

The Argument from Psychological Egoism to Ethical Egoism

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McConnell, Terrance C. "The Argument from Psychological Egoism to Ethical Egoism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 56(1) (May 1978), pp. 41-47.

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The original publication can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048407812341041>

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Article:

Part I

Psychological egoism is the view that each person is so constituted that he always seeks his own advantage or best interest. This thesis makes the factual claim that human nature is such that no person can perform an act unless he believes that it is in his best interest. According to psychological egoism there are two sorts of acts that a person cannot perform: ones that he believes to be contrary to his best interests and ones about which he has no beliefs (with respect to how they relate to his interests). Ethical egoism is the view that a person's only obligation is to promote his own best interest.¹ While psychological egoism purports to tell us how people do in fact behave, ethical egoism tells us how people ought to behave. It is sometimes claimed that psychological egoism, if true, lends support to ethical egoism. Specifically, it is supposed that the truth of ethical egoism follows from two premises: one asserting the truth of psychological egoism, and the other stating the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. One can see that the argument has some intuitive appeal. The first premise says that it is impossible for a person to do anything but seek his own good. And the second premise says that we are never required to do the impossible. So it would seem that we can infer the truth of ethical egoism from these premises. The validity of this argument is rarely challenged. The usual criticism is that the argument is unsound because psychological egoism is false.² So even if the conclusion follows from the premises, we need not be committed to ethical egoism. But even if this defeats the argument, it would still be interesting to know if the conclusion really does follow from the premises. If additional premises are required to make the argument valid, premises as dubious as psychological egoism itself, then the argument is even weaker than it is normally supposed to be.

Paul Taylor, in his recent book *Principle of Ethics* considers a familiar criticism which challenges the adequacy of the argument.³ The criticism is intended to be a *reductio ad absurdum*, an attempt to show that anyone who maintains *both* psychological egoism and ethical egoism is committed to a position that no one can accept. The criticism is this. Psychological egoism asserts that it is impossible for anyone to do anything other than seek his own good. Ethical egoism tells us that a person ought to promote his own interests. Surely, though, it is odd to require a person to do what he cannot help but do. One purpose of a moral theory is to guide human behaviour, to direct people to do acts that are judged to be right according to the system and to avoid those acts that are wrong. If psychological egoism is true, ethical egoism will be superfluous as a guide to human behaviour. A person will be unable to avoid doing what he ought to do. Or as Taylor puts it (p. 35), each person will at every moment be acting in a morally perfect way. But surely this is absurd. A theory which has as a consequence that no one can ever do anything wrong must be rejected. So, contrary to what many have held, psychological egoism does not support ethical egoism. In fact, if the two theories are jointly maintained, one is led to absurdity.

Though this might appear to be a decisive objection, Taylor himself (p. 35) suggests a way that the ethical egoist might respond to this criticism. It is true that people always *seek* their own good; they always do what they *believe* is in their best interests. But ethical egoism requires us to do what is *really* in our best interests. And each of us is all too familiar with the phenomenon of misjudging what is in his best interests. A person

sometimes believes that one thing will maximize his own good only to discover later that he was mistaken about this. So the criticism spelled out above can be answered. People *can* do wrong acts, even if psychological egoism and ethical egoism are both true. Ethical egoism, then, is not superfluous as a guide to behaviour. The theory cautions people to examine their beliefs about what is in their best interests, warning them not to sacrifice their long-range good for some short-range goal.

The egoist's reply to this objection can be understood easily if we appeal to a distinction common in ethical theory, that between the objective moral status of an act and the subjective moral status of an act. The *objective* moral status of an act is the moral status the act has in virtue of its actual circumstances and consequences. The *subjective* moral status of an act is the status it has in virtue of the *beliefs* that the agent has concerning its circumstances and consequences. Thus one may have an objective duty to do one thing, but a subjective duty to do something else. This kind of situation can arise whenever an agent has false beliefs about the actual circumstances in which his act is to be performed. Given this distinction, it is clear why the egoist is able to escape the above objection. If one holds both psychological egoism and ethical egoism, then one must say that there is a sense in which a person can do no wrong acts. Each person will always do his subjective moral duty. Since, by hypothesis, each person always seeks his own good, he will always do what he would do if he were a conscientious ethical egoist. But in another sense it is obvious that people can do wrong acts. A person can fail to do his objective moral duty when he has false beliefs about what will maximize his own good.⁴ So when ethical egoism is understood to be a theory about what our objective moral duty is, the above objection does not show that the argument from psychological egoism to ethical egoism fails.

