



Discrediting Egoism: a Substitute for the Holy Grail

Jawara Sanford¹

Recibido: 3 de septiembre de 2019 / Aceptado: 6 de marzo de 2020

Abstract. A knock-down argument against egoism has been considered to be the Holy Grail of moral philosophy. With the conviction that it is quixotic at best to seek out this Holy Grail by attempting yet again to refute egoism on its own terms, I pursue the more modest goal of roundly discrediting egoism. To show just how implausible this theory is, I set forth a cumulative set of arguments that appeal to virtually universal normative judgments and features of moral phenomenology.

Keywords: rational egoism; ethical egoism; egoism; rationality; selfishness.

[esp] Una desacreditación del egoísmo, como sustituto del largamente perseguido santo grial

Resumen. Un argumento incontestable contra el egoísmo ha sido considerado como el santo grial de la filosofía moral, es decir, una meta muy valiosa pero de muy difícil realización. Convencido de que sería como mínimo quijotesco volver a intentar una vez más refutar el egoísmo sobre la base de sus propios supuestos, persigo la meta más modesta de desacreditar el egoísmo de forma contundente. Para mostrar hasta qué punto esta teoría es inverosímil, expongo una combinación de argumentos que apelan a juicios normativos y rasgos de nuestra fenomenología moral casi universales.

Palabras clave: egoísmo racional; egoísmo ético; egoísmo; racionalidad.

Sumario: 1. Characterization of rational egoism; 2. Methodological reflections; 3. cumulative argument against rational egoism; 3.1. Exculpation; 3.2. Ownership and property; 3.3. Atrocities; 3.4. Impersonal mattering; 3.5. Gratitude; 3.6. Friendship; 3.7. Indignation; 4. Conclusion; 5. Appendix; 6. Bibliography.

Cómo citar: Sanford, J. (2021): “Discrediting Egoism: a Substitute for the Holy Grail”, en *Revista de Filosofía* 46 (1), 173-189.

¹ Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus
jawara.sanford@slu.edu

That honesty is the best policy, may be a good general rule, but is liable to many exceptions: And he, it may, perhaps, be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.

–Hume²

Let it be allowed, though virtue or moral rectitude does indeed consist in affection to and pursuit of what is right and good, as such; yet, that when we sit down in a cool hour, we can neither justify to ourselves this or any other pursuit, till we are convinced that it will be for our happiness, or at least not contrary to it.

–Butler³

Finding a compelling argument against rational egoism has recently again been described as the Holy Grail of moral philosophy (Hills 2012, p. 3). (Apparently, there is also a significant minority of laypersons who, if asked, would claim to believe that rational egoism is true.⁴) Now, if finding the Grail consists precisely in refuting rational egoism on its own terms, it would be, I think, quixotic at best to essay yet another attempt to find the Grail.⁵ Accordingly, my goal will be a more modest and, I believe, realistic one: to provide a substantial *discreditation* of egoism, rather than an incontestable disproof of the theory. To this end, I will present a manifold and cumulative argument against egoism that attempts to show just how highly implausible the theory is. The argument will appeal to virtually universal, stable, and fundamental normative judgements and aspects of moral phenomenology. In the appendix, I succinctly discuss the applicability of this argument to three self-referential and exclusivist theories that are analogous to rational egoism: *familial egoism*, *tribalist egoism*, and *nationalist egoism*, or—to use three equivalent terms that do not stretch the meaning of “egoism”—*rational familialism*, *rational tribalism*, and *rational nationalism*.

I begin, in section 1, with a succinct characterization of egoism; then present a few brief methodological reflections in section 2; set forth the discrediting argument in section 3; summarize the main conclusions in section 4; and, finally, discuss the aforementioned three theories in the appendix.

1. Characterization of rational egoism

It will be helpful to characterize succinctly the theory, before attempting to critique it. *Rational egoism* or, to be more precise, *universal rational egoism*—henceforth, *egoism*—gives one (i.e., each individual) the sole ultimate end of maximizing the satisfaction of one’s own self-interest, maximizing one’s own good or well-being, or—to use yet a third expression that we will consider to be equivalent to the previous

² 1998, p. 155. Here Hume is depicting how a person might reason.

³ 1969, p. 373.

⁴ Near the beginning of three mandatory core-curriculum philosophy courses (two ethics courses and one introduction to philosophy), I gave 64 undergraduates a simple anonymous survey. According to the results, 26.6% of the students thought that egoism is true and the same percentage (26.6%) thought that this theory is perhaps true.

⁵ See section 2 below.

two—making one’s life go as well as possible for one. This theory holds that one’s own good is the sole ultimate source of reasons for oneself. Hence, all reasons are agent-relative and, furthermore, self-interested, i.e., based on self-interest. As for, e.g., “rules of thumb” and psychological dispositions, egoism prescribes using or having those that optimally contribute to the maximization of one’s good, i.e., those that are maximally *advantageous* or *prudent*, in the Kantian sense of the latter term.

Rational egoism differs markedly from psychological egoism, a non-normative psychological theory that asserts that, as a matter of fact, the motives on which people act are always self-interested. Rational egoism is a normative theory, which, as such, has a truth value that is logically independent of that of psychological egoism (and, for that matter, what could be called *psychological altruism*).

It is logically possible that there are circumstances in which egoism is *self-effacing*, i.e., prescribes not believing the theory itself (Parfit 1987, p. 24).⁶ This is possible because (1) the theory prescribes maximizing one’s own good and (2) it is conceivable that maximizing this is not compatible with believing the theory. (In fact, I think that this incompatibility is common.⁷) Finally, note also that since the theory tells one to maximize one’s own good and one can, at least conceivably, do so without believing the theory, one can act *in accordance with* the theory without actually having any intention to do so.

