

## THE POSSIBILITY OF RATIONAL EGOISM

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### Abstract

*In striving to promote or optimize his self-interest, the egoist may be seen as acting both morally and rationally. It is conceptually wrong to contrast self-interest theory (egoism) with morality since the former is itself a moral theory. Whatever may be the consent of what is regarded as group interest cannot be divorced from the interest of the individuals who make up such a collectivity. What is required of the egoist is to include the well-being of others as part of what constitutes his interest.*

**Key words:** Self-interest, Universalizable, Prudential, Utility maximization, Reciprocal benefit, Solipsism, Contract.

According to Whiteley (1976:96):

*Egoism is not a possible basis for morality in the sense that rational egoist will not wish his own principles to be generally adopted by his fellows.*

The above view is informed by the conviction that an egoist is a person who when he has to decide what to do, always chooses whatever course of action he thinks will produce for himself the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, or the least balance of pain over pleasure (Ibid;93). In a paper titled “Rationality Egoism and Morality” Richard Brandt (1972) was very emphatic in his conviction that egoism is not a satisfactory moral system because rational persons will collectively prefer a non-egoistic moral system to egoism. Brandt thought that from the fact (if really this was a fact), that rational persons will not collectively prefer egoism, it follows that egoism is not a satisfactory moral system. Apart from the fact that it is not clear the sense in which Brandt was using the word ‘rational’, we are not equally told whom the ‘rational persons’ are and why it was thought that an egoist is not qualified to be a member of this group of people. On the other hand, and from the title chosen by Whiteley, he appears to contrast morality with egoism, but there seems to be no justified reasons for this polarization or dichotomization.

In this paper, I intend to defend a very modest thesis, namely, that in striving to maximize his subjective values, or to put it differently, in trying to promote his personal interest or happiness, the egoist should neither be seen as non-rational nor non-moral. My thesis is supported by the fact that the actions of the egoist are not contrary to the demands of both morality as well as rationality.

Whiteley is right in observing that morality imposes restraints upon the operation of self-interest, requiring the members of the society, *sometimes*, (our emphasis) to behave to their own disadvantage in order to carry out a rule or exercise a virtue. Even here, the word ‘sometimes’ is worthy of note. The word ‘sometimes’ may be contrasted with the word *always*. In other words, morality demands some sacrifice on the part of members of a particular society. However, this fact does not prove that morality and self-interest (or egoism)

are to be seen as conceptually opposed to one another. If self-interest and morality are construed as opposed to each other, then, there is no way by which we may expect morality to serve as check and balance on self-interest, or by which an egoist may be expected to comply with the demands of morality. In that wise, and since he is believed to be operating outside the scope of morality, there will be no reason for anyone to appeal to the same moral criterion or criteria criticizing or condemning self-interest. I do not agree with Whiteley's contention that the egoist will refuse to contribute to the general well-being of members of his community. I think it will be wrong to see him as an anti-social. His argument appears to be that in trying to promote the general interest (whatever that may mean), his own interest should not suffer in the process. While he may be thinking of the general welfare, he is at the same time, conscious of the need to protect his personal interest. And where there is a conflict between his interest and that of the society in general, he considers his own interest first.

It is not always clear why philosophers like Brandt and Whiteley thought that the egoist could not universalize his judgements. An egoist can do this consistently. It may however be argued that with our limited or scarce resources, an unrestrained tendency for the satisfaction of personal interest may lead to communal or inter-personal conflicts, and since it is only in an atmosphere of peace and concord that the interests of individuals may be satisfied, then, the egoist needs to cooperate with other utility maximizers. In addition, the fact that a rule is universalizable for example "We ought to know ourselves better", "It is wrong to drive in the night", are all couched in universal terms but we will hesitate to call them moral rules. The fact that some rules or judgements are couched in universal terms does not, in itself, mean that they apply equally to all human beings all over the world. Let us borrow from Hare (1981) and say that such rules and judgements apply to all people in similar circumstances (op. cit. 91). Once Whiteley can at least, grant that no community will, or, in reason, should, adopt moral standards which its members think likely to damage their overall welfare, they will, and should choose, those they think likely to increase it, then, it may be argued that similar arguments should be adduced on behalf of the egoist to the effect that he will not, and should not, subscribe to moral standards or rules likely to be inimical to his overall interest since he is (like everyone else) out to increase his happiness. There is no doubt that morality is a public affair, but this fact does not make anyone a slave of the group to which he or she belongs.

