IX. ETHICAL EGOISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISPOSITIONS

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In their endeavors to show that ethical egoism is an unacceptable moral theory, moral philosophers have tended to argue that either (a) the theory is internally inconsistent, (b) an ethical egoist is committed to a form of solipsism, or (c) the theory cannot, properly speaking, be considered a moral theory.1 It would seem, though, that such arguments have not been particularly persuasive. However, my objective in this essay is not to examine these arguments in order to determine which, if any, succeeds. Rather, I wish to attempt yet another argument against the theory or, at any rate, to present an old one in new garb.2 To state the obvious, moral theories tell us what we morally ought to do; and therefore, how we should be disposed to act. Thus, it would seem that a moral theory must be unacceptable if the sorts of dispositions which it requires us to have are such that, given our psychological make-up as healthy persons, we are unable to have them. Ethical egoism, I believe, is unacceptable on just this account. To show that this is so is the objective of this essay.

Ethical egoism, of course, is the view that a person morally ought to maximize the satisfaction of her or his own long-range interests.3 It would be a mistake to infer from this, however, that an egoist must be one who exploits and takes advantage of others at every turn. For he must take into account the fact that in doing so he risks being discovered which, in general, would not be in his interests; and that sometimes the risks are likely to be so great that they are simply not worth taking. After all, an egoist is a psychological being nonetheless, and so like anyone else is capable of worrying, having feelings of anxiety, and so on. It is not desirable to be plagued with either worries or anxieties, and not even an egoist can afford to overlook the fact that a given course of action will have undesirable consequences for him psychologically. Thus, unless he is a professional killer to begin with, an egoist, like most non-egoists, is not apt to be one who kills anyone who happens to stand in his way.

But now there are some risks involved in almost anything we do; yet it hardly follows from this that it is unreasonable or irrational for us to do almost anything. On the contrary, if the risks are small enough, then it is actually irrational for us not to take them. For example, most people are prepared to admit the irrationality of their fear of flying by air, since this in fact is among the safest of ways in which to travel. An egoist, therefore, cannot maintain that it is rational for him to take no risks at all. Hence, the egoist must be prepared to exploit or to take advantage of others if he runs only a small risk of adversely affecting his long-range interests. These remarks point to the kind of disposition a person must have in order to be an egoist: For any person N, N is an egoist if and only if for any person S and at any time T, N is prepared to exploit or to take advantage of S at T if N has good reasons to believe that he does not thereby adversely affect his long-range interests. I shall refer to this proposition as (E).

A few explanatory remarks regarding (E) are in order. To begin with, I assume that a person's actions can be properly regarded as exploitive of another only if he believes himself to be advancing his own interests in so acting. Of course, it is not necessary to have this belief in order to wrong a person. For one can treat a person cruelly without ever having this belief, and it is certainly wrong to treat persons cruelly. I should also point out that although the verb “to exploit,” as used in (E) obviously has negative

1 Respectively, exemplars of the first two approaches are Kurt Baier, The Moral Point of View (Ithaca, 1958); and Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (London, 1970). It would seem that (c) is implicit in the writings of a number of people. See William K. Franke, “Recent Conceptions of Morality,” in Morality and the Language of Conduct, ed. by Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhnikian (Detroit, 1963), Sect. 2, for some of the people to whom (c) can be attributed.
moral connotations, I am not in some surreptitious way attempting to make a case against the egoist on moral grounds. That will not do, surely. Rather, it is just that an egoist must be prepared to act in ways which from the moral point of view (so-called) would be considered exploitive. The use of the verb “to exploit” in (E) ensures that we do not lose sight of this point. Finally, I assume that the verb “to exploit” and the expression “to take advantage of” are synonymous, and so can be used interchangeably barring stylistic constraints.

Now it should be clear that (E) allows for the possibility that even an egoist might find it in her interests to have friends. For it is a fact about our psychological make-up as persons that friends have a most important place in our lives. From this, though, it should not be surmised that there can be no circumstances in which an egoist could take advantage of someone whose friendship he valued without running the risk of losing that person as a friend. Indeed, the very opposite must be true. For in virtue of the bond of trust which is essential to friendship, we are more vulnerable to those individuals whom we count among our friends than we are to others. It is among our friends that we are prepared to be more open about ourselves, and among whom we take fewer precautions in protecting our interests; for there is a deep conviction on our part that those whom we count among our friends have no desire to harm us. Thus, it will undoubtedly be the case that at some time or the other we are in the position to take advantage of our friends without jeopardizing our friendship with them. And according to (E), this is precisely what any person who claims to be an egoist must be prepared to do; for as we have seen, it is a mistake to suppose that an egoist could maintain that risks, as such, are irrational to take. But given our psychological structure as persons, are we capable of being so disposed? Are we capable of having the kind of disposition called for by (E)? I think not, as I shall try to show in the sections which follow.