Egoism as defined above must be combined with a theory of self-interest or well-being. Such a theory purports to specify what *in itself* is good *for* one or—to use two additional expressions that we will consider equivalent—what in itself makes one’s life go well *for oneself* or what is non-instrumentally in one’s self-interest.⁸ Henceforth we can use the term *intrinsic benefit (harm)* to refer to anything that is, in itself, good (bad) for one. Now then, it is standard to speak of three theories of self-interest: (1) the hedonistic theory, (2) the desire-satisfaction theory—henceforth, *desire theory*—, and (3) the objective-list theory.⁹ The merits and demerits of different versions of these three main theories are debated, but doing this here would lead us too far afield. Indeed, we must circumscribe our discussion of these theories to what is necessary for the achievement of the main goal of this article, viz., a critique of egoism. Accordingly, our task right now is simply to figure out what combinations of egoism and these theories are worth critically considering throughout most of the rest of this article, since some combinations are, as we shall see, worth setting aside. Given the need to move on soon to the promised cumulative argument, we cannot but deal with this topic succinctly and with some simplism.

The first of the three theories—the hedonistic one—holds that pleasure is what, in itself, constitutes a person’s good. The combination of egoism and this theory yields *hedonistic egoism*, which claims that one should maximize one’s own pleasure. This rather well-known theory will be one of the versions of egoism on which we will continue to reflect and to which the aforementioned cumulative argument will be addressed.

As for the desire theory, we should consider the simple version of the theory and another common version, namely, the informed-desire theory. As for the simple one, it holds that what is, in itself, good for one is the satisfaction of one’s actual desires

⁶ See also Sidgwick 1981, p. 174.

⁷ In support of this idea, consider Gert 2007, p. 136 and Hare 1992, p. 203.

⁸ With regard to the concept of “good for,” see Scanlon 1998, p. 133 and Parfit 2011, p. 39.

⁹ See Crisp 2017 and discussions in Parfit 2011, pp. 493-502; Scanlon 1998, pp. 111-26, and Hooker 2002, pp. 37-43.

or preferences. Henceforth, for the sake of concision I will omit “or preferences.” As the simple version of the theory stands, it implies that if I have a desire for there to be a piece of parsley on the moon and an astronaut leaves a piece there, then this makes my life go better for me, even if I never find out about it. Since this implication makes the theory hard to believe, let us modify the theory so that it claims only that the satisfaction of desires *about one’s life* is an intrinsic benefit for one (Parfit 1987, p. 494). We can continue to use the term *desire theory* to refer to this modified theory. The combination of this theory and egoism can be called *desiderative egoism*.

As for the other version, the *informed-desire theory* claims that what is, in itself, good for one is the satisfaction of those desires that one would have if one were fully informed about the non-normative facts, such as the real nature of the objects of one’s desires. It will be important for us to keep in mind that in principle this theory does not exclude anything from being a potential intrinsic benefit for someone. For example, if I desire to devote my life to counting blades of grass and would still have this desire once fully informed, then devoting my life to such counting would be what would benefit me the most. Just as we modified the desire theory, we should modify the informed-desire theory by replacing, in the definition above, “desires” with “desires about one’s life.” Call the theory that results from combining egoism with this informed-desire theory *ideal desiderative egoism*. Just as we will continue to reflect on hedonistic egoism, we will also continue to consider throughout most of the rest of this article desiderative egoism and ideal desiderative egoism. Finally, note that in order to prevent the discussion from becoming too convoluted, at times I will focus explicitly only on the desire theory or desiderative egoism, instead of also taking the informed-desire theory or ideal desiderative egoism explicitly into consideration. At those times, explicit consideration of either of the latter two theories would not, I think, lead to any notably different conclusions.

Before considering objective-list theories, it will be useful to note that according to egoism, although there are things that are good *for* people, there is nothing that is *impersonally* good, nothing that is good *simpliciter*.¹⁰ Since the distinction between “good for” and “impersonally good” will be important for us later, I will use the next two paragraphs to briefly contrast the two concepts. We can use the expressions “impersonal goodness” and “personal goodness” to name the kinds of value to which “impersonally good” and “good for” refer, respectively.

First of all, note that it is *conceptually* possible for something to be impersonally good without being good for anyone. Consider an example. Suppose that Ross is correct in claiming that it is impersonally good for pain to be apportioned to vice, i.e., for the vicious to suffer (although I strongly disagree with Ross) (Ross 2002, p. 138). Suppose also that pain is bad *for* whoever suffers it and that this personal badness of pain is one of the reasons why it is impersonally good for the vicious to experience pain (the other reason being that the vicious deserve something bad for them, like pain.) Given these suppositions, that a vicious person experiences pain is impersonally good without being good for anyone (supposing that no one indirectly benefits).

Second and lastly, note that the concept of impersonal goodness implies that if something impersonally good ceases to exist, then things are going worse than before, i.e., the universe has less value. On the other hand, the very concept of personal

¹⁰ See, e.g., Griffin 1996, p 74 and Sidgwick 1981, pp. 420-21.

goodness does not require us to hold that if something good for someone ceases to exist, then things are going worse. Indeed, above it was said that things' going worse for someone can *conceivably* make things go better, *tout court*.

We may now consider the objective-list theories, which claim that certain things are, in themselves, good for one, regardless of whether one desires them or not. Things that have been considered candidates have been rational activity, friendship, awareness of beauty, moral goodness, knowledge, virtues—such as justice, compassion, and generosity—, and accomplishments. In keeping with what was said above, we will assume that nothing that is not part of one's life constitutes a good candidate (and this idea will be important for us in section 3). Note that, although the hedonistic theory qualifies as an objective-list theory according to the foregoing definition, for now we will use “objective list theories” to refer to all other objective-list theories.

