Egoism Essay, Research Paper

Egoism

Psychological egoism is a reflex that every person has to orient

themselves toward their own welfare. Through this, it follows that every one of

his (or her) voluntary actions is some good to himself. If someone gives away

the last piece of bread to someone else, it is because they want to look like a

better person. Due to the fact that they would give away the last piece of bread.

Human nature is completely and exclusively egoistic. People are entirely

selfish and devoid of any genuine feelings of sympathy, benevolence, or

sociability. They are always thinking of themselves in everything they do.

Each individual is preoccupied exclusively with the gratification of

personal desires (felicity or happiness).Ones success in maintaining a

continuous flow of gratification is the means of ones happiness.

The object of the voluntary acts of every man is some good to himself.

Whenever man renounces his right it is either in consideration for some right

reciprocally transferred to himself, or for some other good he hopes for from

the outcome. This presents us with the old saying: “Do unto others as you would

want them to do unto you.”

Social organization originates out of self interest. All society is for

gain, or for glory. It is not like we think it is—for love of our fellows.

Instead it is for self preservation. It is a sort of social contract. In a state

of nature we are at war with each other and life is solitary, poor, nasty,

brutish, and short. In a natural state individuals are in equal powers.

Voluntary collective organization is the most effective way for individuals to

utilize their powers.

Man should be allowed the right to use all means or actions to preserve

himself. For every man is desirous of what is good to him, and shuns what is

evil, but chiefly the chiefest of natural evil, which is death. The right to

bear arms.

In conclusion, I would like to say that?

Psychological Egoism– This is the claim that humans by nature are

motivated only by self-interest . Any act, no matter how altruistic it might

seem, is actually motivated by some selfish desire of the agent (e.g., desire

for reward, avoidance of guilt, personal happiness). This is a descriptive claim

about human nature. Since the claim is universal–all acts are motivated by self

interest–it could be proven false by a single counterexample (Weston, rule #11).

It will be difficult to find an action that the psychological egoist

will acknowledge as purely altruistic, however. There is almost always some

benefit to ourselves in any action we choose. For example, if I helped my friend

out of trouble, I may feel happy afterwards. But is that happiness the motive

for my action or just a result of it? Perhaps the psychological egoist fails to

distinguish the beneficial consequences of an action from the self-interested

motivation. After all, why would it make me happy to see my friend out of

trouble if I didn’t already have some prior concern for my friend’s best

interest? Wouldn’t that be altruism?

Egoism versus altruism

The second issue I want to explore is egoism versus altruism.

Altruism holds “each man as his brother’s keeper;” in other words, we

are each responsible for the health and well-being of others. Clearly, this is a

simple statement of the “safety-net” theory from above. This is incompatible

with individualism, yet many people who are basically individualists uphold

altruism as the standard of morality. What’s going on?

The problem is wide-spread confusion over the meanings of “altruism”

and “egoism.”

The first confusion is to confound altruism with kindness, generosity,

and helping other people. Altruism demands more than kindness: it demands

sacrifice. The billionaire who contributes $50,000 to a scholarship fund is not

acting altruistically; altruism goes beyond simple charity. Altruism is the

grocery bagger who contributes $50,000 to the fund, foregoing his own college

education so that others may go. Parents who spend a fortune to save their dying

child are helping another person, but true altruism would demand that the

parents spend their money to save ten other children, sacrificing their own

child so that others may live.

The second confusion is to confound selfishness with brutality. The

common image of selfishness is the person who runs slip-shod over people in

order to achieve arbitrary desires. We are taught that “selfishness” consists

of dishonesty, theft, even bloodshed, usually for the sake of the whim of the

moment.

These two confusions together obscure the possibility of an ethics of

non-sacrifice. In this ethics, each man takes responsibility for his own life

and happiness, and lets other people do the same. No one sacrifices himself to

others, nor sacrifices others to himself. The key word in this approach is earn:

each person must earn a living, must earn the love and respect of his peers,

must earn the self-esteem and the happiness that make life worth living.

It’s this ethics of non-sacrifice that forms a lasting moral foundation

for individualism. It’s an egoistic ethics in that each person acts to achieve

his own happiness. Yet, it’s not the brutality usually ascribed to egoism.

Indeed, by rejecting sacrifice as such, it represents a revolution in thinking

on ethics.

Two asides on the topic of egoism. First, just as individualism doesn’t

mean being alone, neither does non-sacrificial egoism. Admiration, friendship,

love, good-will, charity, generosity: these are wonderful values that a

selfishness person would want as part of his life. But these values do not

require true sacrifice, and thus are not altruistic in the deepest sense of the

word.