II

Consider the following argument against the view that persons are capable of having the kind of disposition called for by (E):

P1 A true friend could never, as a matter of course, be disposed to harm or to exploit anyone with whom he is a friend [definition of a friend]
P2 An egoist could never be a true friend to anyone [from (1) and (E)]
P3 Only someone with an unhealthy personality could never be a true friend to anyone [definition of a healthy personality]
P4 Ethical egoism requires that we have a kind of disposition which is incompatible with our having a healthy personality [from (1)–(3)]

C5 Therefore, from the standpoint of our psychological make-up, ethical egoism is unacceptable as a moral theory.

Obviously enough, the trouble with this argument is that it would appear to settle too much by definition alone (and I mean here to be using the term “definition” rather loosely). Naturally, if we include the appropriate definition (or account) of friendship and healthy personality amongst our premises, we can get virtually anything we want in the conclusion. We can avoid the charge of circularity, though, or at least insure that the circle is not a vicious one, if we can explain why P1 and P3 are true. I take up this task in what follows.

A most important subset of the beliefs which we come to have are the evaluative beliefs which we have about ourselves. But it goes without saying that we do not believe that we are a good or bad philosopher, artist, mechanic, or what have you just like that. Rather, such beliefs about ourselves have to be grounded. And our conception of ourselves is fundamentally influenced by the conception which others have of us as is indicated by their attitudes and actions towards us. No person, therefore, can come to have a positive sense of worth in a social vacuum; for we each are dependent upon the existence of some person or the other for an affirmation of our self-worth. It is impossible to understand the significance of either parental love or praise without supposing that this is so.

A most important difference between love and praise—and so parental love and praise—is that the grounds for the former, unlike those for the latter,


have nothing at all to do with a person’s performances. There is no surer sign of love than the constancy of affection in the face of variations of performance. Thus, parental love serves to allay, if not to preclude altogether, a child’s fear of being rejected by his parents for not measuring up to their expectations. For a child cannot feel both loved and rejected by his parents at the same time. And since parental love is not based upon performance, then it is possible for a child to feel loved by his parents even when his behaviour fails to measure up to their expectations. Hence, parental love engenders in the child a sense of belonging, a feeling of being wanted, which does not turn upon the way in which he behaves. Clearly, then, parental love serves to affirm the self-worth of the child. On the other hand, parental praise, which is a form of approval, serves to engender in the child a sense of competency, that is, the conviction that he is capable of effectively interacting with his environment. For it is through the approval of his parents (and other authority figures such as his teachers) that the child comes to learn that he can correctly perform those tasks which he sets for himself or which are set for him, and to feel that what he is doing is worthwhile.

So as one can see, our conception of ourselves is significantly influenced by someone, usually our parents, from the very outset of our lives. To be sure, as we mature we become more capable of assessing our abilities and the worth of our pursuits on our own. Even so, the conception which others have of us continues to have a very significant bearing upon the way in which we view ourselves; since it is impossible to maintain the conception which we have of ourselves, whatever it may be, if it is not reinforced from time to time. Things are no different for the egoist. For the remainder of this essay, I shall only be concerned with that aspect of our conception of ourselves which makes reference to our abilities.

Now there can be no question but that persons desire to have a positive conception of themselves. Indeed, it is a generally accepted fact that we have at least a prima facie reason to suppose that a self-deprecatior has deep psychological problems. Therefore, if an egoist is without any fundamental psychological problems, then it is clear that among the many deep desires which he will have, the desire to have a positive conception of himself will be one of them. It is this fact, along with the previously noted fact that our conception of ourselves is significantly influenced by the conception which others have of us, which would seem to make being an egoist quite problematic. The reason why this is so is as follows.