There are a number of combinations of egoism and objective-list theories that I propose that we set aside, that is to say, that we not continue to reflect on. Consider, first of all, a strange objective-list theory that claims that the *virtue* of altruism is what is, in itself, good for one, i.e., is the sole intrinsic benefit. Now consider an even more bizarre objective-list theory—one that holds that *behavior* that maximizes the good of others is the sole intrinsic benefit for one. The conjunction of this theory and egoism can be called *altruistic egoism*. The prescriptions of this strange but coherent theory—which differs greatly from, say, hedonistic egoism—necessarily coincide with those of *ethical altruism*, which holds that one should maximize the good of others.¹¹ Now, one of the various reasons why altruistic egoism seems false is that it contains two ideas that seem to be incongruous with each other. On the one hand, it claims—as all versions of egoism do—that (1) no one else is a source of reasons for anyone; on the other hand, it claims that (2) behavior that maximizes the good of others is *in itself* good for one, whereas behavior that promotes their ill-being is not. The second idea implies that behavior maximizing the good of others is an essential part—a non-contingent part—of one's good, not simply something instrumentally good for one; so, there is no way for one's good to be completely realized without it. How could theses 1 and 2 be defended as part of one and the same theory? It seems impracticable to me. It might occur to us that one could argue that behavior beneficial to others is impersonally good and then one could go on to argue that producing what is impersonally good is *somehow* good for the agent.¹² But this line of argument is not compatible with altruistic egoism because this theory, like all forms of egoism, denies the existence of anything with impersonal value. Furthermore, even *if* the theory did not deny this, how could both of the following theses be defended as part of one theory: (1) others are not ultimate sources of reasons but (2) what is good is benefitting others, instead of harming them? In conclusion, I propose that we set altruistic egoism aside as being too untenable to warrant further consideration, on account of some of its components being too discordant with each other.

Are there other possible combinations of egoism and objective-list theories that we should set aside? Consider *justice egoism*, a combination of egoism and an

¹¹ In fact, for any ethical theory, there is a combination of rational egoism and some objective-list theory—which might be bizarre—that makes the same prescriptions as the ethical theory.

¹² Aristotle surely thinks that virtue is both impersonally good and good for the virtuous. But note that, unlike rational egoism, Aristotle at least *implicitly* holds that others are sources of reasons and that there are some things that have impersonal value.

objective-list theory that claims that the virtue of justice is one of the things that is an intrinsic benefit. Suppose that the virtue of justice is simply the stable disposition to adhere to the phrase *suum cuique tribuere*—to each his own, i.e., may all get their due. The concept of something being due to someone involves that of someone being a source of reasons. So, the virtue of justice—the disposition to see that people get their due—differs markedly from *egoistic pseudo-justice*, which is the disposition to feign—out of self-interest—concern for what most people consider to be just. Now, how could one successfully defend both of the following theses as part of one theory: (1) others are not ultimate sources of reasons and (2) justice—but not egoistic pseudo-justice—is *in itself* good for one, in other words, is an essential part of one's good? I do not see how. Indeed, *mutatis mutandis* the counterargument of the previous paragraph is applicable here, too. I propose, then, that we also set justice egoism aside as being too untenable to warrant further consideration, on account of some of its components being too discordant with each other.

We should also set aside a number of other theories that result from combining egoism with different objective-list theories. To be more specific, we should set aside those theories that include objective list theories that posit intrinsic benefits—like the virtue of justice—whose nature is sufficiently discordant with the fundamental egoist tenet that others are not sources of reasons. Accordingly, let us use the term *objective-list egoism* to refer to combinations of egoism and objective list theories that are non-discordant, i.e., do not posit excessively discordant intrinsic benefits. A version of non-discordant objective-list egoism could claim that rational activity, awareness of beauty, and knowledge are intrinsic benefits, *assuming* (!) that rational activity, awareness of beauty, and knowledge never require deeming others to be ultimate sources of reasons. It lies outside the scope of this article to delineate the bounds of this set of theories more precisely. However, this will not be especially problematic.

Finally, let us also consider the possibility of incorporating the hedonistic or the desire theory into objective-list egoism. Suppose that Jill has a rare illness that makes her suffer immitigable, protracted, and frequent bouts of severe pain and that she hates this (her desires are greatly frustrated). I take it that any theory of self-interest that claims that neither her pain nor the frustration of her desire make her life go any worse is implausible. For this reason (and others), I propose that we increase the plausibility of objective-list egoism by stipulating that this theory recognizes that pain or frustration of desire is at least *one* of the multiple things that, in themselves, contribute to making one's life go worse for one. Let us make an analogous stipulation with regard to pleasure and desire-satisfaction—the opposites of pain and frustration.

In conclusion, the following versions of egoism are the ones about which we will continue to reflect critically: (1) hedonistic egoism, (2) non-ideal and ideal desiderative egoism, (3) objective-list egoism (which, as stipulated above, has a hedonistic or desiderative component). We can also take into consideration—even if not explicitly—a combination of theories 1 and 2. Henceforth I will use the term *egoism* to refer to the set of *all* of these theories. Most of what I have to say will be applicable to all of these theories, so it will be expedient to have one simple term that refers to them all. Finally, it will be useful to keep in mind that all of these theories hold that all intrinsic benefits are part of one's life. It will be useful to remember also that all of these theories subscribe to what may be called *the alterity principle*, which

claims that the alterity of an interest—i.e., its belonging to someone else—excludes the interest from giving one any reason to do or refrain from doing anything.

