not only fails as an ethical theory but also fails to be an ethical theory. In the reading Baier asks, “Can self-interest be a candidate for the moral point of view?” To which he answers, “No.” By self-interest, Baier means what we have been calling egoism, and by “the moral point of view” he means doing something for the morally right reason. Is self-interest or egoism the morally right reason for acting? The reading that follows is a sustained argument to show that it cannot be.

Baier sees some good points in egoism, especially in what we call enlightened, long-term self-interest. Egoism aims at what is good. It utilizes reason. It combats impulsive gratification. And it provides a very strong motive (namely, self-love) to obey itself. Notice that the actions of a person acting from “the moral point of view,” that is, for moral reasons, resemble, and in many cases are outwardly identical with, those of the enlightened egoist; both will help friends, are polite, obey the laws, and so on. The difference lies in their motives—the egoist helps a friend in order to receive help in return; the person acting from the moral point of view helps a friend because of a belief that this is the morally right thing to do.

On the other hand, egoism does seem to oppose ordinary morality, where in ordinary speech doing the morally right thing often means doing the unselfish act. Is there any way out of this dilemma? Baier thinks there is not. The egoist, he says, cannot arbitrate cases of conflicting interests. But this is very damaging for egoism, Baier argues, since this is precisely what a moral theory is supposed to do. It is, in Baier’s words, a reductio ad absurdum.

To settle a dispute we need a “higher” court of appeal. How do we determine which reasons are superior?

Actually, Baier argues, self-interest is often a superior reason to altruism. Again, the question is not whether self-interest is bad, but whether it is the only or chief or highest reason for any action. In general, however, Baier believes that self-interest is inferior to acting from the moral point of view. Why? Why should I be moral (as opposed to self-interested)?
As you read Baier consider what arguments Baier advances to support his claim that egoism is not a moral theory at all. Do you find these arguments convincing? Why or why not? On what grounds does Baier think egoism fails as a moral point of view? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

Throughout the history of philosophy, by far the most popular candidate for the position of the moral point of view has been self-interest. There are obvious parallels between these two standpoints. Both aim at the good. Both are rational. Both involve deliberation, the surveying and weighing of reasons. The adoption of either yields statements containing the word ‘ought.’ Both involve the notion of self-mastery and control over the desires. It is, moreover, plausible to hold that a person could not have a reason for doing anything whatsoever unless his behavior was designed to promote his own good. Hence, if morality is to have the support of reason, moral reasons must be self-interested, hence the point of view of morality and self-interest must be the same. On the other hand, it seems equally obvious that morality and self-interest are very frequently opposed. Morality often requires us to refrain from doing what self-interest recommends or to do what self-interest forbids. Hence it seems that morality and self-interest cannot be the same points of view.

Can we save the doctrine that the moral point of view is that of self-interest? One way of circumventing the difficulty just mentioned is to draw a distinction between two senses of “self-interest,” shortsighted and enlightened. The shortsighted egoist always follows his short-range interest without taking into consideration how this will affect others and how their reactions will affect him. The enlightened egoist, on the other hand, knows that he cannot get the most out of life unless he pays attention to the needs of others on whose good will he depends. On this view, the standpoint of (immoral) egoism differs from that of morality in that it fails to consider the interests of others even when the long-range benefits to oneself are likely to be greater than the short-range sacrifices.

This view can be made more plausible still if we distinguish between those egoists who consider each course of action on its own merits and those who, for convenience, adopt certain rules of thumb which they have found

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will promote their long-range interest. Slogans such as “Honesty is the best policy,” “Give to charity rather than to the Department of Internal Revenue,” “Always give a penny to a beggar when you are likely to be watched by your acquaintances,” “Treat your servants kindly and they will work for you like slaves,” “Never be arrogant to anyone—you may need his services one day,” are maxims of this sort. They embody the “wisdom” of a given society. The enlightened long-range egoist may adopt these as rules of thumb, that is, as prima-facie maxims, as rules which he will observe unless he has good evidence that departing from them will pay him better than abiding by them. It is obvious that the rules of behavior adopted by the enlightened egoist will be very similar to those of a man who rigidly follows our own moral code.

Moreover, this sort of egoism does not appear to be contrary to reason but, rather, to be required by it. For in the first place, the consistent enlightened egoist satisfies the categorical imperative, or at least one version of it, “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” And in the second place, it seems to be superior to other forms of reasoning. For, as Sidgwick puts it, “I quite admit that when the painful necessity comes for another man to choose between his own happiness and the general happiness, he must as a reasonable being prefer his own, i.e. it is right for him to do this on my principle.”

