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“Cyber Ethics” – Paper 1

09-18-09

Egoism

Egoism is derived from the Latin word, “ego”, which when translated to English means “I”. Our command over the English language allows us to infer the principles over which this theory is founded. Egoism is the ethical framework which asserts that individuals ought to act according to what is in their “self interest”. The principal function of ethical theory is to allow the individual to live a life that is most desirable and beneficial to the individual. This indicates that the self or the individual agent is the focal point according to this theoretical perspective. Ethical Egoism indicates that this self interest lends to more wholesome and flourishing life for the individual. I would like to look closer at the characteristics of this theory. Egoism is normative; it discusses the way people should make moral decisions. It provides an understanding that people act in certain ways which ultimately benefit themselves and their lives.

Two distinct facets of Egoism have been classified; these are universal and individual egoism. The universal egoist declares that all individuals must be concerned with themselves and their own welfare. Individual egoists believe that the egoist is concerned with only himself or her, and will disregard the interests of others. It can be said that Egoists have sought to make the “I” significant in the universe.

According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Herbert Spencer said, “Ethics has to recognize truth, recognized in unethical thought, that egoism comes before

altruism. The acts required for continual self-preservation, including the enjoyments of benefits achieved by such arts, are the first requisites to universal welfare.” While Spencer’s words are indicative of ethical egoism, his ideas can be mapped back to Aristotle’s theory of “self-regarding behavior”. According to Aristotle it was imperative that one befriended himself prior to making friends with others. Egoism can be both descriptive and normative. Psychological Egoism falls within the former, which asserts that human beings are naturally self centered and self motivated. The later, normative ethical theory specifies the way in which people ought to live, and not how they do live. Normative Egoism presents itself in two distinct forms: rational egoism and ethical egoism. Rational Egoism was popularized by renowned author, Ayn Rand, who affirmed the idea that “the promotions of one’s interests is always in accordance with reason”. It is irrational not to pursue one’s own interests as neglecting to do so can lead to personal dissatisfaction. Rand suggests that Rational Egoism is not merely acting on whims and temporary desires, but instead it initiates thinking of what is going to be beneficial in the long run. Ethical Egoism is different in the sense that it declares “it is necessary and sufficient for an action to be morally right that it maximize one's self-interest” (Stanford). It exists in contrast to altruism, which is the theoretical perspective that individuals are obligated to “help and serve one another”. However, this does not indicate that egoism does not consider the well being of others, in fact, it asserts that society will become more stable if egoism is appropriately executed. I will now go on to discuss the plausible advantages of egoism.

Egoists assert that this theoretical framework is not selfish in fact, it allows for individuals within a society to be more satisfied overall. It appears to me as though

Egoism rejects the “Judaic-Christian principles on the grounds that it is right for a man to live his own life” and therefore was born as a contrast to religious beliefs. It allows for a more independent society, one that is not governed by religious constraints. However, I think it is interesting to analyze aspects of Western religion in relation to Egoism. In order to do this, I would like to look closely at the concept of confession. Confession is a mechanism of the church that is designed to help one be redeemed of his or her sins. However, while the cause is supposedly religion, it is in fact a great example of Egoism. It is an individual’s best interest to seek redemption, and therefore he goes to confession. Furthermore, the individual has a weight lifted off his chest as a result of this confession. This it is is an example of ethical egoism. To analyze this same concept using rational egoism; we might say that it is irrational for a person to avoid confession, especially if it means that they will be redeemed. The consequences of confessing are largely advantageous to the individual in the long run.

Another example of Egoism is a more complex one concerning volunteer work or charity giving. Individuals partake in community service because they consider it to be “the right thing to do”. Other people feel like it is a duty or an act that benefits people who are less fortunate than themselves. While this could be easily confused with the theoretical framework of Altruism, I want to point out how it is, in fact, an example of Egoism. Simplistically, this can be explained with the understanding that we feel better about ourselves by doing charity. We feel like we are “good” people, and that we have helped lives. Yet, we are choosing to help other people in order to make ourselves feel better. On another level, we believe we are doing “good” for a reason. We are trapped in a realm governed by social normative values that act as indicators for what is good and

bad, right and wrong. By doing good, we are being good and as a result we are considered more virtuous. Our status within our own society is immediately augmented as a result of this one act.

It must be noted that egoists sincerely believe that by acting on our own motivations, we are in fact building a more stable, and satisfied society. A critique of egoism has been made that it could potentially give rise to “conflict theory” as proposed by Karl Marx. This asserts that if individuals are in constant competition, then society is most likely to crumble, and lead to a totalitarian space. However, it is imperative to keep in mind the idea that it is in an individual’s interest to coexist with his fellow citizens and therefore, he will respect each one of them while keeping to himself. It appears as though Egoism was introduced in order to negate the principles of theoretical perspectives such as conflict theory.

It can be argued that, in a society like ours, egoism is so prevalent that it can be considered obsolete. Forgive me for the oxymoron I have presented in the last statement. What I mean to say is that individuals are consistently looking out for themselves, and as a result, it cannot be explicitly pointed out. As a student of sociology, I think it imperative in analyzing the social factors and circumstances surrounding the use of Egoism. In fact, it has been argued by James Rachels that individuals are most familiar with our own needs, and as a result we are able to care for ourselves. In this current world, the question remains, do we have any choice but to employ Egoism in order to survive?

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