

Is Egoism A Virtue Or A Vice

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Abstract. Egoism, nowadays, has centered the attention of our competitive society. The goal of this article is to provide some insight into egoism by revealing egoism as a virtue or as a vice under different theoretical and factual support by examining literature research. This concept of egoism centered around self-interest and has been discussed over hundreds of years. There are theories and ideas proposed that support egoism as a virtue for contributing to both self and common interest, whereas some arguments contradict egoism as beneficial to the overall society and are "immoral". Though the theories are not flawless, they allowed us a new understanding of egoism rather than the stereotypes that are often against egoistic actions. There are two sides to everything; the same applies to egoism.

Keywords: egoism, virtue, vice.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the attention which our highly competitive society paid to ethical fields has been increasing tremendously, especially toward the concept of "egoism" (largely connected with self-interest). What is egoism? Why should we care about the concept? Why, despite the general view of treating altruistic (generally considered as the opposite of egoistic) behavior as virtuous, do some scholars still argue for egoism as beneficial to society? For centuries, egoism has always been the center of debate concerning whether the concept is justifiable and its potential value or destructiveness to society. Some people see egoism as rational, advantageous, and fundamental to humanity; others criticize it as tearing people within society apart. Therefore, the goal of this research is to reveal the concept of egoism by reviewing the origin and definition of the concept and thoroughly examining the theories on both sides of the debate of whether egoism is a virtue or a vice.

This passage is intended to introduce and briefly review theories and studies made by scholars in the past on the topic of "egoism as a virtue or a vice - whether it is beneficial or harmful to the society and individuals." - where each view of seeing egoism as either a virtue (good) or a vice (bad) is theoretically and/or factually supported. The summarization and review of the theories on egoism that are about to be discussed in the following paragraphs could perhaps lead to a better understanding of the field of egoism.

2. Method

An all-around literature search was conducted using the academic database of Google scholar. Certain books written on linking topics were also included to create a more extensive literary review. The following search terms, as well as their derivatives, were entered: egoism, self-interest, virtue, common good, vice, and ethics. Studies were included if they: (i) included references to theories concerning egoism and their author. (ii) contain an analysis (specific reasoning behind defining egoism as either virtue or vice) of egoism (selfishness).

3. Literature review

3.1 Egoism: origin & definition

The word "Egoism" stemmed from the Latin word for self: ego. The composition of the phrase is a clear indication of its definition: practices of maximizing the satisfaction of one's interests. Egoism can be separated into three main branches: psychological, ethical, and rational egoism. Psychological egoism, being a famous descriptive theory, states that human actions are fundamentally driven by self-interest. Rational and ethical egoism are normative forms (meaning that this form of theory focuses on what people ought to do instead of what their actual actions are) of egoism. Rational egoism can be defined as claiming that one ought to perform only actions that maximize one's well-being (thus, the actions are rational); and ethical egoism states that one ought to morally perform actions that are self-oriented and are guided entirely by one's self-interest [1]. Though the three types of egoism differ in their approach to understanding human selfishness and its motivation, they all center on the point of valuing self-interest; in the theories below the "egoism" that will be mentioned is mostly a mix of the three types but all put pursuing self-interest forth.

Plato's book "Republic", a Socratic dialogue focusing on justice, is thought to have revealed the idea of ethical egoism as well as psychological egoism [2]. Through the story "The Ring of Gyges," told in the tone of Glaucon, psychological egoism is reported. The story features Gyges, a young shepherd who comes into possession of a ring that renders him invisible when being twisted on his finger. With this power of being undetectable, Gyges continued to break laws (placing his well-being ahead of everyone else) and eventually killed the king to possess the kingdom as he knew that no one could find him guilty and have him punished [3]. Glaucon proved himself as a psychological egoist by revealing through his story and argument the point that people's actions are done aiming for self-satisfaction. Thrasymachus, also in the book "The Republic," revealed the view of ethical egoism by arguing that a moral man performs actions in accordance with his self-interest.

Rational egoism was first embodied in the book "What is to be done" by Russian philosopher Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky [4]. Later, Henry Sidgwick, an English philosopher wrote rational egoism as a method of ethics that is "any rational procedure by which we determine what individual human beings 'ought' - or what it is 'right' for them - to do, or seek to realize by voluntary action." in his book "The Methods of Ethics" [5].

3.2 Egoism as a virtue

Machiavelli argued that the common good of society is built by virtuous citizens [6]; Peter Lombard describes virtue as a "good quality of mind, by which we live rightly, which no one uses badly, which God alone works in a human" [7]. It can reasonably be concluded from the quotes of these two famous philosophers that virtue can be understood as a quality or trait that, while ensuring one's good, is beneficial in certain ways to other members of society as well.

3.2.1 Adam Smith - Laissez Faire

In his book "The Wealth of Nations," Adam Smith, Scottish social philosopher, and political economist put forth the idea of a "free market" where decisions being made will all depend on individuals without any intervention (Laissez Faire); Smith claimed that all decisions made by each person in the market (be it consumer or producers) regarding their self-interest would eventually lead to an efficient distribution of resources for the whole society [8].