Second, I question if brutality, the form of selfishness usually

ascribed to egoism, is actually in one’s self-interest in practice. Whim worship,

dishonesty, theft, exploitation: I would argue that the truly selfish man

rejects these, for he knows that happiness and self-esteem can’t be stolen at

the cost of others: they must be earned through hard work.

If altruism is so bad, and altruism is based on mysticism, then what is

Rand’s alternative, and what does it have to do with reason? For her own ethics,

Rand started at the very beginning: why do you need ethics anyway, she asks,

what is it for? Her answer to this question can be analyzed in two parts.

First, Rand said that values ought to be objective facts about reality.

She noted that life is conditional, and that it requires a specific course of

action to maintain. She concluded that something can be good or bad only to a

living organism acting to survive: the good furthers life, the bad hinders it.

Second, Rand noted that humans, unlike other animals, need to discover their

values. Consider the life of a squirrel: collect nuts, hibernate, eat nuts,

repeat. Not very exciting. Animals just repeat a built-in cycle of action over

and over. The drama of human life is that people have to decide what action to

take, and their decisions have real, long-range consequences.

How do you decide? Reason. Values are objective facts about reality, and

your means for knowing reality is reason. Reason is the fundamental value

because it’s your means of discovering your other values. What do you do with

reason? In large part, produce the goods needed to survive. Unlike animals that

simply take what they need from the environment, humans produce what they need.

But, as Francis Bacon once said in a quote Rand was fond of repeating: “nature,

to be commanded, must be obeyed.” Through reasoning, people can come to

understand and harness the forces of nature.

So reason and production are the primary values of the Objectivist

ethics. Rand summed it up this way:

Man’s mind is his basic tool of survival. Life is given to him, survival

is not. His body is given to him, its sustenance is not. His mind is given to

him, its content is not. To remain alive, he must act, and before he can act he

must know the nature and purpose of his action. He cannot obtain his food

without knowledge of food and of the way to obtain it. He cannot dig a ditch-or

build a cyclotron-without a knowledge of his aim and of the means to achieve it.

To remain alive, he must think.

But to think is an act of choice…. Reason does not work automatically;

thinking is not a mechanical process; the connections of logic are not made by

instinct. The function of your stomach, lungs or heart is automatic; the

function of your mind is not. In any hour and issue of your life, you are free

to think or to evade that effort. But you are not free to escape from your

nature, from the fact that reason is your means of survival-so that for you, who

are human being, the question “to be or not to be” is the question “to think

or not to think.”

You need ethics because you need values to survive, and you can only

discover those values through a volitional process of reason. Ethics, to Rand,

was “a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions-the choices and

actions which determine the purpose and the course of his life.”

Given that Rand held that values are rooted in the individual’s struggle

to survive, egoism follows naturally. As an ethical theory, egoism holds that

the primary beneficiary of an action should be the actor. The primary goal of

each individual should be to act to achieve personal happiness. The happiness of

family and friends are important to the egoist, but only in so far as it gives

pleasure in return. Being around a bunch of happy, mentally healthy people is a

real joy; being around a bunch of complainers isn’t.

That selfishness implies acting for your own sake is usually understood;

often misunderstood, however, is that this does not reveal which actions are, in

fact, in your self interest. Rand rejected the view that lying to, stealing from,

and subjugating others is acting “selfishly;” she held that these activities

in fact are not values-that they do not lead to a happy life.

Rand listed a number of important values-productivity, honesty, pride-

that make up the good life. An important one in understanding that selfishness

does not involve preying on others is independence.

Independence has two aspects. The first is mental: you must think for

yourself, you must come to your own conclusions, and you must follow those

conclusions into action. You must never subordinate your own grasp of reality to

anything: society, peers, tradition, authority. Howard Roark, the hero of The

Fountainhead, is the symbol of this.

The second aspect of independence is existential: you must embrace the

law of causality in your own life. You must take responsibility for your actions,

which means: you must take the responsibility for achieving your own life and

for all the actions you take in doing so. This is a two-way street: you get

credit for the good you do and get to keep the benefits, and you get blamed for

the bad and are expected to accept the consequences.

It is this noble concept of independence-the man who thinks for himself

and acts for himself and holds himself accountable for what he does-that Rand

held as the truly selfish life.

A final point about Rand’s egoism is that it rejects the need for

sacrifice. Traditionally we’ve been given the choice of living for others (which

is altruism) or expecting others to live for us (which is called

“selfishness”). Rand identified a third alternative: let each man live for his

own sake, neither “sacrificing himself to others nor others to himself.” Rand

held that if (and only if) people act morally and selfishly as she defined it,

there is a harmony of interests among men that makes peace, benevolence, and,

ultimately, general prosperity possible.