

Egoism- its forms and value

Kurt Baier (1917-2010)

– theory of egoism

Egoism, in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, 197-204.

Egoism as a negative attitude: I take into account only my own interests; interests of others are not valid; I cannot resign from my own interests; only my interests are valid, even if at someone else's expense;

Only me, at any expense

Only me, even if at someone else's expense

Psychological Egoism

We are all egoists in the sense that all our actions are motivated by concern for our own best interest or greatest good; 'the theory that if not on the surface, at least deep down we are all egoists in the sense that as far as our behaviour explainable by our beliefs and desires is concerned, it always is aimed at what we believe to be for our own greatest good; (Baier, 198).

P.E is descriptive only and tries to reduce all human motivations to egoism (even if someone tries to present their own activity as a form of altruism, this motivation can be reduced to egoism.

Egoism as a means to the common good

"Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (published in 1776), presents an argument for egoism as a practical ideal, at least in the economic sphere. He advocated the freedom of entrepreneurs to promote their own interest, that is, their profits, by suitable (as they saw it) methods of production, hiring, sales and so forth, on the grounds that such a general arrangement would best promote the good of the whole community. On Smith's view, the promotion by each entrepreneur of his or her own good, unimpeded by legal or self-imposed moral constraint to protect the good of others, would at the same time be the most efficient promotion of the common good. This would happen, Smith believed, because there is an 'invisible hand' (the pervasive effects of the free enterprise system itself) which co-ordinates these many otherwise uncoordinated individual economic activities". (Baier, 199)

"For the removal of legal or self-imposed moral constraints on the individual pursuit of self-interest is likely to promote the common good only if these individual interests do not conflict, or if something like a 'hidden hand' takes the

place of these constraints. If we all rush to get out of the burning theatre, many or all may get trampled to death or perish in the flames. To avoid or minimize mutual interference, we need some suitable coordination of our individual activities. Of course, that may not be enough. Even if we form orderly lines, though no-one will then get trampled to death, the last ones in the line may be caught in the fire. Thus, our system of co-ordination may not be able to prevent all harm, and then the contentious problem arises of how the unavoidable harm is to be allocated. So far as egoism as a means to the common good is concerned, the essential point is that the pursuit of individual good does not necessarily promote, and may in fact be disastrous for, the common good.” (Baier, 200)

Rational egoism.

“Rational egoism is highly plausible. We tend to think that when doing something seems not to be in our interest, doing it calls for justification and showing that it actually is in our interest after all provides that justification”. (Baier, 201)

Ethical egoism:

What is ethical must be consistent with rationality. If some egoistic actions are rational, they also must be ethical.

“Both ideals have a stronger and a weaker version. The stronger maintains that it is always rational (wise, reasonable, reason-backed), always right, (moral, praiseworthy, virtuous) to aim at one’s own greatest good, and never rational etc., never right etc., not to do so. The weaker version maintains that it is always rational, always right to do so, but not necessarily never rational or right not to do so”. (Baier, 201)

Is egoism something wrong? To answer this question one must consider 5 different forms of egoism: there are such forms of egoism which are justified but the assumption is that our activity cannot liquidate or limit the similar activity of others. Only unlimited egoism is certainly wrong. One can say against egoism that it leads to reductio ad absurdum:

1. Egoism is true.
 2. If egoism is true, then John ought to liquidate George.
 3. If egoism is true, then George ought to prevent John from liquidating him.
- Therefore,
4. John ought to liquidate George (from 2 and 1).
- Therefore,

5. George ought to prevent John from liquidating him (from 3 and 1).
6. Preventing people from doing what they ought to do is wrong.
Therefore,
7. George's preventing John from liquidating him is wrong (from 6 and 4).
Therefore,
8. George's preventing John from liquidating him is not wrong (from 5).
Therefore,
9. George's preventing John from liquidating him is wrong and George's preventing John from liquidating him is not wrong (from 7 and 8).

Baier underlines also that egoism makes it impossible to solve interpersonal conflicts; to avoid or at least minimize such conflicts, we need some cooperation or some coordination of other different interests:

“An example: can it be morally wrong for me to kill my grandfather so that he cannot change his will and disinherit me? Assuming that my killing him will be in my best interest but detrimental to my grandfather, while refraining from killing him will be to my detriment but in my grandfather's interest, then if ethical conflict-regulation is sound, there can be a sound moral guideline regulating this conflict (presumably by forbidding this killing). But then ethical egoism cannot be sound, for it precludes the interpersonally authoritative regulation of interpersonal conflicts of interest, since such a regulation implies that conduct contrary to one's interest is sometimes morally required of one, and conduct in one's best interest sometimes morally forbidden to one. Thus, ethical egoism is incompatible with ethical conflict-regulation. It allows only personally authoritative principles or precepts; they can tell me to kill my grandfather and tell my grandfather not to allow himself to be killed, perhaps preventively to kill me in self-defence, but they cannot, 'regulatively', tell both of us whose interest must give way. But it is precisely this interpersonally regulative function we ascribe to *moral* principles”. (Baier, 202)

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- 1) Psychological egoism (but also other forms of egoism) seems to commit a naturalistic error.
 - 2) An egoistic motivation can be interpreted as a secondary part of motivation; For example: I am personally interested in happiness of my son. It is pleasant to me to observe his life successes. But, should I say that my happiness is most important in this situation? I should say that my happiness is something secondary in this case, what is really important is rather happiness of my son