2. Methodological reflections

How may we reasonably go about trying to figure out whether we should reject egoism? There have been numerous ambitious attempts to show that egoism may be refuted on its own terms—or at least on terms that have been taken to be attributable to the theory or to adherents thereof.¹³ For example, G. E. Moore concludes, “What Egoism holds . . . is that *each* man’s happiness is the sole good—that a number of different things are *each* of them the only good thing there is—an absolute contradiction!”¹⁴ This conclusion is based on the mistaken assumption that egoism (or at least one common version of egoism) claims that each person’s happiness is the only thing that is *impersonally* good, but what egoism actually—and self-consistently—claims is that each person’s own happiness is good *for him* and is the sole ultimate source of reasons *for him*. In conclusion, it seems as though neither Moore’s ambitious attempt at refutation nor any other similarly ambitious attempt has convinced any significant number of philosophers; and making another such attempt would, I think, be quixotic at best.¹⁵

Egoism is self-consistent. However, it would be a mistake to think that its mere self-consistency has any probatory force, i.e., establishes any presumption in its favor. Countless theories that deny rational egoism are self-consistent, such as, e.g., utilitarianism. Furthermore, self-consistency clearly constitutes no safeguard against extreme implausibility. Consider, for example, *individual egoism*, which holds that everyone ought to maximize the good of one particular individual. Or consider *anti-egoism*, which holds that everyone ought to maximize her own ill-being—or even nihilism and skepticism about the external world. As for (universal rational) egoism, I think we will end up finding that it, too, is highly implausible.

To be succinct, what I think that we can reasonably do is try to determine whether a conviction that egoism is true could be part of anything *similar* to a wide reflective equilibrium of ours (Rawls 1971, pp. 46-53).¹⁶ Such an equilibrium would involve our having attained a harmonious and maximally plausible set of, among other things, (1) moral judgments about particular cases, (2) broad moral judgments about sets of similar cases, (3) very general moral principles, (4) views about moral theories, and (5) relevant non-normative judgments. It is, of course, difficult to ascertain exactly of what elements this harmonious and maximally plausible set would be composed. However, so much of our moral phenomenology is incompatible with the thesis of egoism that it can be made clear that this thesis is very far from being a possible part of the aforementioned set. In short, if moral wisdom lies precisely in that set, the thesis of egoism is clearly false.

¹³ Two of the most widely known are found in Moore 1988, pp. 98-101 and Baier 1965, pp. 95-96. For additional attempts see, e.g., the articles in the bibliography by Baumer, Campbell, Daniels, Glasgow, Goldstick, and Medlin. For lucid discussions of many of these and other attempts to refute egoism, see Österberg 1988, chaps. 5-6.

¹⁴ Moore 1988, p. 99.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Hills 2012, pp. 5-6 and Gauthier 1990, p. 234.

¹⁶ For additional discussion, see also Hooker 2002, pp. 9-16.

Given that egoism cannot be refuted on its own terms but can, I think, be shown to be highly implausible, the goal of the cumulative argument of the next section is to provide a discreditation of egoism, i.e., a modest refutation of the theory—one that does not entirely rest on assumptions of the theory itself. Accordingly, the goal is not the impracticable task of dissuading a merely hypothetical proponent of egoism who lacks all moral sentiments incompatible with his theory. (This would be a very strange person, indeed!) The goal is a more modest one: it is to set forth considerations that would be enlightening to many real people.

I think that it is a sign of realism that we not feel much disillusionment on account of this situation. After all, it is in general wise to feel reconciled to not being able to do the impossible, such as, e.g., flying by flapping one's arms. Furthermore, the aforementioned situation is hardly unique: if it is reasonable for us to reject solipsism, idealism, individual egoism, and many other theories, it is surely only because there exists a *modest* refutation of each one of those theories.

3. Cumulative argument against rational egoism

The argument is cumulative in that it is composed of seven rather independent sets of considerations whose combined refutatory force is greater than that of any proper subset of the seven. For the sake of concision, I will not seek to draw up an exhaustive list of considerations; however, I will aim for some degree of heterogeneity in the list. The argument frequently targets the alterity principle, but not always.

3.1. Exculpation

Imagine an orphanage that depends entirely on donations, and suppose that for years the director of the orphanage has kept most of the donated money for herself. On account of her stealing, the orphans have long suffered from malnutrition and she has lived quite comfortably. One day, she is finally found out, and a trial is held. Strangely, she never denies her copious stealing but does repeatedly insist that her conduct has always been irreproachable. Let us also imagine, in a manner not dissimilar to Kant, that to defend her position she takes pains to provide the jury with detailed explanations for why she always had good reason to think that the stealing was in her self-interest (Kant 1996, pp. 167-69 [AK 5:35-37]). This is the exculpatory strategy she uses. She invokes the apparent optimally self-serving nature of her actions. Suppose also that, in an attempt to vindicate her character, she tries to give examples of how she never fails to pursue, with determination and shrewdness, what she believes will be most advantageous for her alone.

It is probably true that according to egoism stealing was an error on the part of the director and so was her self-regarding exculpatory strategy. (Whether these courses of action were really wrong depends on the details of the case.) In addition, it may be the case that, had the director been an enlightened egoist, it would have been obvious to her that egoism would advise against the misappropriation of the donations and against the exculpatory strategy that she used. It may even be the case that egoism was self-effacing in her case, i.e., that optimal adherence to the prescriptions of egoism presupposed not believing this normative theory. However, none of this changes the fact that the director's exculpatory strategy seems deeply misguided—and not merely ineffective.