"By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it."

Quoted directly from "The Wealth of Nations", the above words form a perfect indication of how, from the perspective of Adam Smith, egoism can be a virtue. When people make decisions and perform actions in ways that they believe can benefit themselves the most (like "directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value", as Smith mentioned), which is indeed an explication of egoism, they are promoting the common good and benefiting the entire society. For example, when a producer produces goods and sets the price that is proper and wanted by society without any observable intervention aiming at receiving and maximizing profit, the producer does not just benefit him or herself but also the society as otherwise, the good would not be produced.

Moreover, virtues such as "honesty" and "fairness" would flourish in a free market[9], a representation of egoism for the way it works, as mentioned above, which is another perspective that makes egoism a virtue. To be more specific, as these virtuous traits are valued highly in a regulation-free market (especially compared to other types of society where people are not allowed to act freely in accordance with their self-interest), the people holding these traits are very much likely to be rewarded which nurtures more to take on these virtuous characters. A supporter of this view, McCloskey claimed that the free market could be a place nurturing a notable number of bourgeois virtues "enterprise, adaptability, imagination, optimism, integrity, prudence, thrift, trustworthiness, humor, affection, self-possession, consideration, responsibility, solicitude, decorum, patience, toleration, affability, peaceability, civility, neighborliness, obligingness, reputability, dependability, and impartiality" [10].

3.2.2 Ayn Rand - Objectivism

Ayn Rand, a Russian-born American writer, and philosopher were famous for her writings, including "Atlas Shrugged" and "The Fountainhead", as well as her philosophy-Objectivism (revealed very first through her novels and later in her nonfiction and essays); both of which are deeply connected with egoism. Objectivism was labeled by Rand as a "philosophy for living on earth;[11]" it is, as Rand claims, "the concept of man as a heroic being, with his happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." [12]. In her book "The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism," Ayn Rand described how egoism could be seen as a virtue by explaining her philosophy of Objectivism, which presents similar traits to rational egoism (both argue for pursuing personal well-being and how this action is identified as "rational" and "reasonable"). The central idea Rand revealed in "The Virtue of Selfishness" is that virtue is performing actions through which people would be securing and protecting their rational values (as god granted us a brain, which we use to make rational decisions) and, therefore, one's life and happiness. Selfishness or egoism fits perfectly into this description.

To elaborate on Rand's point, Rand believes that a Selfish or egoistic person is someone who neither sacrifices his or herself for others' well-being nor unreasonably demands others to sacrifice for his or herself, someone who truly presents self-esteem and self-support, someone who is truly an "individual." She argued that while altruist people beings from living for "his own sake," egoism protects their personality and their right to happiness. Therefore, in Rand's philosophy, egoism should be considered a virtue [13].

3.2.3 From an Evolutionary Psychology Perspective - Reciprocal Altruism

In "The Selfish Gene," Richard Dawkins wrote that our survival is a direct result of our genes being competitive and selfish in natural selection; only the genes that could adapt to the competitive environment would survive and pass down heritage at the expense of other genes [14]. Thus, all life is biologically and fundamentally selfish base on this Darwinian argument for life evolution.

The problem that arises under this premise of humans born selfish and egoistic is how altruism came into its presence. Even though altruism can be widely understood when present between family members when it comes to altruism between friends or people who are unrelated by blood (therefore, refusing to help them does not result in loss of heritage), it became puzzling why living organisms

would choose to perform the behavior (altruistic actions) that decrease their reproduction while enhancing that of the others [15].

The answer scientists came across for this problem concerning altruism is the concept of "reciprocal altruism," which argues that if the altruist is given back by the beneficiary, this mechanism of helping others who are not our blood relatives will continue to evolve [16]. Imagine two neighbors: In one winter, one of the two neighbors encountered a problem where his family failed to stock enough coal that would keep the family through the winter without freezing to death; the other neighbor, on the other hand, happened to have stored excessive coals and did not need that much and have no reason to keep that large amount of coal to next year. The neighbor with excessive coal then gave some of his coal to the other neighbor and helped the family to get through the cold winter days. The next year, things turned all the way around, the neighbor who used to help the other was being helped (reciprocal altruism). In this situation, both gained a relatively larger benefit with a relatively lower cost through performing reciprocal altruism compared to if they relied all on their own, revealing how reciprocal altruism can be more beneficial in survival (thus reproduction, the ultimate goal of living organisms). To conclude, based on the situation, "Reciprocal altruism is simply cooperation between two or more individuals for mutual benefit, and it is variously known in the literature as social exchange, cooperation, or reciprocation" [15].

