

# A Defense of Egoism<sup>1</sup>

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## **1. Introduction**

Egoism, the view that self-interest is the exclusive standard of morally right action, is in my opinion the most uncharitably treated of all ethical theories. Philosophers go to great lengths charitably to understand, interpret, and develop other ethical theories—e.g., utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics—and to defend them against objections, e.g., counterexamples, charges of vagueness, ambiguity, internal inconsistency, intuitive implausibility. They have no problem, furthermore, regarding other ethical theories as respectable, i.e., as having something important to say about the moral life, even if they regard the theories as having problems. Philosophers tend not, however, to extend the same sympathetic treatment to egoism.

Were egoism to be given a sympathetic treatment, I think many people, even if they would not be persuaded that egoism is totally correct, would be persuaded that the pursuit of self-interest is far more morally attractive<sup>i</sup> than they previously thought. My aim in this paper is to defend the thesis that egoism aligns with *and explains* a critical mass of widely held intuitions about moral living. By a critical mass, I mean a minimum amount of our intuitions such as to warrant taking egoism seriously and thinking about it further. I think I achieve more than the minimum in this paper, but I will stick to a conservative formulation of my official thesis.

My defense of egoism has three steps, corresponding to the three remaining Sections of this paper (2-4). In Section 2, “Selfishness is Generally Morally Attractive,” I characterize what selfish behavior generally looks like in the real world. If we grasp what it looks like in the real

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world, we will intuitively find it to be generally morally attractive. In Section 3, “Egoism and Helping Others,” I argue that an egoistic policy toward helping and not helping others well aligns with and explains our intuitions about when and why we should help and not help others. In Section 4, I do the same for an egoistic policy toward harming and not harming others.

I constructed this three-step defense of egoism to address what I think are the two strongest sources of resistance to egoism. The first is the view that there is nothing morally attractive about the pursuit of self-interest; it is at best amoral. The second is that egoism conflicts with common-sense morality, according to which we should help others and not harm them; the pursuit of self-interest, it is widely believed, is often incompatible with adherence to these common-sense norms. The first step addresses the first source of resistance and second and third steps address the second.

My defense of egoism might be helpfully thought of as a further development of the program, revived in contemporary literature in the tradition of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, of arguing that there is substantial harmony between morality and self-interest.<sup>ii</sup> My defense shares with writings in this tradition the feature of deep and sustained reflection on the relation between the pursuit of self-interest and adherence to widely accepted moral norms, in real life. At the same time, however, there is an important difference between my defense of egoism and the neo-Aristotelian harmonization program. According to the harmonization program, there are apodictic moral norms that are independent of self-interest, with which the pursuit of self-interest must be reconciled. By contrast, I am not arguing that pursuing self-interest is morally attractive on grounds that we can reconcile self-interest with such norms. Rather, I am arguing that one should help others, not harm others, etc., to the extent that and *because* doing so promotes one’s self-interest.

## 2. *Selfishness is Generally Morally Attractive*

I will understand *selfishness* as the pursuit of self-interest. To act selfishly means to act in one's self-interest, with the usual qualification of "to the best of one's knowledge." By self-interest, I mean the realization of one's true or actual self-interest; not the fulfillment of whatever interests one happens to have, the pursuit of which might be *self-destructive* rather than self-interested.<sup>iii</sup> It is not, for example, *selfish* to destroy one's mind and body with drugs and alcohol. It *is* selfish, by contrast, to pursue a long life, health and happiness, deep relationships, a career and hobbies one enjoys, to develop one's mind, to grow, and to deepen one's appreciation for life. No moral judgment is built into my definition of selfishness. It is an open question to what extent and with what qualifications selfishness is morally attractive or unattractive. This is what I am investigating; though, just from the brief exemplification of selfishness above, the case for its intuitive moral attractiveness has already been started.

I assume that the moral attractiveness of a type of behavior—selfish behavior, unselfish behavior, honest behavior, etc.—is a function of our intuitive reactions to what that type of behavior generally looks like in the real world. Let us then consider a paradigmatic example of selfishness, i.e., an example that illustrates what selfishness generally looks like in the real world.

Consider **Selfish Coco**. Coco, with the aim of achieving happiness, puts in enormous effort over a decade to transform herself from a socially awkward, spiteful, destitute, miserable, and lonely woman, into a socially adept, warm woman with a well-paying career she loves and the love of her life by her side. This decade-long paradigmatically selfish behavior can also be thought of as encapsulating thousands or more of smaller selfish actions, e.g., that particular morning she looked at herself in the mirror and said to herself, "I'm going to turn my life around"; that day she decided to see a therapist; that night she signed up for an online dating site, despite all her fears.

Upon confronting Selfish Coco, we find that selfishness is highly morally attractive. We do not regard it merely as amoral, but rather as great, beautiful, and admirable. Why exactly is selfishness morally attractive? Why do we morally admire Selfish Coco? One reason is that we intuitively regard our own life and happiness as great things. A second is that life is *short*, making it important to make the most of it *for ourselves*. A third is that, for many if not most people, achieving happiness is very challenging, requiring enormous dedication, and we find such dedication to one's self admirable. Coco has, suppose, a possible ninety years of life and that's it (I am assuming a secular worldview). What should Coco do? *Fight for her happiness*, because it's a great thing, she doesn't have long on this Earth, and it won't come automatically. She has one shot; she'd better not waste it; she'd better be selfish.