Nevertheless it can be shown that this is not the point of view of morality. For those who adopt consistent egoism cannot make moral judgments. Moral talk is impossible for consistent egoists. But this amounts to a reduc-tio ad absurdum of consistent egoism.

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 that only one can succeed. It would then be in the interest of B but against the interest of K if B were elected, and vice versa, and therefore in the interest of B but against the interest of K if K were liquidated, and vice versa. But from this it would follow that B ought to liquidate K, that it is wrong for B not to do so, that B has not “done his duty” until he has liquidated K; and vice versa. Similarly K, knowing that his own liquidation is in the interest of B and therefore anticipating B’s attempts to secure it, ought to take steps to foil B’s endeavors. It would be wrong for him not to do so. He would “not have done his duty” until he had made sure of stopping B. It follows that if K prevents B from liquidating him, his act must be said to be both wrong and not wrong—wrong because it is the prevention of what B ought to do, his duty, and wrong for B not to do it; not wrong because it is what K ought to do, his
duty, and wrong for K not to do it. But one and the same act (logically) cannot be both morally wrong and not morally wrong. Hence in cases like these no moral judgments apply.

This is obviously absurd. For morality is designed to apply in just such cases, namely, those where interests conflict. But if the point of view of morality were that of self-interest, then there could never be moral solutions of conflicts of interest. However, when there are conflicts of interest, we always look for a “higher” point of view, one from which such conflicts can be settled. Consistent egoism makes everyone’s private interest the “highest court of appeal.” But by “the moral point of view” we mean a point of view which furnishes a court of arbitration for conflicts of interest. Hence it cannot (logically) be identical with the point of view of the interest of any particular person or group of persons.

A consistent egoist has only one supreme principle to which he does not make exceptions, namely, to do whatever is necessary for the promotion of his interest. All his other more specific maxims are merely rules of thumb designed to apply this principle to particular circumstances. If, in a particular case, they do not serve this end, then the consistent egoist would make an exception in his favor. A person who has adopted the moral point of view acts on a different supreme principle, namely, to do whatever is required by moral rules. All his other maxims are merely more specific rules of thumb designed to apply this principle to particular circumstances. The egoist’s supreme principle requires him to make exceptions “in his favor,” the moral person’s supreme principle requires him not to make such exceptions.

Are moral reasons really superior to reasons of self-interest as we all believe? Do we really have reason on our side when we follow moral reasons against self-interest? What reasons could there be for being moral? Can we really give an answer to “Why should we be moral?” It is obvious that all these questions come to the same thing. When we ask, “Should we be moral?” or “Why should we be moral?” or “Are moral reasons superior to all others?” we ask to be given a reason for regarding moral reasons as superior to all others. What is this reason?

Let us begin with a state of affairs in which reasons of self-interest are supreme. In such a state everyone keeps his impulses and inclinations in check when and only when they would lead him into behavior detrimental to his own interest. Everyone who follows reason will discipline himself to rise early, to do his exercises, to refrain from excessive drinking and smoking, to keep good company, to marry the right sort of girl, to work and study hard in
order to get on, and so on. However, it will often happen that people’s interests conflict. In such a case, they will have to resort to ruses or force to get their own way. As this becomes known, men will become suspicious, for they will regard one another as scheming competitors for the good things in life. The universal supremacy of the rules of self-interest must lead to what Hobbes called the state of nature. At the same time, it will be clear to everyone that universal obedience to certain rules overriding self-interest would produce a state of affairs which serves everyone’s interest much better than his unaided pursuit of it in a state where everyone does the same. Moral rules are universal rules designed to override those of self-interest when following the latter is harmful to others. “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not lie,” “Thou shalt not steal” are rules which forbid the inflicting of harm on someone else even when this might be in one’s interest.

The very raison d’être of a morality is to yield reasons which overrule the reasons of self-interest in those cases when everyone’s following self-interest would be harmful to everyone. Hence moral reasons are superior to all others.

“But what does that mean?” it might be objected. “If it merely means that we do so regard them, then you are of course right, but your contention is useless, a mere point of usage. And how could it mean any more? If it means that we not only do so regard them, but ought so to regard them, then there must be reasons for saying this. But there could not be any reasons for it. If you offer reasons of self-interest, you are arguing in a circle. Moreover, it cannot be true that it is always in my interest to treat moral reasons as superior to reasons of self-interest. If it were, self-interest and morality could never conflict, but they notoriously do. It is equally circular to argue that there are moral reasons for saying that one ought to treat moral reasons as superior to reasons of self-interest. And what other reasons are there?”