The acceptance of another’s evaluation of one’s abilities and pursuits necessarily involves trust on one’s part, since there is no way of insuring that such an assessment is an honest and sincere one; and it is impossible to believe that a person’s assessment is accurate, though neither honest not sincere, unless one has independent grounds for believing that person’s claims to be true. Of course, one’s own experiences can constitute such grounds. But except in those cases—which are few and far between—where what counts as success is so straightforward that there is virtually no room for disagreement among competent judges, even beliefs which are grounded by experience need to be reinforced from time to time by other individuals. And there is no getting around the fact that others can do this only if we trust them.

It might be objected, however, that an egoist can avoid having to trust anyone simply by soliciting judgments of his abilities and pursuits, and believing to be true only those judgments which occur with an assigned frequency. But not so. For surely one would have to start with the premise that those whom one was going to query had not entered into a conspiracy against one; otherwise, there would be no point in soliciting their judgments in the first place. More significantly, though, is the fact that there is very little in life than we can do which does not call for trusting someone or the other. Given the fallibility and limitations of our human nature and, therefore, the fact that we could not possibly anticipate every difficulty which we might encounter as we engage in this or that activity, it follows that it is rational or, at any rate, far less irrational to engage in some activities only if we can trust someone or the other to come to our aid should any difficulties arise. Walking down the street, for instance, would be a veritable nightmare

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7 The expression “sense of competency” is borrowed from Robert W. White, op. cit., pp. 131ff.

8 For an account of an aspect of our conception of ourselves which does not in any way make reference to our abilities, see my “Morality and Our Self-Concept,” The Journal of Value Inquiry, vol. 12 (1978), pp. 58-68.


10 Cf. John Bowlby, “The Self-Reliant Personality: Some Conditions that Promote It,” in Personality, ed. by Rom Harré (Totowa, 1976). He writes: “Evidence is accumulating that human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage
of person, that the egoist could never have good reasons to believe that he could get away with taking advantage of a friend (who affirms his self-worth). But could a person be prepared to take advantage of, to exploit, the very person who affirms his self-worth anytime he (the egoist) could advance his own interests in doing so? As I shall argue in what follows, I think not.

III

If we value having a positive sense of worth, then we will be favorably disposed towards those persons who affirm our self-worth, other things the same. This follows from what we may call the principle of reciprocity, namely that we are (or become) disposed to act favorably towards those who act favorably towards us. The soundness of the principle is clearly illustrated by the love between parent and child.\(^{11}\) For it is in virtue of the fact that the parents display warmth and affection towards the child that he comes to respond in kind, and that he comes to trust his parents. But needless to say, the disposition to act favorably towards a person and the disposition to take advantage of that person whenever it would be in one's interests to do so do not constitute a dispositional fit, as I shall say. To be sure, a person's dispositions can change, but not just like that. To illustrate, consider the virtue of honesty and the vice of mendacity.\(^{12}\) The corresponding dispositions here do not constitute a dispositional fit. An honest person has a firm disposition to tell the truth in spite of the fact that it is not in his interest to do so. The very opposite is true of the mendacious person. Obviously enough, one cannot move back and forth between these two dispositions at the drop of a hat. Likewise, a person who is favorably disposed towards an individual cannot be disposed to take advantage of that individual the minute he realizes that he can do so and get away with it.

At this point, I want to say something about the concept of a healthy personality, without becoming enmeshed in all of the complexities of the issue. The one fact about what a healthy personality comes to which is particularly germane to our discussion is that a stable character is an essential ingredient of a healthy personality.\(^{13}\) He or she exhibits the same character over a wide range of circumstances, and is capable of rebounding after such jolting experiences as the loss of a loved one or sudden fame. As an aside, it is worth noting that a complete account of what a healthy personality comes to would seem to bear a very close affinity to what a satisfactory account of personal identity would look like.\(^{14}\) For as recent work on the topic suggests, any adequate theory of personal identity must take into account two things: One is that our future selves may differ drastically from our past or present selves. The other is that a

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11 This point is masterfully developed by John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, 1971). See the first four sections of ch. 8.


person would fail to have a concept of himself as a being over time if he were merely a series of disconnected selves which had nothing in common with one another. Having a stable character, then, would seem to be intimately connected with having a concept of oneself.

At any rate, if having a stable character is necessary for having a healthy personality, then a person who shifts from being favorably disposed towards a person to being disposed to exploit that person every time he realizes that he can do so and get away with it, cannot be one with a healthy personality. For these two dispositions do not, as I have said, constitute a dispositional fit. Accordingly, a person with a healthy personality cannot move from one to the other just like that.