Indeed, the director seems to be convinced of the egoistic principle that an action is right if and only if it maximizes the agent's good; and, consequently, she tries to exonerate herself in the eyes of others by attempting to show them that she had every reason to think that she was maximizing her good. Of course, her strategy fails utterly, because we do not share her egoistic conviction. In fact, not only is the strategy ineffectual; it is counterproductive. It seems clear to us that the orphans were ultimate sources of reasons (to refrain from stealing), i.e., that the interests of the orphans were worthy of consideration in their own right. The director should have refrained from stealing because of this moral status of the orphans, and furthermore she should have been aware of this status. This case evidences our rejection of the alterity principle.

However, this is just one example. There are innumerable other cases in which we would judge exculpatory strategies similar to that of the director to be profoundly wrong-headed. Furthermore, upon further reflection we continue and surely will continue to endorse our prior un-egoistic judgments.¹⁷ In addition, shedding these un-egoistic judgments (in which we reject the kinds of self-regarding exculpatory strategies in question) would require wide-reaching and deep changes in our moral phenomenology. Indeed, we would have to shed the conviction that the orphans were sources of reasons, as well as countless other such convictions. Hence, a wide reflective equilibrium of ours would surely be greatly at odds with the kinds of self-regarding exculpatory strategies in question. Finally, note that if we were correct in rejecting this sort of strategy in *only* one of the countless cases in which we do in fact reject it, this would be sufficient to imply that egoism is false.

It is of course true that the fact that we are in a certain way profoundly in disagreement with these strategies does not prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the alterity principle is false. But we wanted our goal to be feasible. Finding such proof is not.

3.2. Ownership and property

If I say that something belongs to someone, in other words, that someone owns something, it is not impossible for me to intend to make *only* a non-normative, purely descriptive assertion about the logical implications of prevailing laws or existing social norms. However, such an intention is uncommon. Suppose that someone says of a canoe that Jack built for himself that the canoe is Jack's. Or suppose that someone says, "His kidneys belong to him [Jack]." Usually, assertions such as these express substantive, normative stances.

Indeed, it would be reasonable to interpret the speaker above as attributing to Jack certain bundles of substantive rights with regard to his canoe and his kidneys (Honoré 1961, pp. 112-24). We can focus on the canoe as an example of something owned by someone. That the canoe (or anything else) belongs to Jack implies, among other things, the following. (1) Jack has a right, is at liberty, to use (or not use) his canoe as he pleases. This implies that it is *morally permissible* for Jack to use his canoe in this way. However, to be precise we must add that ownership involves background restrictions on conduct that limit the ways in which owners may use their property as they please. For example, for the most part I may ride my bicycle wherever I please,

¹⁷ On this topic, see Scanlon 1998, 68-70.

but it is not morally permissible for me to run into children. (2) Another implication of the canoe belonging to Jack is that he has a negative right against others that requires them not to exclude him from the use of the canoe. This implies that others have a *moral obligation* to refrain from interfering in various ways. (3) Yet another implication is that Jack may, for example, license others to use his canoe, by lending it, alienating it, etc. (4) A fourth implication is that Jack has a right to resort to a battery of measures to obtain, maintain, and recover his canoe (within certain moral limits). If, e.g., someone takes it, he may take it back. This list of four implications will suffice, although there are others.

It is true that there is disagreement over the nature of the justification of property and ownership. For example, it may be claimed that someone's ownership of, say, a piece of land is justified by "first occupancy" (Pufendorf) or by the fact that "he hath mixed his Labour" with the land (Locke) or by hedonistic consequentialist considerations or by the promotion of freedom or a virtuous character. However the case may be, for our current purposes we need not resolve the debates over the nature of such justification. Nor need we come close to determining all of the details of the nature of ownership in all cases.

It will, however, be useful to consider the four implications of ownership enumerated above. And I think it will suffice to focus explicitly on only the second one, viz., the negative right against others. This second implication is one of the most important components of ownership. Indeed, if it were permissible for others to make use of what you consider to be your computer, kidneys, car, etc., however they pleased, these things would clearly not actually be yours, would clearly not really belong to you.

Now, according to egoism nothing even similar to the aforementioned negative right exists. At any time whatsoever in which it is in any person's interest to use as he pleases something that supposedly belongs to someone else, the first person not only may use it but should use it, according to egoism. Hence, if egoism is true, nothing—not "your" pen, not "your" heart—belongs to you. Many of the most widespread, basic, and least doubted normative judgments consist precisely in attributions of ownership. If just one of these innumerable attributions is reasonable, egoism is false. In any case, surely a large number of these attributions are reasonable, and this is another reason to think that the thesis of egoism is far from being a possible part of anything *similar* to a wide reflective equilibrium of ours.

3.3. Atrocities

Egoism permits and prescribes doing *anything whatsoever* that maximizes one's good. Consider a world that is blighted by many more evils than ours. Grave birth defects (spina bifida, microcephaly), mental disorders (schizophrenia, autism), physical illnesses (the plague, leprosy), and natural disasters (earthquakes, floods) are all far, far more common. Call this world *hell on earth*. And suppose that there is a highly sophisticated time bomb that, if activated, would turn our actual world into hell on earth. Suppose also that there is a lollipop connected to the activation switch and that, if I grab the lollipop, the bomb will explode 1,000 years after my death and no one will ever find out that I activated it. Finally, suppose that I like lollipops. Activating the bomb will have no negative consequences for me, since nothing outside of my life can constitute an intrinsic harm to me (according to all of the

theories subsumed under the term “egoism”). However, grabbing the lollipop would have a good consequence for me: the enjoyment of eating the lollipop. (To deal with [1] hedonistic egoism, [2] desiderative egoism, [3] ideal desiderative egoism, or [4] objective-list egoism [with a hedonistic or desiderative component], we can suppose that eating the lollipop will [1] bring me pleasure, [2] satisfy my desires, [3] satisfy my informed desires, or [4] do any of these last three things, respectively.) So, according to egoism, I should grab the lollipop.¹⁸

It is probably true that in many sets of common circumstances the dispositions and rules of thumb prescribed by egoism would lead me not to grab the lollipop. However, there are conceivable circumstances for which this does not hold true. And, more importantly, regardless of what the maximally prudent dispositions and rules of thumb might lead me to do, egoism claims that it is actually right for me to grab the lollipop. This is thoroughly implausible. As for the idea that in many sets of common circumstances egoism is self-effacing for me, something similar may be said in this regard.

