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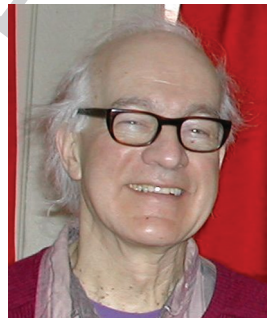
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Keywords: Altruism; Charity; Deep theories; Egoism; Ethical egoism; Justice; Moral egoism; Normative; Psychological egoism; Selfishness; Self-interest; Virtue

Abstract

Egoism and altruism come in two forms: psychological and normative – theories about what we do and what we ought to do. Psychological egoism succumbs to the distinction between interests in ourselves, strictly, and interests that are ours but not directed at ourselves. The first, egoism proper, is clearly false. The second allows altruism. Ethical egoism falls before the familiar observation that exclusive devotion to ourselves does not make us as happy as a life of love and involvement. Moral egoism is irrational, asking us to sanction actions by others that are strongly against our own interests.

Biographical Sketch



Jan Narveson, B.A. (University of Chicago), Ph.D. (Harvard), is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. He is the author of more than 200 papers in philosophical periodicals and anthologies, mainly on ethical theory and practice, and of six published books: *Morality and Utility* (1967), *The Libertarian Idea* (1989), *Moral Matters* (1993; 2nd ed., 1999), *Respecting Persons in Theory and Practice* (2002), *You and the State* (2008) and *This Is Ethical Theory* (2010). He is co-author, with Marilyn Friedman, of *Political Correctness* (1995) and, with James P. Sterba, of *Is Liberty Compatible with Equality?* (forthcoming). He is also the editor of *Moral Issues* (1983); *For and against the State* (with John T. Sanders, 1996); and *Liberalism: New Essays on Liberal Themes* (with Susan Dimock, 2000). In 2007, a Festschrift of essays about his work was published: *Liberty, Games, and Contracts*, edited by Malcolm Murray (Ashgate). He is or has been on the editorial boards of many philosophical journals. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and is a frequent guest at colloquia and conferences throughout North America and in the United Kingdom and Europe. In 2003, he was inducted as Officer of the Order of Canada, which is Canada's next-to-top civilian distinction.

a0005

Egoism and Altruism

AU2

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Glossary

g0005

Altruism In its broadest sense, the denial of egoism. However, many degrees of denial are possible, notably the following three: partial altruism, impartial altruism, and extreme altruism.

g0010

Deep egoism The view that the state of ourselves that we are motivated by is not accessible to the agent but must be got at by special means, such as Freudian psychiatry or neurological investigation.

g0015

Egoism The theory that all human behavior is (psychological egoism) or ought to be (ethical egoism) motivated entirely by self-interest.

g0020

Ethical egoism The view that the best normative theory of general action, or life, is to do what is best for oneself, regardless of effects on others, except when those are indirectly necessary for the best result for oneself.

Extreme altruism The view that other people's interests count and that one's own do not.

g0025

Impartial altruism That the interests of oneself and any others should count equally. In between egoism and impartial altruism is extreme altruism.

g0030

Moral egoism The view that the correct rule for groups of people tells each member to do whatever is in his or her interest, regardless of consequences for others in the group.

g0035

Partial altruism Some other people's interests count more than those of others – for example, friends above strangers.

g0040

Superficial egoism Egoism identified in ordinary language, with our usual vocabulary concerning what agents intend to do, as they see it.

g0045

s0005

Psychological versus Ethical Egoism

p0005

Egoism and altruism are subject even more than usual in philosophy to crucial ambiguities that must be sorted out before one can say anything helpful. There are two types of egoism – psychological and ethical. The first is a theory about human motivations: What makes us tick? According to egoism, we are actuated entirely by self-interest, even when it appears to be otherwise. Altruism, of course, denies this. However, the second is a normative theory – a theory about what we should do. It says that we should, or ought to, act only in our own interest. How these are related is perhaps the central question for the subject.