Of course, under extraordinary circumstances anyone might succumb to the temptation to advance his own interests at another's expense. But the egoist, it must be remembered, is not tempted to exploit others only under extraordinary circumstances. Rather, he is disposed to do so whenever he can thereby advance his interests. He does not succumb to the temptation to do so; quite the contrary, for him doing that, and only that, is what living is all about.

IV

Let us return now to the argument presented at the beginning of Section II against the view that persons are capable of having the kind of disposition called for by (E). What is at issue, it will be recalled, is whether or not the premises of the argument, in particular P1 and P3, are sound. If the arguments in this essay are sound, then we have an explanation as to why P1 and P3 are true.

P1 is true in view of what I have called a dispositional fit. The disposition to act favorably towards a person and the disposition to exploit a person are polar dispositions. And a person can no more shift between these two dispositions at the drop of a hat than can a person exhibit those traits which are fully characteristic of both the virtue of honesty and the vice of mendacity upon demand. Of course, none of this is a matter of logical impossibility as such. There may very well be a world in which beings can change their character, and so their dispositions, rather like you and I can change the temperature of the water which comes out of the faucet. But that world is certainly not this one. It is a deep fact about our psychological make-up as persons that stability of character goes hand in hand with soundness of mind and therefore a healthy personality. Another such fact is that we desire to have a positive conception of ourselves. And this fact in conjunction with what I have called the principle of reciprocity, has been a key premise in my argument to show that a person cannot have the kind of disposition called for by (E).

Turning now to

P3 Only someone with an unhealthy personality could never be a true friend to anyone [definition of a healthy personality],

it should be observed that P3 is true if and only if the principle of reciprocity is not operative in the life of the person in question. Friends are disposed to act favorably towards one another. So obviously enough, an individual who could never be a true friend to anyone would have to be one for whom no amount of positive treatment, including the affirmation of the worth of his own pursuits and aims, from anyone could trigger in him the desire to respond in kind. Let us consider, then, what a person would be like if the principle of reciprocity were not operative in his life.

This principle makes reference to a number of capacities, one of the most important among them being the capacity to take up the point of view of others and to interpret their behavior which, in turn, presupposes the capacities of sympathy and compassion. For we are often moved by the efforts of others to treat us favorably even when their efforts do not reach fruition. Consider parents with their children. Moreover, we are in general quite capable of recognizing when a person has harmed us accidentally and when he has not, our positive attitude towards him being adversely affected only when we believe the latter to be the case. Thus, to suppose that the principle of reciprocity is not operative in a person’s life is not just to suppose that he is not moved to act favorably towards others if they act favorably towards him. It is to suppose, further, that he is capable of going through life impervious to the aims, desires, and efforts of others to help him; and that he is neither embarrassed nor shamed nor plagued with feelings of guilt by the fact that his own success has been contingent upon the good will of others for which he does not feel the least amount of gratitude.

Now there is a medical term for people who are so impervious to the good will of others. They are called psychopaths. The egoist, I believe, would be a

15 On the idea of something being fully characteristic of a virtue or vice, see James D. Wallace, “Excellences and Merit,” op. cit.

psychopath. For if the principle of reciprocity is sound, then we are sometimes moved to reciprocate the kindness of others even on those occasions when we have no reason to believe that we would thereby advance our own interests. The egoist, needless to say, cannot afford to be moved in this way too often. However, it seems that only a psychopath would not be. And if I am right in this, then it follows that P3 is true. For I take it that a psychopath is a person with an unhealthy personality.

V

I have been arguing against the possibility of a psychologically healthy individual being a pure egoist. It may be thought, however, that the very point of the essay fails, since having a healthy personality can be one of the egoist's aims. But this is to misunderstand my argument against the theory. For if I am right, then we do not consider the interests of others in order to be psychologically healthy beings; on the contrary, it is because we are psychologically healthy beings that we are capable of considering the interests of others even when we have no reason to believe that doing so will serve our own interests.17

It may be that ethical egoism is an unacceptable moral theory for the sorts of reasons mentioned at the outset of this essay. However, I have tried to show that the case against the egoist can be made from a quite different perspective. As always, there is much to be learned from attending to our psychological make-up as persons.18

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17 To appreciate the force of this point consider that, without simply ignoring the facts, it is impossible to suppose that the delight which parents take in their children's successes and the sorrow which parents feel when their children suffer could be explained by the extent to which the interests of the parents are either advanced or harmed. Thus, imagine a pure egoist as a parent.

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