We have seen an atrocity that egoism prescribes someone to commit, but countless examples of such atrocities could be given. On reflection, it seems unreasonable to think that our rejection of the prescriptions of egoism in each and every one of those cases is groundless because, in reality, the principle of alterity is true. Furthermore, to find reasons to doubt the principle of alterity, we do not really have to go so far as to consider the possible commission of atrocities. Indeed, we could simply consider, along with Hume, stepping on someone’s gouty toe. “Would any man, who is walking along, tread as willingly on another’s gouty toes, whom he has no quarrel with, as on the hard flint and pavement? There is surely a difference in the case” (1998, p. 114).

3.4. Impersonal mattering

That some people go blind on account of malnutrition due to poverty or that an earthquake turns dozens of children into orphans seems *unfortunate*, indeed, very unfortunate. Such occurrences clearly seem to us to be a bad thing. And they seem so, even if we are convinced that we ourselves will remain unaffected. On the other hand, the eradication of, say, smallpox (a disease that killed some 300 million people in the 20th century) seems to be a good thing. But, according to egoism (i.e., all of the versions under consideration) none of these things is fortunate or unfortunate *tout court* because no state of affairs or event is good or bad *tout court*, good or bad *simpliciter*. Nothing has impersonal value, whether positive or negative.

Of course, there are countless things that are good or bad *for* one person or another, according to egoism. But, as we know, although the fact that an action would be bad *for* someone gives her a reason not to carry it out, this fact gives the rest of us no reason whatsoever not to perform the action. However, egoism also implies that the insignificance of others goes beyond their simply not being sources of reasons for others. Indeed, according to egoism all value is personal (*q.v.* sec. I) (and none is impersonal); and this implies that, if a situation does not affect me, then for me there are no grounds on which to evaluate positively or negatively any part of the situation, no matter how good or bad the situation is *for* others. Not only do I have no reason

¹⁸ Compare Rachels 1974, pp. 308-13 and Rachels 1978, p. 427.

not to cause, e.g., hell on earth long after my death, but I actually have no grounds for thinking that the realization of this state of affairs would even be a bad thing, i.e., something with negative impersonal value, something bad *simpliciter*. The realization of that state of affairs would not matter *tout court*, although it would matter *to* those affected (i.e., they would *feel* concerned instead of feeling indifference) and it would matter *for* them (i.e., affect their well-being).

Egoism does not only imply that what happens to *others* does not matter *tout court*, it also implies that what happens to *us* actually does not matter, either. So, in actuality, no state of affairs ever matters (*tout court*). Hence, there are no impersonal grounds for ranking any sets of states of affairs. Hell on earth is no better or worse *tout court* than any other state of affairs, not even heaven on earth. This is implausible. And the idea that nothing is unfortunate is also implausible. Egoism cannot be refuted on its own terms, but doing so is hardly necessary to reach a well-grounded conclusion that this theory is false.

3.5. Gratitude

You inadvertently drop your wallet with all of the little money that you have for holiday gifts this year. But someone notices, picks up your wallet, runs after you, and manages to catch you right before you get on the bus. Winded, he says, “You dropped your wallet.” You feel grateful.

In paradigmatic cases of gratitude, the following factors combine to give rise to this feeling:¹⁹

1. Someone—the *giver*—gives something—a *gift*—to someone else—the *recipient*.
2. It seems to the recipient that the gift is good for him, benefits him.
3. It *seems* to the recipient that the giver gave the gift out of direct concern for him (the recipient), i.e., for his sake. Suppose that you watch video footage that clearly shows that the person who returned your wallet initially intended to keep it for himself and only changed his mind when he noticed that a policeman was watching. You would cease to feel gratitude.
4. It seems to the recipient that the giver renounces something good for himself, even if it is, e.g., just a little of his time. Note that if it seems to the recipient that the giver has given up something of value to himself, in the mind of the recipient this may serve to corroborate the conclusion that the giver gave out of direct concern for the recipient.
5. The act of giving presents itself to the recipient as invested with positive impersonal value: it seems to the recipient that such giving is a good thing *tout court*, is endowed with impersonal goodness. The recipient appreciates the act of giving, i.e., evaluates it positively; and this appreciation does not consist only in feeling glad to receive the gift. Suppose that someone considers all altruism (all unselfish regard for the welfare of others) to be stupid or servile. Then, had she been the one to receive her wallet from a good Samaritan, she would not have felt gratitude, even if she would have felt glad to be again in possession of her wallet. Her failing to appreciate benevolence is what would have prevented her from experiencing gratitude.

¹⁹ Compare Schwarz 2004, esp. pp. 9-15 and Wallace 1978, esp. pp. 131-6.

