

The Influencing Factors of Altruism and Egoism

Yawen Liu*

Yew Chung International School, Shanghai, 200127, China

*Corresponding author: rcooperx84826@student.napavalley.edu

Abstract. The two most common doctrines related to “ethics” are Egoism and Altruism, these two doctrines are often considered to be opposite, therefore understanding the difference between the two will be very important. Egoism refers to people who only care about their own happiness and interests, while an extreme type of Egoism is selfishness; Altruism refers to people who prioritize the interests and feelings of others over themselves, while a type of extreme Altruism is considered as “People Pleaser”. People will choose what they will do based on the “moral boundaries” in their view, since everyone’s boundaries are different, and people will be classified into these two types of ideology based on their actions and thoughts, usually altruists can empathize others better than egoists, which will lead them to make decisions that are benefit for other people. The factors that set the “moral boundaries” for each person is based on their experience, and how do other people treat themselves, factors that drive people to become these two ideologies mainly include family factors and interpersonal relationship factors, most people become egoistic or altruistic influence by other people and the environment.

Keywords: Egoism, altruism, family factors, interpersonal relationship factors, morality.

1. Introduction

Egoism and Altruism are two completely different ethical theories that explore the motivations behind human behavior. The idea that one should put one’s own interests and well-being above all others is known as Egoism [1]. It suggests that humans are fundamentally self-centered, and that they will act in a way that will increase their level of happiness and satisfaction. An important idea is that this theory and egoists does not mean unethical, being egoistic is not wrong (unless they base their happiness/interests on the pain of others and harm other people, this should consider and depends on the specific situation). Altruism, on the other hand, is the idea that people should put other people’s interests and well-being above their own. It suggests that humans are capable of selflessness and ought to act in ways that are advantageous to others, even at the expense of giving up their own satisfaction. It is important to notice at the first place that the ratio of Egoism to Altruism can differ from person to person and can be impacted by a variety of factors, the main three influence factors are family factors and interpersonal relationship factors, interpersonal relationship factors include teacher-student relationships and peer relationships. People’s social circle have a connection with their tendency to become egoists or altruists, at the same time, they will also decide whether they will become egoistic or altruistic based on the world they see themselves in. Moreover, Egoism and Altruism have a direct connection to human psychology, morality, and their understanding of “ethical decision”, everyone has different boundaries for moral decisions, in other words, no one can accurately state whether a decision is absolutely moral or immoral, and this boundary is very vague. Therefore, everyone will determine whether they are egoistic or altruistic based on their own experience and other influence factors.

2. Comparison Between Altruism and Egoism

It is generally believed that Egoism and Altruism are a pair of moral ideologies, which is opposite in form and consistent in substance. Speaking about Egoism, people believe that this type of person only cares about themselves. To some extent, Egoism is a natural human ideology. In previous human societies people are more likely to fight over food or shelter, and this phenomenon has turned into an ideology today. So, humans are born to take action to enhance their own well-being and attempt to

always benefit themselves. Whenever egoists were asked “why did you do this”, they all have a “universal answer”, which is “because this choice/action benefits me” [2]. When it comes to decision making, if it benefits them, egoists will choose to harm the rights of others, if necessary, they will base their own interests on the pain of others and resort to any means to achieve their own goals. Because egoists only care about themselves, some people argue that egoists have lack of empathy, but this is very one-sided. However, the concept of Altruism is opposite to Egoism, which places the interests of others or the collective above one’s own interests. And, usually altruists have more empathy than Egoists. Today’s society places more emphasis on human’s empathy and compassion, for example in China, more and more places are displaying signs saying "Do not litter", and signs saying "Do not spit". The purpose of these signs is to call on everyone not to do these things, as they may have negative influence on others and environment (animals). However, a lack of empathy is not the main reason why the Egoism people make decisions that are only beneficial to themselves, egoists are not psychopaths, only psychopaths are born without empathies for other people. The main idea of Egoism is it is human nature for humans to prioritize their own interests and happiness, you have no obligation to help others, and similarly, others have no obligation to help you.

Using a famous experiment to compare Egoism and Altruism more intuitively, the Trolley Problem. this is an experiment about a psychopath tied five innocent people to the tram track, a runaway tram approached them and was about to crush them in a moment. You can pull a lever to drive the tram to another track. However, the problem is that the psychopath also tied a person on another tram track. Considering the above situation, should you pull the lever? The answer from an Egoist is more likely to be he/she will do nothing, even pretend that they did not see the accident. This is because the first thing egoists think of when they encounter this problem is that if they make a choice, they will be responsible for anyone who dies, so for their own benefit, they will choose not to see anything and will not do anything. However, the answer from an altruist is more likely to be they will not make a choice, because they know no matter how they choose, someone will die, which goes against their ideology, so at first, they will refuse to make this decision.