s0010

Substantive versus Tautological Psychological Egoism

AU4

p0010

Just what is self-interest? Here, the groundbreaking work of Joseph Butler (1692–1752) paves the way for us. Does 'self-interest' mean interests in ourselves or only interests of ourselves? Everything hangs on that one-word difference.

p0015

Interests in ourselves are interests that one's own self have certain things, held to be good by the agent – things that can be identified and had independently of the goods of others. For example, hunger is a desire for food in one's own stomach; desires for physical comfort, for optimal temperature, or for the absence of pain in

one's own body are further examples. The desire to feel pleasure and avoid pain is the most widely held candidate for the status of fundamental motivator of all action. Interests in others, by contrast, would be such desires as love or hatred, where we are essentially directing our actions toward the production of certain states of other people. The kind of psychological egoism holding that we are exclusively motivated by the first kind of interests may be called strict or substantive.

Interests of ourselves, on the other hand, simply refer to whose interests they are but not at all to what the interests are taken in – what they are aimed at affecting, either in or outside of ourselves. As Butler pointed out, it is trivial to say that all action is motivated by interests or desires of the agent – that is what makes them the agent's actions at all. We might call this tautologous psychological egoism. By contrast, it is not at all trivial to say that the object of our actions is only to produce certain conditions of ourselves. Of course, the situation is complicated by the fact that we can get pleasure, for example, from our perception of the condition of certain other people, or even of all other people. When we do so, are we motivated by the prospect of pleasure from our relations to those people? If so, is that to be accounted egoism, despite the fact that the source of our pleasure in these cases is the pleasures – or perhaps the pains – of others? On the face of it, we need yet another distinction. This would be between theories that deny that we even get pleasure

p0020

2 Egoism and Altruism

from other-regarding acts and theories that accept this but insist that it is only because of the pleasure we get from them that we perform them.

s0015 **Superficial versus Deep Theories**

p0025 The question whether psychological egoism may be true becomes very difficult, however, when we distinguish between what we may call superficial or, in the terminology of contemporary philosophers of mind, folk-psychological versions of the theory and what we may call deep theories.

p0030 At the superficial level, psychological egoism is, as Butler also pointed out, overwhelmingly implausible. People make huge sacrifices for those they love, including sacrifice of their very lives. Moreover, they sometimes go out of their way to do evils to other people even at the cost of ruining their own lives in the process.

p0035 Deep theories are quite another matter. No one can claim to have refuted the view that there is some variable within the soul – or the nervous system – such that all actions really do maximize it, regardless of all else in the environment. To make this work, of course, it would have to be noted that other factors in the environment would certainly interact with that variable, whatever it is.

p0040 The most popular candidate for what we may be trying to maximize, no doubt, is net pleasure: the quantity, pleasure minus pain, or more plausibly, of positive affect minus negative affect (or plus negative affect if we think of the latter as a negative quantity). Perhaps the man who falls on the grenade to save his comrades reckons that he could not live with himself if he did not do it. Perhaps, as Kant supposed, our self-interested motivations are hidden from our own view so that despite our pretensions to altruism, we are really always acting in our own interest after all. However, once the commonsense idea that pleasure and pain are things we are aware of is abandoned, the situation changes radically. We then need a good theory explaining just what the quantity in question is really supposed to be – electrical magnitudes in brain cells, perhaps? We would need to explain how the theory is to be assessed in empirical terms. Clearly, appraising any such view will be very difficult. In this article, we will not further discuss such possibilities. Regarding commonsense distinctions, psychological egoism may surely be dismissed as simply wrong and based entirely on the confusion between egoism as a substantive view and egoism in its tautological form.

s0020 **Varieties of Motivation**

p0045 A major complication in the discussion of this issue is just how we are to count certain human motivations in

relation to the egoism versus altruism categories. There are many cases in which someone acts without obviously intending to promote his or her own pleasure but also without obviously intending to benefit anyone else. Suppose that Henry conceives a passion for building a replica of the Great Pyramid in his backyard. He labors mightily and for years, often with considerable pain, and it damages his health considerably in the process. Is he here pursuing pleasure? If we say so, then the notion of pleasure has become very broad. Is he doing it for anyone else's benefit? Not obviously, at least.