Consider a world that is very different from ours in that everyone is convinced that the maximal satisfaction of his own self-interest is the only reasonable ultimate aim for himself, as egoism says. Suppose also that everyone believes that everyone else is also thus convinced. In this hypothetical state of affairs, no one would ever feel gratitude (except in fanciful circumstances). On the one hand, each person would be convinced that others consider him not to be worthy of any consideration in his own right. As a result, no receiver of anything would ever think that at bottom the giver gave out of direct concern for him (the receiver): factor 3 above would never exist. On the other hand, each person considers himself not to be an ultimate source of reasons for anyone else to do or not do anything. Consequently, although acts of giving could be seen as good *for* the giver and/or the recipient, these acts would never elicit the sort of appreciation of benevolence involved in factor 5 above. To be sure, some acts of giving could be seen as astute or cunning, but such a perception of the acts would not elicit gratitude.

Of course, in the real world we ourselves do appreciate benevolence because we are sure that at least in many cases others and we are sources of reasons. And in the real world there are countless situations in which virtually anyone would experience gratitude. For, on the one hand, we are far from being convinced that self-interest is the only reasonable aim and, on the other hand, it seems to us that in many situations others are also far from being genuinely convinced that this is the only reasonable aim. From this we may gather that it is quite improbable that the thesis of egoism could be part of anything similar to a wide reflective equilibrium of ours. For egoism to be true, we would have to be very mistaken about many things.

3.6. Friendship

It is very widely thought that one person is not a friend of another unless the former cares about the latter for the latter's own sake, i.e., has direct concern for the latter.²⁰ (Something similar may be said of a good father or mother and their child.)²¹ Now, it is surely true that it is not a psychological impossibility for someone to both believe that egoism is true and sometimes experience direct concern for another person. In addition, I think that in many more or less common series of sets of circumstances egoism actually prescribes having direct concern for at least some people other than oneself because this is in *one's own* self-interest.²² Furthermore, egoism may very well be self-effacing for many people (given the circumstances in which they will carry out their lives) while it also prescribes having direct concern for some other people. But, whatever the case may be, the seeming considerability of your friends, mine, and those of everyone else is, according to egoism, entirely illusory. If my best friend's child has died and I feel concern for my friend, my concern can have no justification that is grounded in my friend. My concern is warranted only if it benefits me in a way that is maximally advantageous for me.

²⁰ Consider, e.g., Aristotle 1984, vol. 2, pp. 1826-27 (1155b31, 1156b10); Blum 2010, p. 43, and Wallace 1978, pp. 128-9.

²¹ Consider also Broad 1952, p. 223 and Hutcheson 1970, pp. 102-3.

²² For more on this idea, see Gert 2007, p. 136 and Hare 1992, p. 203.

3.7. Indignation

We see someone walking across an immaculate central lawn on a beautiful university campus. Carelessly unwrapping a pack of cigarettes, she lets pieces of the wrapping fall here and there. On another occasion, a policeman pulls us over, although we were driving below the speed limit. She insinuates that a bribe would prevent her from giving us a speeding ticket. In these and innumerable other cases, we have experienced or *would* experience indignation. Indeed, there are not many feelings the capacity for which is more central to the human psyche than indignation.

For an action to arouse our indignation, it is not sufficient (1) that the action frustrate some desire of ours and (2) that the action seem to us to be bad for someone. For example, if a policeman fines me for speeding in a school zone and I was indeed driving far above the speed limit, the fine may very well frustrate a desire of mine and seem to me to be bad for me; but, if I am convinced that the fine is just, I will not experience indignation. For an action to provoke indignation, it must be thought to be immoral.²³ And, in the vast majority of cases, the action is thought to be immoral at least in part because the action is taken to involve one person wronging another, i.e., mistreating him. Now, this conviction that one person is mistreating another implies the conviction that someone is a source of reasons for someone else. Yet egoism claims that this conviction that is involved in innumerable experiences of indignation is mistaken in every case. But there are countless cases for which it is extremely hard to believe that this conviction is really mistaken.

The idea that one is never under any circumstances a source of reasons for anyone else is extremely implausible. This is part of what explains why it would surely be impossible to find a self-styled egoist who would under no circumstances experience indignation that implicitly denies the alterity principle. Furthermore, it would be roughly as difficult to find a self-styled egoist who would experience indignation in different situations—like any normal human being—but would always *sincerely* condemn his own indignation after the fact. It is virtually impossible to be a completely coherent egoist, because any slightly reasonable person will in some circumstances suppose that he is a source of reasons for others.²⁴

4. Conclusion

To recapitulate the seven-part cumulative argument of section 3, egoism—as characterized in section 1—is extremely implausible for the following reasons. (1) Exculpatory strategies that appeal solely to egoistic criteria are commonly thoroughly unconvincing (and laughable). (2) Egoism entails the inexistence of anything similar to what we ordinarily take to be private property. (3) This theory can justify causing, for a trivial benefit to oneself, atrocities. (4) Any positive or negative evaluation of a state of affairs that does not affect oneself is groundless. (5) The common and characteristically human experience of gratitude is profoundly at odds with both subscription to egoism and attribution of such subscription to others. (6) Egoism makes the seeming considerability of one's friends (and children) entirely illusory.

²³ See, e.g., Rawls 1971, esp. pp. 484, 488; Nagel 1970, p. 83, and Hume 1998, pp.110-1.

²⁴ Nagel makes some related points (1986, p. 162).

(7) Indignation at supposed mistreatment is a commonplace component of human emotional life; and, yet, the truth of egoism would undercut the legitimacy all of such indignation, no matter how apparently reasonable.

In short, we have seen reasons to believe that egoism is profoundly at odds with widely-held basic moral convictions and common moral phenomenology—so much so that the idea of egoism is far from being a possible component of a wide reflective equilibrium of ours or perhaps of anyone. In fact, long before reaching a wide reflective equilibrium, no one (or, at least, virtually no one) who understood the implications of egoism would find this theory sufficiently plausible to believe it. Furthermore, the cumulative argument of section 3 could be made even stronger by including additional topics: consent, sympathy, veracity, desert, parenthood, and others.