The perspective of evolutionary psychology offered support to how egoism (pursuing self-interest) can be a virtue promoting both individual and mutual good, as it is the basic motivation to which we cooperate; egoism can coexist with altruism. Individuals realize how cooperation can, in many cases, be more beneficial to their survival and reproduction than if they perform actions all alone in their process of evolving.

3.3 Egoism as a vice

Vice is generally considered the opposite of virtue and is actions of traits that are "intrinsically bad" regardless of consequences [17]. These traits are impossible to create and promote the common good and could be suppressing virtual traits among individuals.

Egoism can happen in form of vice during dictatorships, and the following paragraphs will provide detailed description to this point. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, dictatorship refers to "a form of government in which absolute power is concentrated in a dictator or a small clique (party)."

There are times in history, and perhaps even today in certain places where, under dictatorship, people betray their family, their friends, their loved ones, and their neighbor for rewards from the government (the dictator), their safety, and other things that concern only their interest, especially through denunciation and whistle-blowing; these people were the informers. In this way, their egoistic intention breeds evil behavior and, in many cases, inhumane consequences.

In the 1970s, Poland was under the governance of the communist party. The government put forth the rule of "unity and unanimity", and by this, the government required all to submit unconditionally to their decisions. In those days, cooperation with the people in power through denunciation and whistle-blowing brought the informers tempting benefits, including but not limited to financial rewards and job promotion. These and other potential benefits (self-interests) drove many to betray and sell their friends, colleagues, and even families. These actions are considered egoistic (driven by their will of pursuing self-interest) and are driven by low motives such as envy, the desire for material benefits and to eliminate possible competition. [18].

Similar situations happened under the government of Nazis, in Germany, the dictatorship in the Soviet Union (See "The Whisperers" by Orlando Figes), and during the cultural revolution in China. The human nature of self-preservation (egoism) led directly to harming severe others, and evoke the ignoble vice of betrayal.

3.4 Discussion

The above review included different theories or factual support, which all portray egoism from distinct perspectives. While each held relatively solid reasons for viewing egoism as a virtue or a vice, there are still some points that I consider defects to the theories.

In Adam Smith and Ayn Rand's theories, they set the premise (though in Smith's theory not explicitly) that all humans are rational, and therefore, they would understand that holding virtues like honesty and fairness would yield the most profit and interest in the market, or they would not ask others to sacrifice for their good without sacrificing for others. However, the reality proved that the flaw that existed in both theories is that human is not always and not everyone is rational. There is commercial fraud in the economy where the people build their interests among others through lies and betrayals, and in reality, many would still ask for others to sacrifice for their interests, ignoring the common good. Smith and Rand perhaps idealized the human desire to pursue self-interest and the rationality human possesses when coming into this question. Another problem with Rand's theory is how she defines altruism as solely sacrificing oneself for others, while altruistic behavior does not always ignore the interest of the altruist like but can even be beneficial, like in Reciprocal altruism. Still, even in reciprocal altruism, egoist can sometimes be over-egoistic by ignoring the help they receive from others and refusing to help in return; these cheaters (although being proven scientifically that people tends to remember cheaters and are not likely to cooperate with them anymore [16]) broke the seeks only maximizing their short-term interest and betrays the altruist who helped them seeking for return.

Then under dictatorship, some people would inform others' secrets seeking their benefit, but under certain circumstances, this could be a result of securing one's survival as we are "born selfish", and it is natural for many to incline to prioritize themselves over others, even built their interest among others. In these cases where safety is concerned, it somehow turned the egoistic actions from "morally bad" to a choice in a "moral dilemma". Also in certain cases, the action of informing someone of the authority could be an act aiming for the common good.

4. Implications

The literary review provided a comprehensive look into theories held in the debate over egoism. Throughout centuries, philosophers, scientists, psychologists, economists, and scholars in all various studies have been discussing and offering theories to explain egoism, whether as a virtue or as a vice. The summarization of some well-known theories explaining egoism and pointing out certain defects with the theories could help people to better understand egoism and how it could affect society and the common good.

In many aspects of life recently, such as education, many ignore the importance and possible benefits that egoism (egoistic actions and aims) could buy. Many schools, for example, criticize egoism for bringing people apart from cooperation and teach their students to never act egoistically. With this report more inclusively writing about theories where egoism could be beneficial to society, and with further study into the topic, systems like education can undergo tremendous changes in how they inform people about egoism.

5. Conclusion

The view towards egoism, the belief, and practices of pursuing one's self-interest, had always been split. The previous paragraphs examined different theories toward viewing egoism as a virtue or a vice; when proving egoism as a virtue. The theories held that egoism could extend to include mutual benefit and can fulfill not only one's good but also the common good. Then to view that considering egoism as a vice demonstrated how egoism could in splitting society and damage the common good only for pursuing one's self-interest. All theories provided reasonable support for their claim, while none were perfect in classifying egoism solidly into any of the two categories (virtue or vice). Perhaps

egoism is like how Feuerbach describes the concept: there is evil and cold egoism, but there is still a kind of compassionate egoism.

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