In addition, in order to sustain group interests, the sacrifice being made by individuals or certain minorities should not task them beyond bearable limit. It is erroneous, therefore, for anyone to claim that the egoist does not take into reckoning the welfare of any other person unless he has a spontaneous fondness for that person and will be pleased by his happiness and distressed by his misery (Ibid; 93). Whiteley goes on to argue that an egoist will take care to make friends with people who contribute directly or indirectly to his own enjoyment, and will avoid engagements with those likely to cause him distress. This picture of an egoist portrays him as somebody who derives benefit from the community without making contributions in return for the benefits so derived. This assumption is false. What is more, it is not only an egoist that behaves the way described by Whiteley. And if this is the way we may possibly identify an egoist, then, my suggestion is that we do not need to look far in search of egoist. All we need to do is to start from ourselves when next we want to know who egoists are. This is so because no one will establish friendship with those he believes are likely to diminish his enjoyments as well as cause him distress. An egoist is capable of sacrifice, but he need not be stupid. He may make sacrifices provided others are doing the same, and in making sacrifices, he calculates his probable gains and losses. It may be true that most of us make many decisions without calculating results in terms of pleasure and pain to ourselves, yet this does not prove that anyone who does so is not behaving morally. An egoist may accept the constraints imposed by morality, but our argument is, such constraints are

aimed at restraining the egoist from undermining the society's interests whenever the egoist is striving to satisfy his personal interests and not necessarily to prevent him from making efforts to maximize his self-interests. In point of fact, the argument that a moral action is one that should enhance the general well-being of the people does not negate the fact that the individual's advantage must not be unnecessarily undermined. Secondly, while trying to promote his self-interest, the egoist does not aim at undermining the general advantage or welfare. His actions will be seen as non-moral the moment the egoist aims at working towards the disintegration of his community to achieve his interest.

A consistent egoist is aware, at least, ought to be aware, of the fact that it is within a stable society that his values may be realized and optimized. He needs the services of others as he himself contributes to the well-being of his society but he has to be free in order to decide what his interests or values are, and what constitutes the interests of his society, and any system of morality that restrains him from pursuing these interests will be seen both as unfair and unjust. Even an appeal to the scarcity of resources as to why the egoist must refrain from unrestrained pursuit of self interests, does not fall within the scope of morality. The fact that, despite preponderance of individuals' attempts to promote their subjective values as well as the fact that the available resources are few and far between, such considerations as these are non-moral in nature. And if we cannot find adequate moral reasons to reject egoism, then we must agree that egoism is not opposed to morality.

It is true that not everything good or moral could promote self-interest, and conversely, it is not the case that every moral virtue could make us happier, but it is not the case that egoism, as a principle of human conduct, does not allow occasional failures in the pursuit of self-interest. The egoist will not, however subscribe to a system of morality that consistently and systematically diminishes his personal interest. In that wise, any charge of hypocrisy against the egoist is really uncalled for. Hence there is no reason to argue that to advocate the acceptance of a rule in public, and break it in private when you can do so with advantage is hypocrisy (Ibid; 96). Since we now know the egoist to be someone who is out to maximize his happiness, then we will realize that any decision or policy that may likely constitute an obstacle to the realization of this objective may not receive his approval or blessing. Therefore, the question of his accepting a rule in public and breaking it in private does not arise in the first place.

Assuming the egoist joined a pact in order to promote his interest as well as society's interest and discovered later that to remain with this pact will be detrimental to his interest and he finally decided to quit, this act or behaviour will not amount to hypocrisy for the simple fact that he would quit publicly as he had joined. This type of action is usually termed inconsistency, and it is wrong of critics of egoism to argue this way. This alleged inconsistency may be nothing more than a mistake in the calculations of the egoist; after all, an egoist is not to be construed as an infallible moral reasoner.