Comparing to egoists, altruists are easier to feel empathy, compassion, and transference of emotion to other people, this means they are more likely to be influenced by Drawbridging Effect, when they see the same person crossing a suspension bridge, their heart beats faster, they interpreting this feeling as falling in love. But that is not the case, the fact is that they feel empathetic about the other person’s experiences being the same as themselves, and their heart rate accelerates only because they are afraid of falling off the bridge. So, from a certain perspective, altruists are more emotional and perceptual. Egoists on the other hand, they are more likely to be influenced by Kick Cat Effect. This is because they only care about their own benefit and happiness, so they are easily to vent their negative emotions by abusing weaker and innocent creatures/humans than themselves.

3. The Influence Factors

3.1. Family Factors

Parents are the most fundamental dependence for children’s growth, childhood is a critical period for shaping a person’s personality [3], thus, different families and their educational methods can affect a child’s ability to become an egoist or altruist. The most important influence factor is companionship, some parents lack time to accompany their children due to their busy work schedules, that neglecting family education; or some parents themselves lack a sense of family responsibility and care little about their children, which can lead to their children becoming isolated and lacking confidence, long term past may cause depression or other psychological disorders, as their negative emotions cannot be timely addressed by their parents. Such isolated children are more likely to become an egoist in the future, because in their view, even their parents do not care about themselves, so they do not trust others and are not willing to participate in group activities such as sports, performances, and parties, this will make them feel lonelier and more become difficult to get along with others. These children are usually lacking in empathy, they will not think about others, and social skills can also be very

poor, which means they will be less likely to become an altruist. Also, these children are very independent (self-supporting) and defensive, they avoid making friends and build close relationships, and only care about themselves, only make decision that benefits themselves [3,4]. In addition to companionship, family composition, educational philosophy, and parents' communication method are also important factors that influence children to become whether egoist or altruist. Children from single parent families, restructured families, or foster homes often exhibit introverted, withdrawn, insecure, suspicious, and out of group traits [4], they will lack collective consciousness, and altruism is about thinking for others and the collective, so this type of child will become more like an egoist. About educational philosophy, some parents give their own children very high expectations, such as achieving top grades, being admitted to top universities, or being versatile, can increase psychological pressure on them because they are afraid of disappointing their parents. This will lead to them not being good at getting along with others, or being poor at expressing themselves, not knowing how to sympathize with others, and not putting others' interests above their own, because they only focus on their own achievements. At last, parents' communication method is another important factor. Some parents use a commanding tone, a biased attitude, or a boss's tone towards subordinates when communicating with their children, without considering their children's thoughts and believing that their children's thoughts are not important. Lack of care/love can lead to children becoming indifferent and not caring about others' feelings as they grow up, only caring about themselves, and then become an egoist.

On the other hand, children who grow up in a complete and happy family are more likely to become altruistic because they are more compassionate and considerate of others than other children, this is because they have been cared for by their parents since childhood. Their parents rarely argue or have a cold war, and they communicate with each other promptly when there are problems. Their families are tolerant and understand each other, and there is a good family atmosphere [3, 4], which means children from families are more likely to become understanding and become an altruist. In addition, if a child's parents are altruistic, then the child will also be more likely to become altruistic, this is because parents will educate their child from an early age to understand sharing, understand others, and think for others. However, not all children with family issues will become egoists, and some will also become altruists. For example, if a child grows up feeling inferior due to their parents' inadequate education, they may become too concerned about others' opinions as they grow up, believing that others are always right, belittling themselves, and lacking confidence. This type of person will also become altruistic and become a "People Pleaser". People Pleaser are not individuals with personality disorders, but rather a pathological behavioral pattern. They are not good at rejecting others, unconsciously catering to others, and actively apologizing (whether it is their own mistake or not). Therefore, this type of person is considered as too altruistic. Moreover, about family composition, children with brothers and sisters are a special case, because such children may become either an egoist or altruist, this depends on their parents. Some parents are biased, which means they "have their favorite child", and they treated their children unfairly. For example, they may ask a child to give a toy to another child they like the most, or the last piece of meat on a dinner plate, and they may also ask that child to give it to their favorite child. This may lead to the child who has always been humble becoming an altruist, and the other child who has always been receiving love becoming an egoist. However, if parents treated their children equally, then the older child may become more altruism, because they maintained a good family relationship, this means they know better than others to take care of people younger than themselves, so they will show empathy and consider the feelings/interests of others.

3.2. Interpersonal Relationship Factors

3.2.1 Teacher-student relationships

Interpersonal relationship factors are the influencing factors of people becoming Egoism or Altruism, and the teacher-student relationship is one of the more important relationships in the process of human growth, since some people say that teachers are the parents of students at school. Like

parents, if teachers often treat different classmates unfairly, fail to focus on education, adopt incorrect educational methods, or do things that violate teacher ethics, it will reduce students' learning motivation and focus their attention on things outside of learning [5], such as playing games and indulging on the internet, skipping classes, and fighting. Over time, students will become egoistic, lack a sense of collectivity, and will not consider themselves as members of the class, not even thinking about the collective of the class.

