8th LUMEN International Scientific Conference Rethinking Social Action.
Core Values in Practice | RSACVP 2017 | 6-9 April 2017 |
Suceava – Romania

Rethinking Social Action.
Core Values in Practice

Ethical Egoism, a Failure of Moral Theories

Viviana IVLAMPIE*
https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.34

How to cite: Ivlampie, V. (2017). Ethical Egoism, a Failure of Moral Theories. In C. Ignatescu, A. Sandu, & T. Ciulei (eds.), *Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice* (pp. 375-384). Suceava, Romania: LUMEN Proceedings
https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.34

© The Authors, LUMEN Conference Center & LUMEN Proceedings.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

©LUMEN Proceedings

8th LUMEN International Scientific Conference
Rethinking Social Action. Core Values in Practice |
RSACVP 2017 | 6-9 April 2017 | Suceava – Romania

Ethical Egoism, a Failure of Moral Theories

Viviana IVLAMPIE[1]

Abstract

This article aims to regard selfishness as a human conduct, as a norm of human behaviour. Selfishness is analysed as a psychological trait and as a moral norm. There are two perspectives in its research: psychological and normative. The first perspective has two sides. In its hard version, the psychological theory considers that a human being is motivated by and centred on herself / himself. According to this theory, even if their motivation is masked by good intentions, by duties or obligations, people always act in their own interests. The soft version of psychological egoism supports the possibility of an altruistic behaviour, but argues that the choice of action is an act of will of its agent. This leads to an end just because the agent wants it, for reasons that serve her / his own interest. The second perspective, of normative selfishness, claims that the agent of an action considers himself / herself as the most important entity. This theory appears in two forms: rational egoism and ethical egoism. As rational egoism claims, promoting personal interests is always justified and is in agreement with reason. There are also situations in which personal interests may come into disagreement with reason, which weaken the theory. Ethical egoism claims that the assertion of self-interest is consistent with morality. The main principle of behaviour is the one of self-interest that aggregates all the natural duties and natural obligations of the human being.
Understanding the fact that human beings are similar to one another and that we should care for the others makes the theory of ethical egoism fail as a moral theory.

Keywords: ethics, psychological egoism, normative egoism.

[1] Lecturer PhD, "Dunarea de Jos" University Galati, Galati, Romania, E-mail address: vivianaivlampie@yahoo.com.

https://doi.org/10.18662/lumproc.rsacvp2017.34
Corresponding Author: Viviana IVLAMPIE
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

1. Introduction

Modern society, as it emerged from industrialization and urbanization, has focused its attention on the human with an acrimony worthy of the spirit of our times, i.e. that of the strictest possible specialization. The human being is analysed microscopically and as objectively as possible in his / her biological, psychological, social, political, moral, religious or cultural existence. Individualism, born in the framework of a market economy and which led to the gradual democratization of industrial societies, has become the means of approaching the human character in all these scientific and philosophical perspectives. Self-interest was postulated as the fundamental principle, above collective good. This aspect can be traced, for example, from the primordial self-interest in the Calvinist doctrine of salvation to self-interest as the engine of entrepreneurial success in economic life. Ethics has not remained outside the thesis of individualism.

At present, ethics approaches the individual from two different stances: either as a moral *force* which *motivates*, or as an *end* of moral actions. Individualism generated a new trend in ethics, which can be met as a theory in the formula of ethical egotism. In the specialised literature, a distinction was made between the *psychological thesis* according to which individuals pursue their self-interest, and the normative thesis, according to which individuals are interested in satisfying their self-interests in accordance with reason. Therefore, egoism may be regarded either as a psychological *trait* or as a moral *norm* worth following.

In the following lines, we aim to highlight the specifics and principles of these theories, with their variants employed in contemporary thinking, and comparing them with the principles of classical ethics, based on the existence of an a priori in human nature, susceptible to give to human behaviour a moral form, in accordance with the need for self-preservation of society itself. The author supports the classic thesis of ethical theories on the innate character of human intuitions, feelings and moral predispositions, based on the bioethical argument of the chance of success in the survival of the human species.