For the purposes of this article, we account motivations that seem to be for the pursuit of states of affairs having no evident connection with either the agent's or anyone else's benefit as being, nevertheless, for the agent's benefit inasmuch as they are attempts to attain something that he or she wants, or at least feels impelled, to do. If this is not very much like satisfying hunger or sex, that is the point. The category of the self-interested is hugely broad so that the explanatory value of appeals to self-interest is rather low. p0050

Altruism – Psychological Version

If psychological egoism has its difficulties, psychological altruism is also problematic. Again, discussion requires more care with definitions. Altruism may be understood as concern with others – but how much, and which others? At the opposite extreme from egoism is the view that we only act for the sake of others, and we do so for the sake of all others. To the author's knowledge, no one has ever seriously advocated such a theory. The English philosopher David Hume (1711–76) hypothesized that some altruism is to be found in every human – a general feeling for all other humans, at the least. Taken as a superficial-level generalization about people, this is fairly plausible, and it would be even more so if we said that nearly everyone is at least slightly altruistic regarding most other humans. But it is, of course, not very precise, and how to describe it more accurately, and account for it, is an interesting question. Interaction with one's mother in infancy, for example, and later with peers, may play a role in the genesis of such dispositions. p0055

Ethical Incompatibility with Psychological Egoism s0030 AU5

We now turn to the ethical versions of egoism. Here, we do well to begin by recognizing that for ethical egoism to be meaningful at all, strict psychological egoism, at least in its superficial forms, must be false. If Jones is unable to seek anyone's well-being but his own, then there is obviously no point in telling him that he ought to be p0060

seeking someone else's. Ought, as philosophers state, implies can. (Even here, the distinction of shallow from deep theories is essential because it is by no means clear that ethics is incompatible with deep self-interest. Possibly, totally altruistic behavior is best for oneself, and the truly selfish person is the saint or the hero who devotes his or her life to helping others.)

s0035 **Ethical versus Moral Egoism**

p0065 For purposes of this article, we are assuming the plain or superficial level of discussion, which we all understand fairly well, and ask whether ethical egoism is plausible in those terms. However, now we must make still another distinction, and again a crucial one – this time with the word 'ethical.' By ethical, do we refer to the general theory of how to live? Or do we mean, much more narrowly, rules for the group? Egoism will look very different in these two very different contexts. If the question is, Should I aim to live the best life I can? it is extremely difficult to answer in the negative. Each one of us should, surely, try to live the best life we can – the most satisfying, most rewarding, most pleasant, etc., life we can manage. Of course, this leads to the very large question of what the ultimate values of life are and how to maximize them – what sort of life will do that. For example, as already noted, it is quite possible that a life of self-sacrifice is nevertheless the most fulfilling or rewarding. Perhaps it is even the most pleasant, although this seems to strain the idea. Furthermore, perhaps there are other values more important than pleasure.

AU6

s0040 **Egoism Not Necessarily Selfish**

p0070 As the previous discussion suggests, egoism as a theory of life may be very different from what the word at first suggests. When we think of egoists, we think, first, of people who are highly self-centered, who tend to ignore others and their needs, even their rights. Another word for this is egotism, which is a personality trait rather than a theory. At the extreme, we think of the psychopath, who will kill, rape, steal, lie, and cheat without compunction in order to achieve certain narrow ends for himself – usually the increment of his monetary income, but by no means always. However, does the psychopath live a good life? Would someone setting out to live the happiest, most rewarding life he or she can become psychopathic? That is extremely implausible. The wisdom of philosophers through the millennia has been uniform on this point: If you want to be happy yourself, then you need friends, loved ones, and associates, and you need to treat all these people with respect, most of them with kindness as well, and some of them with real love.

This last discussion shows the difficulty of contrasting egoism and altruism at this level. Should we literally sacrifice our own overall happiness or well-being for others? Which others? And especially, of course, why? To suggest that one should do such a thing – if it is possible – seems to be to suggest that those others persons are somehow superior to you. Why should we believe any such thing?