In conclusion, the impossibility of strictly incontestable disproof of egoism is hardly much of an impediment to rejecting this theory, in view of the possibility of what we called a “modest refutation” and given how roundly such a refutation can discredit the theory.

5. Appendix

Consider three additional self-referential, exclusivist theories, whose similarity to the sentiments of some people is sufficient to make them well worthy of consideration: (1) *rational familialism* (or *familial egoism*), (2) *rational tribalism* (or *tribalist egoism*), (3) and *rational nationalism* (or *nationalist egoism*). These three theories give each person the sole ultimate aim of maximizing the good of (1) his family, (2) his tribe, and (3) his nation, respectively. Like egoism these three theories hold that for any individual the vast majority of humanity is not an ultimate source of reasons, i.e., is not worthy of any consideration in their own right.

Consequently, *mutatis mutandis* the seven parts of the cumulative argument above strongly discredit the three aforementioned theories, as well. By way of example, let us explicitly consider how five of those seven parts may be used to critique rational nationalism, which is, of the three theories, the one that most differs from egoism. First, consider subsection 3.5, which—like other subsections—contributes to showing that the alterity principle is false. In the enumeration of factors that contribute to eliciting gratitude from, e.g., someone having his wallet returned to him, it was said that the act of giving presents itself to the recipient as invested with impersonal positive value. Among other things, it was hardly necessary to qualify this assertion by adding the proviso “provided that the act of giving is not carried out by someone who seems to be a foreigner.” From subsection 3.3, we may conclude that, according to rational nationalism, the fact that grabbing a lollipop would cause hell on earth in any other country constitutes no reason whatever not to grab it. This fact, too, discredits rational nationalism. From 3.4 we may gather that, if a foreign country suffers hell on earth and a second foreign country enjoys heaven on earth, we have no grounds to conclude that the former state of affairs is worse than the latter. Now consider, e.g., 3.1; and suppose that our country has enslaved another. Rational nationalism implausibly implies that an exculpatory strategy that attempts to demonstrate that the enslavement was optimally self-serving for us could, in principle, show that we, not only did not act wrongly, but also acted in the only genuinely reasonable manner.

Finally, consider 3.7. If another country enslaves us, in reality we would have grounds for indignation; but rational nationalism denies this. So much the worse for rational nationalism.²⁵

6. Bibliography

- Aristotle (1984): *Nicomachean Ethics*. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, 2:1729-1867. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Baier, K. (1965): *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics*, abridged ed. New York: Random House.
- Baumer, W. (1967): "Indefensible Impersonal Egoism." *Philosophical Studies* 18, pp. 72-5.
- Blum, L. A. (2010): *Friendship, Altruism and Morality*. 1980. Reprint, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Broad, C. D. (1952): *Ethics and the History of Philosophy: Selected Essays*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Butler, J. (1969): "Fifteen Sermons." In *British Moralists 1650-1800*, edited by D. D. Raphael. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 325-377.
- Campbell, R. (1972): "A Short Refutation of Ethical Egoism." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, pp. 249-54.
- Crisp, R. (2017), "Well-Being." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/well-being/>.
- Daniels, Ch. B. (1972): "A Note on Ethical Egoism." *Philosophical Studies* 23, pp. 418-20.
- Gert, B. (2007): *Common Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gauthier, D. (1990): *Moral Dealing: Contract, Ethics, and Reason*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Glasgow, W. D. (1968): "The Contradiction in Ethical Egoism." *Philosophical Studies* 19, pp. 81-92.
- Glasgow, W. D. (1970): "Metaphysical Egoism." *Ratio* 12, pp. 79-84.
- Goldstick, D. (1973): "Refutation of 'Ethical Egoism'." *Analysis* 34, pp. 38-9.
- Griffin, J. (1996): *Value Judgement: Improving our Ethical Beliefs*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hare, R. M. (1992): *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hills, A. (2012): *The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Honoré, A. M. (1961): "Ownership." In *Oxford Essays in Jurisprudence (First Series)*, edited by A. G. Guest, 107-47. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hooker, B. (2002): *Idea Code, Real World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hume, D. (1998): *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. 1751. Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hutcheson, F. (1970): "Virtuous Affections and Self-Love" In *Morality and Rational Self-Interest*, edited by David P. Gauthier. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, pp. 91-130. (Excerpt from *An Inquiry concerning Moral Good and Evil*, 1729.)

²⁵ I would like to thank John Welch for his generosity and helpful comments. My thanks also go to the two anonymous reviewers.

- Kant, I. (1996): *Critique of Practical Reason*. In *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, 133-272. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Medlin, B. (1957): "Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism." *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 35, pp. 111-18.
- Moore, G. E. (1988): *Principia Ethica*. 1902. Reprint, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Nagel, T. (1970): *The Possibility of Altruism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nagel, T. (1986): *The View from Nowhere*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Österberg, J. (1988): *Self and Others: A Study of Ethical Egoism*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Parfit, D. (2011): *On What Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D. (1987): *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rachels, J. (1978): "Can the Egoist Have it Both Ways?" *Philosophia* 8, pp. 425-28.
- Rachels, J. (1974): "Two Arguments Against Ethical Egoism." *Philosophia* 4, pp. 297-314.
- Rawls, J. (1971): *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ross, W. D. (2002) *The Right and the Good*. 1930. Reprint, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, T. M. (1998): *What We Owe Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schwarz, B. (2004): *Del agradecimiento*, translated by Juan Miguel Palacios. Madrid, Spain: Ediciones Encuentro.
- Sidgwick, H. (1981): *The Methods of Ethics*. 1907. Reprint, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Wallace, J. D. (1978): *Virtues and Vices*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.