The answer is that we are now looking at the world from the point of view of anyone. We are not examining particular alternative courses of action before this or that person; we are examining two alternative worlds, one in which moral reasons are always treated by everyone as superior to reasons of self-interest and one in which the reverse is the practice. And we can see that the first world is the better world, because we can see that the second world would be the sort which Hobbes describes as the state of nature.

This shows that I ought to be moral, for when I ask the question “What ought I to do?” I am asking, “Which is the course of action supported by the
best reasons?” But since it has just been shown that moral reasons are superior to reasons of self-interest, I have been given a reason for being moral, for following moral reasons rather than any other, namely, they are better reasons than any other.

The answer to our question “Why should we be moral?” is therefore as follows. We should be moral because being moral is following rules designed to overrule reasons of self-interest whenever it is in the interest of everyone alike that such rules should be generally followed. This will be the case when the needs and wants and aspirations of individual agents conflict with one another and when, in the absence of such overriding rules, the pursuit of their ends by all concerned would lead to the attempt to eliminate those who are in the way. Since such rules will always require one of the rivals to abandon his pursuit in favor of the other, they will tend to be broken. Since, ex hypothesi it is in everyone’s interest that they should be followed, it will be in everyone’s interest that they should not only be taught as “superior to” other reasons but also adequately enforced, in order to reduce the temptation to break them. A person instructed in these rules can acknowledge that such reasons are superior to reasons of self-interest without having to admit that he is always or indeed ever attracted or moved by them.

But is it not self-contradictory to say that it is in a person’s interest to do what is contrary to his interest? It certainly would be if the two expressions were used in exactly the same way. But they are not. We have already seen that an enlightened egoist can acknowledge that a certain course of action is in his enlightened long-term, but contrary to his narrow short-term interest. He can infer that it is “in his interest” and according to reason to follow enlightened long-term interest, and “against his interest” and contrary to reason to follow short-term interest. Clearly, “in his interest” and “against his interest” here are used in new ways. For suppose it is discovered that the probable long-range consequences and psychological effects on others do not work out as predicted. Even so we need not admit that, in this new and extended sense, the line of action followed merely seemed but really was not in his interest. For we are now considering not merely a single action but a policy.

All the same, we must not make too much of this analogy. There is an all-important difference between the two cases. The calculations of the enlightened egoist properly allow for “exceptions in the agent’s favor.” After all, his calculus is designed to promote his interest. If he has information to show that in his particular circumstances it would pay to depart from a well-
established general canon of enlightened self-interest, then it is proper for
him to depart from it. It would not be a sign of the enlightened self-interest
of a building contractor, let us say, if he made sacrifices for certain subcon-
tractors even though he knew that they would or could not reciprocate, as
subcontractors normally do. By contrast, such information is simply irrele-
vant in cases where moral reasons apply. Moral rules are not designed to
serve the agent’s interest directly. Hence it would be quite inappropriate for
him to break them whenever he discovers that they do not serve his interest.
They are designed to adjudicate primarily in cases where there is a conflict
of interests so that from their very nature they are bound to be contrary to the
interest of one of the persons affected. However, they are also bound to serve
the interest of the other person, hence his interest in the other’s observing
them. It is on the assumption of the likelihood of a reversal of roles that the
universal observation of the rule will serve everyone’s interest. The principle
of justice and other principles which we employ in improving the moral
rules of a given society help to bring existing moralities closer to the ideal
which is in the interest of everyone alike. Thus, just as following the canons
of enlightened self-interest is in one’s interest only if the assumptions under-
lying it are correct, so following the rules of morality is in everyone’s inter-
est only if the assumptions underlying it are correct, that is, if the moral rules
come close to being true and are generally observed. Even then, to say that
following them is in the interest of everyone alike means only that it is better
for everyone that there should be a morality generally observed than that the
principle of self-interest should be acknowledged as supreme. It does not of
course mean that a person will not do better for himself by following self-
interest than by doing what is morally right, when others are doing what is
right. But of course such a person cannot claim that he is following a supe-
rior reason.

It must be added to this, however, that such a system of rules has the sup-
port of reason only where people live in societies, that is, in conditions in
which there are established common ways of behavior. Outside society, people
have no reason for following such rules, that is, for being moral. In other
words, outside society, the very distinction between right and wrong vanished.