2. Theoretical Background

The hard version of psychological egoism theory considers that the human being is motivated by and centred on himself/herself. According to this theory, people *always* act in their own interest, even though their

motivation may be concealed by good intentions, duties and moral obligations. Our entire experience proves that people act as a result of various motivations: envy, greed, will of power, anger, love, hate, etc. They act in their own interest, but sometimes their action may serve the interests of others, or these interests may coincide. In this case, there occurs the perspective of altruism (wilful or not), which the representatives of the theory of psychological egoism strongly rebuke. For them, it is only one motivation – selfishness – and the contribution of altruism is simply apparent. People can be altruistic, they acknowledge, but the last instance of the action is still egoism. The motivation as seen by the theorists of psychological egoism is a purely subjective one, which is to say that the agent of an action can self-deceit or can lie to others in regard to his or her authentic reasons. Although they are aware of the existence of altruistic actions and behaviour, these theorists posit that placing them at the centre of the action is too simplistic and superficial. People seem to be altruistic, but a more thorough analysis of their deeds may reveal something else. Supporters of this theory emphasise the idea that people *behave in a certain way*, regardless of their aim.

The soft version of psychological egoism admits the possibility of an altruistic behaviour, but argues that the choice of action is an act of will of its agent. He or she performs the action just because he or she wants, for example, to rescue a child from a house on fire. The selfish reason for the action is the public acknowledgment of the heroic deed, and not in the least an altruistic gesture. Therefore, he or she acted for his/her own interest. It is we, the spectators of the altruistic action, who are deceived in regard to its motivation, which remains purely egoistical.

3. Argument of the paper

There are ethicists who have noted the difference between psychological egoism and personal interest. Some human actions and behaviours satisfy the personal interest, and not selfishness, as the above theorists claim. For example, one person's physical pain requires the treatment of that person exclusively. Nobody else gets a treatment to get you rid of the pain. Therefore, solving this problem is not determined by egoism, but by personal interest. If, in this case, personal interest overlaps the instinct of self-preservation, then the latter is the purest egoism. People protect themselves from pain instinctually. When their vitality or well-being is threatened, people act in view of reinstating their balance. In this example, I have started from the premise of an injury coming from within, belonging

to our organic state, a case in which egoism does not overlap personal interest. When the person's harm is the product of an external action, induced by the social environment, the self-preservation instinct is alerted by egoism. An external aggression triggers at least an equal reaction. It warms us up, it triggers resentment, grudge or hate. Injuring one's self-esteem is worse than physical pain. Self-esteem, just as self-love, are unforgivable vices for Christian ethics. Saint Athanasius the Great said that God worship is replaced by self-adoration, which affects the entire human nature through egoism and narcissism.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

Self-esteem signals three ways of reference to personal value: pride, vanity and egoism, as attitudes of exaggerate attachment to self. It deems the whole individual behaviour oriented towards personal preservation and development, with contempt for alterity. We discover that egoism and its corollary, self-esteem, is stimulated by the social environment. If we were alone in the world, self-interest, either egoistic or not, together with self-esteem and self-love, could not be placed in a moral equation. But, since we are social beings, our relationships with the others are under the auspices of moral judgements. In this spirit, Rousseau pleaded for a return to nature. In his view, the human being is the "savage good" whose existence is guided by two rules: self-preservation instinct (manifest through interest in one's own well-being – natural egoism) and natural repulsion to suffering and death of the peers. By returning to nature, Rousseau envisages the human being's moral reformation, as he sees in Nature the sublime exponent of morals.

Altruism, strongly refuted, as shown above, by the theorists of psychological egoism, is as present as egoism in the motivation of human action. The perspective of the psychological altruism underlines the fact that human actions are necessarily centred on and motivated by peers. The two theories, psychological egoism and psychological altruism, cannot be absolutely true at the same time. People cannot be completely egotistic, nor can they be fully altruistic. Therefore, either one or both theories can be questioned. However, as already stated, the analysts of psychological egoism, in its soft variant, admit the possibility of altruistic behaviour.

Altruism and mercy, as complementary moral senses, have been studied by psychologists, educationalists, ethologists and philosophers alike. The research of these scholars underlined a commonality: the two senses are innate. Nevertheless, the manner of approaching the a priori nature of these sentiments is different.