### **Egoism is not hypocrisy**

Whiteley (Ibid) further argues that 'for the egoist to fail to be a hypocrite when hypocrisy is profitable will itself be inconsistent with his egoist principles'. However, this conclusion, to say the least, cannot be said to be derivable from the self-interest theory. Even if we grant that morality is a supreme value, it need not work against the interest of discrete individuals. The question of moral backsliding (*acrasia* or *akrasia*) is not peculiar to egoists. Both the altruist and egoist have genuine reasons for acting in the ways they do. We justify our actions and reactions by trying to forge a compromise between conflicting (sometimes non-moral) reasons. More often than not, critics of self-interest forget that non-moral reasons are usually appealed to in support of certain actions believed to be morally good. I do agree that the egoist should try as much as possible to cooperate with other utility maximizers so as to obtain optimal results. It may then be asked: why should the

egoist cooperate with non-egoist(s)? The reason for this is not far-fetched. Since the egoist is here defined as a utility maximizer (he may either be a constrained utility maximizer or a straight-forward maximizer), that the available resources are scarce, and that there is the possibility of attaining the highest units of value from acting corporately with other maximizers, it will be wiser for him to act in conjunction with other maximizers.

After all, and as we have already argued, the egoist is not an anti-social utility maximizer. He is not against cooperative endeavour, rather, he does not want to sacrifice his personal interest for the sake of promoting societal or communal interest without a reciprocal benefit from such sacrifices. Though it is often argued that altruism (that is, other-regarding theory which is usually contrasted with egoism, believed to be self-regarding) requires the moral agent to sacrifice some of his personal interest at all times. Moreover, and as I have already pointed out, an egoist may have regards for other people's interest. However, to have regards for others does not entail making oneself a guinea pig or putting oneself at the receiving end. There is nothing like 'pure altruism' and 'pure egoism'. When the altruist talks about other-regarding actions, he need not necessarily exclude his personal welfare from such talks. After all, being 'other-regarding' may form part of the 'interest' of the altruist, in which case, he is still promoting and prosecuting 'his interest'. In the same vein, when the egoist speaks of 'interest', he does not rule out completely the possibility of parting with some of his personal interests or values in order to promote peaceful co-existence in the society. All the egoist appears to mean is that his interest must not suffer unduly in the process of promoting the well-being of the generality of the people in his society.

Despite the fact that critics regard the egoist as a self-regarding person, it does not follow that he thinks of himself, and himself alone, at all times or that he is completely bereft of social tendencies and ideas. Even where the egoist refuses to be a party to any compromise, contract or pact, the only reasons to be adduced as a move to convince him will be non-moral reasons. For instance, it can be argued that it is the society that protects him, his family, as well as his property, and that he too has to contribute to the well-being of his society, or that he has to give something in return for such benefits that he derives from the society.

Let me re-emphasize my earlier conviction that there is no reason to conclude that the maximizing tendencies of the egoist are non-moral. Such a conclusion can be reached only after the egoist has been shown a better way of achieving optimal results and he still refuses to follow that line of action. In our present-day urbanized, heterogeneous, and highly specialized societies, each utility maximizer requires the co-operation of other maximizers. In this type of co-operations, though the constraint which morality places on self-interest will require the egoist to perform some acts which, left alone, are disadvantageous, but his losses are compensated by what he gains from the losses of other co-operators. We may then conclude that the fact that the egoist puts himself first in his quest to maximize his happiness does not, in itself, constitute a big moral problem. Rather, the real problem lies with his non-preparedness to co-operate with other equally rational utility maximizers. After all, whatever is eventually and corporately achieved by our said co-operators or contractarians can still be said to be 'in their own interest'. This is another way of saying that no one joins or agrees to a pact in order to work against his or her own interest. It follows, therefore, that the protection of one's interest is not lost upon joining a group or upon striving to promote corporate interest.

All that is required of an egoist is his readiness to widen the scope of 'his interest', not necessarily by replacing 'his interest' by 'others interest', but to include the love of his fellow men and women as an integral part of 'his interest'. His 'self-interest' then will mean the promotion of his interest plus the desire to promote the interest of the people around him. In that wise, he does not believe that his interest is adequately promoted and protected until he makes positive contributions to the welfare of the generality of the people in his community or society. In so doing, the egoist may still be seen as a prudent person, but, as David Gauthier

(1967:466) once argued, he (the egoist) also needs to be a trust-worthy maximizer. In this context, the egoist may rely on others for assistance in promoting his interest and others too may equally rely on him for the realization of their utilities. If the egoist will grant this minimum cooperation, then, he will escape the charge of ethical solipsism or self-centeredness. This is however different from saying that the egoist should be or ought to be indifferent to his self-interest.

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