Part II

The question about the validity of the argument from psychological egoism to ethical egoism, then, comes to this: Does the truth of ethical egoism, when construed as a theory about what our objective moral duty is, follow from psychological egoism and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'? Taylor, after he indicates how the egoist can respond to his objection, goes on to criticise psychological egoism (pp. 36-45). One gets the impression from this that Taylor believes the argument is valid and the only way to avoid its conclusion is to show that it has at least one false premise. But is this correct? To answer this we must set out the specific steps of the argument. Let us state the first premise, that psychological egoism is true, as follows.

- (1) A person cannot perform an act that he does not believe to be in his best interests.

The second premise is the claim that 'ought' implies 'can', and it may be stated as follows.

- (2) If an act is one that a person ought to perform, then it must be an act that the person can perform.

Does the truth of ethical egoism follow from these premises? What follows immediately from (1) and (2) is

- (3) It is not the case that a person ought to perform an act that he does not believe to be in his best interests.

Notice that the claim in (3) is not that it would be wrong for someone to perform an act that he does not believe to be in his best interests. No statement of the form 'ought not' follows from (1) and (2). What is asserted in (3) is that no one is morally required to perform such an act; this is a 'not ought' statement. Thus (3) alone is not equivalent to ethical egoism. Some additional premise, (4), is needed so that we might derive,

- (5) Ethical egoism is the correct moral theory.

What is this missing premise? The assertion in line (3) establishes a requirement that any adequate moral theory must satisfy. If an ethical system requires someone to do something that he does not believe to be in his best interests, it will be incompatible with (1) and (2) (which we are assuming to be true). This suggests that the egoist's missing premise might be

(4a) Ethical egoism is the only moral theory that satisfies the injunction in (3).

If (4a) is true, we might well be entitled to assert (5). But surely (4a) is false. Ethical egoism itself (understood as a theory about what our objective moral duty is) does not satisfy the requirement set out in (3). Ethical egoism does on some occasions require one to do acts that he (erroneously) does not way for the ethical egoist to escape Taylor's objection. So (4a) cannot be the missing premise. It is clear that (4a) makes a claim that is too strong. We need a weaker premise, but one which will still allow us to infer (5). Perhaps the following is the missing premise.

It is clear that (4a) makes a claim that is too strong. We need a weaker premise, but one which will still allow us to infer (5). Perhaps the following is the missing premise.

(4b) Ethical egoism is the only theory that can satisfy the requirement set out in (3).

The claim in (4b) is that no other moral theory even has a chance of satisfy the requirement set out in (3) either, it at least can satisfy it. Under what conditions will ethical egoism satisfy the requirement of (3)? It will do so if all an agent's beliefs about what is in his best interests are correct. In and so ethical egoism will satisfy the injunction in (3). From (4b), (5) may not follow, but something similar to it does seem to follow.

(5¹) If any moral theory is correct, it is ethical egoism.

But is (4b) true? There are two claims being made in (4b). One is that ethical egoism can fulfill the injunction in (3); the other is that no other theory can satisfy it. It is the latter claim that I wish to dispute. Surely it is at least possible for some other theory to meet this requirement. One can imagine living in a world in which the social and political institutions are such that each agent always believes that it is in his best interest to do what the utilitarian moral theory (for example) requires him to do. And if the punishment for acting contrary to utilitarianism were severe enough and the indeed be in one's best interest to act as utilitarianism dictates. One might object that if utilitarianism were to satisfy the requirement set out in (3) because of the nature of the social and political system, its doing so would be due to a mere contingent fact. But if this is a legitimate objection, it counts against (4b) too. If ethical egoism satisfies (3) only when an agent has all true beliefs about what is in his best interest, such fulfillment also depends on a mere (and improbable) contingency. So (4b) cannot be accepted as our missing premise.

Our discussion of (4b) may prompt the egoist to propose the following as the fourth premise.

(4c) If any theory satisfies the requirement of (3), ethical egoism will too. The claim that (4c) makes is this. Suppose that utilitarianism (or any other theory) does satisfy the requirement of (3) in the way suggested above. Any time some other theory does satisfy (3) in this way, ethical egoism will too (assuming that the agent has correct beliefs about what is in his best interests). An agent following ethical egoism will arrive at the same moral judgements that the utilitarian does, since by hypothesis following utilitarianism is truly in the agent's best interests. Even if (4c) is true, however, it does not yield the conclusion that ethical egoism is the correct moral theory. The most that one can legitimately infer from this is that ethical egoism is extensionally equivalent with the correct moral theory.⁵ But it is usually supposed that the argument from psychological egoism to ethical egoism yields a stronger conclusion than this. In particular, (5) or perhaps (5¹), is thought to be the conclusion of the argument. Though (5) and (4c) are compatible, (5) does not follow from (4c).