Thus, for J. J. Rousseau, mercy is a natural moral virtue. In *Discourse on Inequality*, he considers mercy as a virtue which "precedes (…) the use of any reflection and so natural that even animals give visible signs of mercy". [1 p66-67] For the philosopher, the natural side of morals (mercy) represents its most important aspect, which determines him to assert that people endowed only with a reasonable moral would be "monsters". Mercy precedes any element of sensible moral and, at the same time, the source of all the other virtues of the social man, such as: generosity, clemency, humaneness, benevolence, etc. By reading Rousseau's views, one can draw the conclusion that reasonable morals has biological roots, which entitles ethologists to consider him a forerunner of their theory, if only along the lines of assessing the innate character of the natural moral.

While Rousseau considers Nature the source of moral laws, Kant deduces this law from reason. The French philosopher argues that the human being's natural state were perverted by the social conventions instituted by reason, which is the reason why he strongly advocates for the return to nature. On the contrary, Immanuel Kant considers reason as the source of moral law, as any action sprung from sentiment lacks moral contents. In the German philosopher's view, the moral law is a priori placed in the human reason, which gives the possibility of a life independent from animality and even from the entire sensitive world. Kant pays special attention to safeguarding the fundamentals of morals against any mixture of *inclination*. Natural inclinations are, in his view, expressions of self-love, and their accomplishment is synonymous with happiness. If the aim of the human being was only a natural one, "preservation, well-being, in one word, happiness" [2 p13], then the instinct would better serve this purpose than reason, which has a superior finality. The human being's goal should target the universal validity of his or her moral actions which cannot be enacted by the inclinations' spontaneity and hazard, but by the categorical imperatives of reason. For Kant, morality is not just a nature-given, but a gift from reason, which is the reason why he rebukes sentiments as origins of morals: "All inclinations together (which can be in their turn arranged in a supportable system and whose accomplishment is then called personal happiness) constitute *egoism* (*solipsism*). Egoism is either self-love, which consists in an exaggerate benevolence towards the self (philautia) or self-satisfaction (arrogantia). The former is generally known as self-esteem, while the latter, as self-conceit". [2 p162]. Practical reason is harmful for self-love, which is anterior to moral law, limits it, placing it in accordance with it. This confinement of self-love caused by reason gives birth to sensible self-love, as Kant puts it. For him, self-esteem, also occurred prior to the agreement to moral law, raises "null and illegitimate claims". Practical reason puts down

self-conceit in as much as the latter is based exclusively on sensitivity. Any inclination, instinct, feeling born from sensitivity and experience is marred by the insubordination and disagreement with the moral law enacted by practical reason. The sole "non-pathological" feeling not vitiated by sensitivity, is respect: "The respect for moral law is therefore a feeling that is produced by an intellectual principle, and this feeling is the only one that we can fully know a priori and whose necessity we can scrutinize". [2 p162].

Psychologist and educationalist Jean Piaget, in his work *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, does not reject the a priori idea, but applies another meaning to it than the one given by Immanuel Kant. At the level of moral life, the French author speaks of the existence of not a structural, but a functional "a priori". He discovers a similar evolution of intellectual and moral development. Morals is built similarly to cognitive structures, starting from prior functional conditions: "But an intelligent act can only be called logical and goodhearted impulse moral from the moment that certain norms impress a given structure and rules equilibrium upon this material. Logic is not co-extensive whit intelligence, but consists of the sum-total of control of which intelligence makes use of for its own direction. (…) Now there is nothing that allows us to affirm the existence of such norms in the pre-social behaviour occurring before the appearance of language." [3 p405]

Ethologists confirm the structural a priori supported by Kant and contested by Piaget. What else can be the phylogenetic adaptations which guide the specific behaviour of the social animals in general and of the human being in particular, the analogous behaviours of morals in the animal world and the moral instincts in the human world if not a priori forms? They pre-programme the behaviour of the individuals, show them how to act in relation to their peers in certain life situation, prior to any experience. But beyond the common idea of the existence of a structural a priori in the field of moral, it is also worth underlining the differences between Kant's ethics and ethology. If, for the German philosopher, morals is a priori situated in reason, ethologists prove that it is, in fact, located at the level of instinct, inclination, and feeling. Such a placement is considered by Kant incompatible with morality, as for him, instinct and inclination are subjected to self-love.