Notice that as a universal theory, this last would run into logical difficulties. Whatever 'worthy' means, if A is more worthy than B, then B is less worthy than A, by definition. Thus, it is impossible for everyone to be more worthy than everyone else.

Egoism and Morality

At this point, let us turn to the other member of the distinction I have made – morality. To talk about morality is to talk of what should be the rules governing the general behavior of the group. One question this immediately raises is, which group? Without getting too involved in the question of cultural relativism, let us supply two answers to this question: (1) the group in question – that is, the group of which the persons we are addressing are members, with whom they interact, fairly frequently; and (2) the group consisting of literally everybody – all humans. Again, most classic philosophers assumed the latter, and the assumption is certainly not a unrealistic one.

What matters, however, is that we are now addressing the question not simply what to do in life generally but what to do in relation to our fellows: How do we carry on our dealings with them, our interactions? It is when we address this question that egoism, in any sense of that word in which it is meaningful, becomes enormously implausible. For if we think of the egoist as the one who pursues only his or her own interest, regardless of others, so that our image is of near-psychopathic behavior, then to recommend that as the rule for a group seems completely absurd, even unintelligible. Egoism, again speaking at the superficial level, must address the question of conflicts of interest. If A's interests are incompatible with B's – meaning, simply, that if A achieves what he is after, then B is frustrated in his pursuit of what he is after – then a rule addressed to the two of them, telling them both to ignore the other and go for it, is silly. If both try to follow it, at least one will fail. In fact, most likely both of them will, especially if we take into account any aspects of their values that extend beyond the narrow one that was the subject of conflict. For example, if the two come to blows, then at least one and probably both will suffer injuries that they would prefer not to have inflicted on them. A rule for a group, if it is to be even remotely plausible, will have to do better than that. When there are

AU7

p0090

4 Egoism and Altruism

conflicts, it is going to have to tell us who is in the right and who is in the wrong – who gets to go ahead and who has to back down.

p0095 Trying to incorporate real egoism, of the first kind identified at the outset, into the very matter of moral rules is an invitation to conceptual disaster. That Jones ought to do x and Smith ought to do y , even though Jones's doing x entails Smith's not doing y , is rightly regarded as a nonsense rule. Two boxers in the ring ought both, of course, to try to win; but to say that both ought to win is nonsense because by definition that is impossible. A morality for all, therefore, cannot look like directions to the cheering section for one of the fighters but, rather, like the rule book for boxing, which tells both of them that they have only so many minutes between breaks, that they may not hit below the belt, and so forth. Morality in our second and narrower sense of the term consists of the rules for large, natural groups – that is, groups of people who happen, for whatever reason, to come in contact with each other rather than groups that come together intentionally for specific purposes. For such groups, the rules are going to have to be impartial rather than loaded in favor of one person or set of persons as against another. Thus, such rules simply cannot be egoistic.

s0050 Altruism and Morality

p0100 Can they be altruistic? That gets us to our last question. Should the rules for groups tell everyone to love everyone else, as fully as if everyone were one's dear sibling or spouse? The answer to this is surely in the negative, as Nietzsche pointed out. One or at most a very few lovers or loved ones is all any of us can handle. Truly to love someone, we must elevate that person well above the crowd, pay more attention to him or her than to others – not merely an equal amount – and so on. Altruism construed as the general love of humankind, therefore, simply cannot be using the term 'love' in its full normal sense. A doctrine of general altruism must retreat very far from that. Indeed, it is clear that general altruism has exactly the same problem as general egoism: Both are shipwrecked as soon as we see the inevitable asymmetries and partialities necessarily involved in love, whether of oneself or anyone else.

p0105 How far, then, do we retreat? Here, a variety of answers have been given, and we need to make one last distinction – between two departments or branches of morals. One branch is stern, and associated with justice, rules that are to be enforced by such heavy-duty procedures as punishments; the other is associated with commendations and praise, warm sentiments, and so forth. Following Kant, we may call these respectively the theory of justice and the theory of virtue or, in a

slightly different vein, justice and charity. One is, in short, the morality of the stick, whereas the other is the morality of the carrot. That is, it is appropriate to reinforce the rules of justice by such methods as punishment, including incarceration, or even death. However, the other is to be encouraged – we cheer for those who do well but we do not resort to punishment for lesser performance of those actions that are merely virtuous rather than downright required.