Part III

It would seem, then, that the most obvious ways of completing the argument from pshychological egoism to ethical egoism are unacceptable. There is, however, an even more serious problem with the argument. Let stand for 'person p ought to do act x ' let ' Bpx ' stand for ' p believes that x is in his best interest'; and let ' Cpx ' represent

' p can do or x ' 'doing x is within p 's power'. One of the paramount claims of psychological egoism is that a person can do an act only if he believes it to be in his best interest. We may represent this as

(i) $Cpx \supset Bpx$ (for every person and every act).

We may state the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' as

(ii) $Opx \supset Cpx$ (for every person and every act).

It follows from (i) and (ii) that

(iii) $Opx \supset Bpx$

What (iii) says is that a necessary condition of an act's being morally required of an agent is that the agent must believe that it is in his best interest.⁶ It follows directly from psychological egoism and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' that if a certain (logically) possible act, A , is not believed by the would-be agent to be in his best interest, then he is not morally required to do A . The egoist, qua psychological egoist, is committed to (iii) *regardless* of the moral theory that he holds.

But suppose (what is surely true of each of us) that a person has a false belief about what is in his best interest. Suppose that act x is in a person's best interest but he does not believe that it is. Since ethical egoism requires one to do what is really in his best interest, the ethical egoist must say that the person ought to do x . This is a situation in which a person ought to do something that he does not believe to be in his best interest. So when an agent has incorrect beliefs about what is in his best interest, the ethical egoist is committed to

(iv) $Opx \ \& \ \sim Bpx$.

The egoist, qua ethical egoist, must assert (iv) in order to answer Taylor's objection and to accommodate the fact that some of our beliefs about what is in our best interest are false. Since (iv) denies that a necessary condition of an act's being morally required of an agent is that he believes it to be in his best interest, (iii) and (iv) are contradictory. So the ethical egoist cannot consistently support his position by appealing to psychological egoism and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'; in fact, given his commitment to (iv), he must deny one of these two theses.

In summary, we are justified in concluding that even if psychological egoism is true and 'ought' does imply 'can', we need not be committed to ethical egoism. All that follows from these premises is that one is not morally required to do something that he does not believe to be in his best interest. That, however, is not equivalent to ethical egoism, and there does not seem to be any acceptable premise that one can add to this that will entail the truth of ethical egoism. There is, though, a problem that is even more worrisome for the defender of this argument. If one accepts both psychological egoism and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can', this establishes certain conditions that any adequate moral theory must satisfy. One of those conditions is that if a person ought to do an act, it must be the case that he believes the act to be in his best interest. But because people can and do have false beliefs about what is in their best interests, the ethical egoist must hold that on some occasions a person ought to do an act even though he does not believe that it is in his best interest. Taylor shows that the standard criticism of the argument from psychological egoism to ethical egoism—if psychological egoism is true, then ethical egoism is superfluous—can be answered because agents have false beliefs about what is in their best interests. What I have shown, however, is that if people can have false beliefs about what is in their best interests, then ethical egoism is inconsistent with the conjunction of psychological egoism and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. Either way, psychological egoism does not lend support to ethical egoism. It seems unlikely that any particular normative theory follows from psychological egoism. If this theory of human motivation is correct, no moral theory can be efficacious in guiding human behaviour. In light of this, it might be more reasonable to conclude that the theory leads to a kind of moral scepticism.⁷

Footnotes:

1. This is an oversimplified statement of ethical egoism, one that ignores such problems as what the egoist should say about second and third person moral judgments. However, such problems are not relevant to this paper. For a discussion of these difficulties, see William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Prentice-Hall, second edition, 1973). pp. 18-20.
2. See, for example, Frankena, *Ethics*. pp. 20-22. For a detailed critical analysis of psychological egoism see Joel Feinberg, 'Psychological Egoism,' in Joel Feinberg, editor. *Reason & Responsibility* (Dickenson Publishing Co., third edition, 1975), pp. 501-512.
3. Paul W. Taylor, *Principle of Ethics* (Dickenson Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 34-36. Page references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text. This criticism of the argument that Taylor presents has been suggested by others. See, for example, Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 372, and John Hospers, *Human Contact* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 142.
4. It would seem that the advocate of this argument is committed to saying that this is the *only* time that a person can fail to do his objective moral duty. He must deny, for, example, that weakness of the will is possible.
5. A person maintaining the following position would be committed to saying that ethical egoism is extensionally equivalent with but not *the* correct moral theory: each person should do what will promote his own good *because* doing so will bring about the greatest good for the whole. See Frankena, *Ethics*, p. 20, and Taylor, *Principles of Ethics*, p. 47.
6. It does not follow from (i) and (ii), however, that this is a sufficient condition for an act's being morally required. If this did follow, psychological egoism and the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' would entail the truth of ethical egoism.
7. This point is suggested by Lucius Garvin in his *A Modern Introduction to Ethics* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953). p. 35.

For some helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, I would like to thank Chris Swoyer and my colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, particularly Joshua Hoffman.