In what *normative egoism* is concerned, the agent of an action considers himself/herself the most important aspect. This theory discusses *sensible egoism* and *ethical egoism*. As sensible egoism is concerned, it is always justified and in agreement to reason to promote personal interests. There are, however, instances in which personal interests can be in conflict with reason, and failure to fulfil them does not necessarily mean a proof of irrationality. For example, an entrepreneur needs a sum of money for purchases but he

does not have it. A loan is impossible, so is any other financial trick, so, as ardent as his wish may be, reason tells him to abandon the project. Reason imposes on personal interest the postponement of even annulment of an action which has its own conditioning: natural, social or personal. It must choose between a range of possibilities related to opportunity, performance, quality, interdependences and rules, which must concur with personal interest. By respecting this conditioning, reason cannot afford to tread on its own principles for the sake of personal interest. Fulfilment at any cost belongs to irrationality.

The theory of ethical egoism does not attempt to describe the human nature as primarily preoccupied with the way people behave, as the supporters of psychological egoism do. Ethical egoism is a theory of how should people behave, free from any moral obligations to their peers. The only moral obligation admitted is doing what is the best for us. According to this doctrine, there is only one fundamental principle of conduct, i.e., the personal interest principle, which subordinates all natural duties and obligations. The theorists of ethical egoism do not forbid us to help the others. There can be instances in which personal interest may coincide with the others'. Or helping others may be the best means for accomplishing one's interests. In other words, fulfilling the other's interests is *the best means* to reaching one's *ends*.

In his work, *An Introduction to Ethics*, James Rachels asserts that the arguments of the theorists of ethical egoism are refutable, while also revealing their valuable aspects. The proponents of this theory try to prove that the behaviour marked by the phrase concern for the others is doomed to failure, as each person knows their own interests and an external intervention could harm these interests. Transforming the human being into an object of charity, one can affront or insult him or her, affecting his self-esteem. What is more, if one wants to equally support all people's interests, one should not resort to altruism. If each person is preoccupied with their own long-term interests, it is likely that each one fares much better, both physically and emotionally. Judging by these assertions, ethical egoism advises not to mingle with other people's lives, as any intervention made out of concern may affect either one's or the other's interests. According to J. Rachels's opinion, the abovementioned facts are not arguments in favour of ethical egoism. The argument, in his view, might translate as follows: we must do what supports everyone's interests to the same extent, and each person's interests will be best supported if everyone considers their own interests. If one accepts this point of view, one cannot regard oneself as an aficionado of ethical egoism: "Even when we end up behaving as selfish people, our fundamental principle is one of doing good – we do what we

believe that will help everybody, not only what we believe to be to our advantage". [4 p79]

The second argument brought forth by the theorists of ethical egoism and presented by J. Rachels is proposed by the less famous ethicist Ayn Rand. She argues that, if the human being has any moral value, then his or her life has supreme value. The second working hypothesis she resorts to is that altruism requires sacrifice. According to altruistic ethics, the human being should be capable to sacrifice for the good of others. Ayn Rand's conclusion drawn from this syllogism is that altruistic ethics does not value life, which is a fundamental value. From this point of view, altruistic ethics is not convenient for anybody. The only viable theory would be that of ethic egoism, which is, in any case, more convenient than a suicidal ethics.

This second argument is among the extremes: choose to be egoist and live well or choose to be altruist and others will live well by means of your sacrifice. The common sense philosophy, just measure of the Antiquity, prompts us to avoid the extremes when it comes to morals. Personal interests and other people's interests should be put in balance through comparison. Their priority can change at any time, for one reason or another. The theory of ethical egoism is not the only alternative to an altruistic ethic, as J. Rachels states.

With the third argument, the supporters of ethical egoism aim to revise the common sense morals, which they consider burdened by a multitude of rules, duties and obligations. The theorists of ethical egoism accredit the idea of a unique fundamental principle of the personal interest from where all our obligations can be deduced. As Rachels says, this theory does not question the common sense morals, it simply tries to explain and systematise it, which is otherwise commendable.