On the opposite, if the teacher can maintain a good relationship with each student, such as encouraging their progress, timely resolving conflicts between classmates, encouraging mutual respect and help, avoid bullying, focus on training their self-esteem, then this good relationship can allow students to buffer the negative impact of the lack of family relationship, and the students will follow the teacher as an example and become altruistic. According to American sociologist Hartup, there are two different types of interpersonal relationships in children's lives: vertical and horizontal. The teacher-student relationship and the family relationship are complimentary examples of vertical relationships. In these two relationships, the roles of the parents and the children are dominating and subservient, respectively. Vertical interactions primarily serve to offer kids a secure atmosphere for growth and to train their abilities, such as empathy, helping, and caring for others [3], helping them to become an altruist.

3.2.2 Peer relationships

In addition to teacher-student relationships, peer relationships are more closely related to people's lives because they are not limited to their student years but will accompany them throughout their entire lives. According to American sociologist Hartup, "Peer relationships belong to horizontal relationships, with equal status among peers. Their main function is to provide children with opportunities for physical and mental development and communication and interaction in an equal and mutually beneficial manner" [3]. In other words, peers can influence people more directly than either teacher or parents. If there are "groupuscule" in school or at work, this may affect people to become Egoism. Normally, every groupuscule has a "leader", and if people want to stay in a certain group, they will need to say things they think the "leader" likes to listen to, regardless of whether these words will harm others' interests, but in order for them to survive in this group, they must say things that hurt others, and more and more people will do the same, whether due to their own benefit or peer pressure. Sometimes, groupuscule may isolate someone, and they know it is not ethical, but for their own benefit, they choose to remain silent and not empathize with that isolated person. In addition, this phenomenon has the same meaning as the Bystander Effect, this is an experiment that was carried out by Darley and Latane in 1968, it concludes as the number of bystanders increases, the likelihood of any bystander providing assistance decreases, which means they will be more unlikely to help the person that has been isolated [6,7]. To sum up, members in groupuscule will gradually become Egoism [8].

On the contrast, if a person lives in a circle without small groups since childhood, they will not encounter these groupuscule problems. Because in their view, everyone is equal, which also means that they will not encounter peer pressure or bullying, and on this basis, people will become altruist, they will have a sense of helping and empathize others [9]. But in another case, using the same case study about Egoism above, the person that was exclude/being isolated from the groupuscule will gradually become too altruist. This is because they know that if they want to stay in a certain social circle/job, they must join a small group and build a good relationship with them, especially for new classmates/employees, because they need to quickly integrate into the new environment more than others, they need to rely on good relationships to obtain information, such as asking questions to help them quickly enter the state. Such people will gradually become altruistic and deliberately try to please others, which is the "People Pleaser" personality just mentioned [10]. Moreover, the most unique aspect of peer relationships compared to other interpersonal relationships is that they affect other people more quickly than any other relationship. Take the same example, the isolated person is likely to teach his/her friends what to do if they encounter similar problems, this will also affect his/her friends, making them altruistic as well.

4. Conclusion

Egoists and altruists have different ways of handling situations and treating other people, from a certain perspective, they are opposite to each other, altruists can empathize, care, understand other people better than egoists. The factors that cause a person to become an egoist or altruist are very diverse and complex and are not single reasons, they are all long-term consequences, such as a person cannot become egoistic or altruistic due to one thing or person, but about family education and interpersonal relationship. Usually, people will be influenced more easily by their social circle, which means the people around them. People often imitate the method their parents, teachers, and friends handle situations, especially their peers, because they are of the same age, there is no age generation gap, which makes it easier for peers to influence each other. This also means that a very important reason why people become egoistic or altruistic is what the people around them are like. Although egoists and altruists may seem opposite in many aspects, each ideology has its own meaning and there is no right or wrong. Modern society is developing rapidly and the pace of life is fast, many times, people cannot even afford to pay attention to themselves, so it is normal to become an egoist; Altruism is what modern society encourages people to do, having altruists in this society is very valuable, as people can help and empathize each other in their busy lives.

References

- [1] Zheng X., Mao X. G., Wang B. Psychological egoism and Hobbes Philosophical Analysis. 2021, (02), 109-120+198
- [2] Liu Q. P. An Analysis of the Paradox of Altruism's "Virtue without Man" Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2019, (01), 141-149
- [3] Zheng Y. The impact of teacher-student relationships on the mental health of migrant children: a follow-up study Education Science Forum, 2022, (08), 18-23.
- [4] Wang Y. H., Dong Y. B., Wang X. Q. Research on the Influence of Family Factors on Students' Psychological Health and Countermeasures Journal of Shandong Open University, 2023, (03), 55-57
- [5] Woodis, C. A. Teacher-Student Relationships and Their Impact on Student Achievement in School. Spark Repository. 2019.
- [6] Egilmez, Eda, "Altruism and Popularity". Master's Theses. 2016, 32.
- [7] Rhodes, India, "Egoism: A Case Study of the Relationship Between Self-Interest and Ethics". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, 2022.
- [8] IvyPanda. Egoism and Altruism as Ethical Theories, 2020.
- [9] Schulz A. W. Altruism, egoism, or neither: A cognitive-efficiency-based evolutionary biological perspective on helping behavior. Studies in history and philosophy of biological and biomedical sciences, 2016, 56, 15–23.
- [10] Shaver, R. (2023b, January 9). Egoism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Retrieved August 26, 2023, from Stanford.edu website