Now, our question may be put thus: Is altruism to be regarded as figuring prominently in, or perhaps even constituting the basis of, either of these, of both, or of neither? p0110

Again, it is highly plausible to deny altruism any significant role in the first. If you and I are enemies, it is pretty pointless to tell us to love each other, but it is not at all pointless to tell us to draw some lines and then stay on our side of them. For example, we are to refrain from killing, stealing from, lying to, cheating, maiming, or otherwise damaging even if we hate each other. We shall all do better if we simply rule out such actions. This is negative morality, the morality of thou shalt not, and it applies between absolutely everyone and absolutely everyone else, be they friends or enemies or strangers, with the sole qualification being that those who themselves are guilty of transgressing one of those restrictions may be eligible for punishment. It is absurd to point to love as the basis of such rules. Rather, it is our interests, considered in relation to how things are and how other people are, that undergird these vital rules of social life. p0115

On the other hand, when it comes to helping those in need, showing kindness to people, being thoughtful, helpful, supportive, and so on – in short, of being, in the words of Hume, agreeable and useful to others – it is more plausible to ascribe this to sentiment – to some degree of altruism. Even so, it is by no means clear that it is necessary because in being nice to others, we inspire them to be nice to us, and so even considerations of self-interest fairly narrowly construed will teach us the value of these other-regarding virtues. However, it is also plausible to suggest that we admire and praise people who go well beyond the minimum in these respects: We put the Mother Therasas of the world, the heroic life-savers, those who go the extra mile and then some, on pedestals, and rightly so. As Hume conjectures, it seems implausible to confine those tendencies to self-interest in any narrow sense of that word. p0120

Conclusion

To get a clear view of this long-discussed subject, we need to make several important distinctions. First, we must distinguish the normative or ethical from the psychological version of egoism. Second, in both cases, we need to distinguish between egoism in the narrow sense in which it entails an interest exclusively in the self, defined as p0125

s0055

independent of all others, and the much broader – really vacuous – sense in which it essentially means that one acts only on one’s own desires, whatever their objects. Third, we must distinguish shallow or superficial from deep versions. Finally, we must distinguish ethics in the very broad sense of one’s general view of life from morality, in the much narrower sense of a canon or set of rules for the conduct of everyone in society. It is then seen that ethical egoism says essentially nothing, whereas moral egoism proposes what is obviously unacceptable.

[AU8]

See also: Kantianism (00210); Theories of Ethics, Overview (00231)

Further Reading

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Biographical Sketch

Jan Narveson, B.A. (University of Chicago), Ph.D. (Harvard), is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. He is the author of more than 200 papers in philosophical periodicals and anthologies, mainly on ethical theory and practice, and of six published books: *Morality and Utility* (1967), *The Libertarian Idea* (1989), *Moral Matters* (1993; 2nd ed., 1999), *Respecting Persons in Theory and Practice* (2002), *You and the State* (2008) and *This Is Ethical Theory* (2010). He is co-author, with Marilyn Friedman, of *Political Correctness* (1995) and, with James P. Sterba, of *Is Liberty Compatible with Equality?* (forthcoming). He is also the editor of *Moral Issues* (1983); *For and against the State* (with John T. Sanders, 1996); and *Liberalism: New Essays on Liberal Themes* (with Susan Dimock, 2000). In 2007, a Festschrift of essays about his work was published: *Liberty, Games, and Contracts*, edited by Malcolm Murray (Ashgate). He is or has been on the editorial boards of many philosophical journals. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and is a frequent guest at colloquia and conferences throughout North America and in the United Kingdom and Europe. In 2003, he was inducted as Officer of the Order of Canada, which is Canada’s next-to-top civilian distinction.