The example provided by the said theorists refers to someone's being harmed. This is not desirable, as the harmed person may injure us in turn, which would not be to our advantage – it would affect our interests. The supporters of the theory regard not doing harm as an instance of reciprocity: do not hit and you will not be hit, which is advantageous to you and corresponds to your interest. Rachels amends this example: there are instances when harming someone may provide an advantage. By trespassing the so-called "golden rule" – do good to others is in our advantage – and by doing harm, we can no longer conclude that all moral duties derive from our interest.

Up until now, we have discussed by resorting to Rachels's view, the arguments in favour of the theory of ethical egoism. The same author refers to the contribution of philosopher Kurt Baier who, in his work *The Moral Point of View* (1958), considers that ethical egoism is not a valid theory

because it cannot provide solutions in cases of conflict of interests. To solve a conflict of interests, moral rules are necessary, and ethical egoism does not have them. (E.g. B and K running for president – there are no moral solutions for the conflicts of interests" [4, p. 84]. Let's assume that B and K are running for president in a certain country and let's assume further that it is in each one's best interest to win the elections, but only one can win. Then, it would be in B's interest and against K's interest if B was elected and the other way round, and in B's interest and against K's interest if K was eliminated, and the other way round. But it follows that B must liquidate K and that is wrong if B does not do this, that B does not do his job until he liquidates K (and the other way round). Similarly, K, knowing that his own elimination is in B's interests, and anticipating B's attempts to make sure of his elimination, must take action to thwart these attempts. He does not do his duty until he is certain that he stopped B. Obviously, this is an absurd situation. This is because morals is meant to be applied precisely in such cases, when interests are conflicting. But if the perspective of morals was one of personal interest, there would not be any moral solutions for conflicts of interests. From Baier's point of view, an effective morals should solve a conflict of interests. The conflict between B and K should be solved so as they would not have a duty that the other should prevent. From the perspective of personal interest, it cannot happen, and if we are certain that ethics should be capable of solving conflicts of interests, then this ethics is unacceptable.

Another accusation of Baier concerns the logical inconsistency of ethical egoism. The logical contradiction that the objectors of the theory note is the following: it is wrong and it is not wrong for a K person to prevent B to liquidate him, a proposition which does not solely derive from the principle of ethical egoism, but also from the additional premise that it is wrong to prevent someone to do their duty. This is the contradiction. In order for this theory not to be logically contradictory, its proponents should phrase it as follows: „if you must prevent someone to do their duty fully depends on the fact that you serve your best interests by doing it". [4 p85] Regardless the moral correctitude of this ethics, the salvation from logical contradictions endows the theory of ethical egoism with consistency.

5. Conclusions

Almost all arguments brought forth by the theorists of ethical egoism could be refuted either by common sense morals or by logic. This is

not to say that the theory does not have any positive aspects. When it is not radical, it has valuable ideas which soften its harshness.

Throughout this undertaking, starting with psychological egoism and ending with the ethical one, we have tried to grasp the *reason* why *our* interests would be above the interests *of the others*. Mercy, charity, empathy or love did not escape the suspicion of egoism. The supporters of the ethical egoism theory have striven to convince that *egoism* is a *duty* in a conflicting world. The theory of ethical egoism, as any theory of this type, cannot explain the reason why the world is divided into us and the others, or what is the difference between me and the others. It cannot find the sensible, justifiable reason for the existence of this difference. What makes me so special in reference to others? Why would I be so special? Understanding the fact that we are similar and that we should care about one another makes ethical egoism fail as a moral theory.

References

[1] Rousseau JJ. Discurs asupra inegalităţii dintre oameni (Discourse on the Origin of Inequality). Bucureşti: Editura Incitatus; 2001. 144 p.
[2] Kant I. Critica raţiunii practice (Critique of Practical Reason). Bucureşti: Editura ştiinţifică; 1972. 342 p.
[3] Piaget J. The Moral Judgment of the Child. Glencoe. Illinois: The Free Press; 1948. 448 p.
[4] Rachels J. Introducere în etică (Introduction to ethics). Bucureşti: Editura Punct; 2000. 204 p.