Let me now consider two objections to my position that Selfish Coco illustrates the general moral attractiveness of selfishness. The first is that Selfish Coco is not a paradigmatic example of selfishness. The second is that what makes Selfish Coco morally attractive is the virtuous activity she exhibited, not the fact that she is selfish.

Beginning with the first, many people would not regard Selfish Coco as an example of selfishness, let alone a paradigmatic one, because they assume that selfishness is *per se* morally wrong and do not see anything wrong with Selfish Coco's behavior. Instead, most people would call *selfish* those people who characteristically try to gain<sup>iv</sup> at the expense of others, e.g., using other people for money, rides to the airport, career advancement, emotional support, while never helping others in return; lying to people, manipulating them, physically assaulting them to obtain something they want.

There are three problems with people's tendency to associate selfishness with gaining at others' expense. First, cases of gain at the expense of others are not paradigmatic examples of

selfishness, because it is generally not in people's self-interest to gain at the expense of others.<sup>v</sup> I will adduce support for this empirical claim throughout the paper. For now, I will limit myself to brief remarks that capture most fundamentally why this claim is true: Attempting to gain at the expense of others will typically make others resent you, make relationships more dysfunctional and internecine, make them less willing to help you in the future, reduce intimacy and opportunities for intimacy with others—and intimacy is a crucial value to one's happiness; a habit of trying to gain at the expense of others will only exacerbate these consequences. It is rather to people's self-interest to participate in mutually beneficial relationships.

Second, most cases in which people gain at the expense of others are possible only because those being expended are *not being selfish*. If they were, then they would not be willing for others to gain at their own expense and would act to prevent that from happening.<sup>vi</sup> Cases of gain at the expense of others, then, even *if* they were paradigmatic examples of selfishness (which they are not), are not examples of selfishness that are relevant for the current discussion: The reason is that I am arguing that selfishness is morally attractive as a principle for *everyone* to live by, *not* as a principle for some but not others to live by. Thus, we must exemplify what selfish behavior would look like in the real world if it were practiced *generally*.

Third, in cases of gaining at the expense of others, even if the gain genuinely benefits the gainer, it is the very activity of gaining *at the expense of others* that people find morally unattractive; *not* that the gaining benefited the gainer. Supposing Coco robs a store so that she can afford some things that will make her happy, it would be the *stealing* that people think is morally wrong; *not* that the stealing was selfish. To appreciate this even more sharply, note again that gain at another's expense can be—and, per the first point, is generally—self-destructive, e.g., Coco robs a store so that she can sustain her drug addiction.

The fact that the notion of selfishness, in most people's minds, is so disconnected from actual self-interest and so illicitly linked with behavior that is widely thought to be immoral, makes it all the more important—if we are to give the case for egoism a fair hearing—to fasten onto Selfish Coco as a paradigm example of selfishness. Doing so is a way of counteracting the deeply ingrained tendency for people, when reflecting on selfishness, to jump to examples of behavior that (1) they regard as morally unattractive, (2) that is not actually selfish, and that (3) even if it *were* selfish, its being so would not be the reason it is morally unattractive.

The second objection to my argument for the general moral attractiveness of selfishness is that what's morally attractive about Selfish Coco is not that she was selfish, but rather the virtue she exhibited, e.g., courage, persistence, the overcoming of obstacles.

My reply to this objection is that Selfish Coco's exhibition of virtue are morally attractive *because they are selfish*, i.e., *because they served her happiness*. To appreciate this, transpose her virtues to a case of *self-destructive* behavior and note how our intuitive reaction changes. Suppose Coco, who is regularly being emotionally abused by her husband, thinks, "I really want to leave my marriage because my husband keeps emotionally abusing me, but I had better not be selfish—for selfishness is immoral—so instead I will muster up the virtue that is necessary for me to withstand a lifetime of being emotionally abused." Notice here that Coco's virtues do not make her behavior morally attractive. Why? Because they are *self-destructive*.

Let me add two more examples further to illustrate my claim that selfishness can make the overcoming of obstacles and exhibition of virtues morally attractive. Imagine telling a student who, after several years of schooling and simultaneous working to support herself, has just earned her college degree, "You get moral credit for the all the hard work you have done, but not for doing it *for yourself*. In fact, you would get more moral credit if you did it for *someone(s) else*, e.g., your

parents, to please them.” Imagine telling an oppressed woman in the Middle East that her struggle to fight for a life in which she is not raped, beaten, and imprisoned at home, gets moral credit for exhibiting the virtues of courage and dedication, but no moral credit for the fact that she is trying to *improve her life*. I suggest that such thoughts are wrong. It is morally admirable to lose weight, battle depression, search for love, earn a college degree, pursue a fulfilling career, try to avoid being raped and beaten, *etc., for your own sake*.<sup>vii</sup> Selfishness *itself* is morally attractive.

Now, continuing with the idea that selfishness can make the exercise of virtues morally attractive, not only is this true, but also, *such exhibitions of virtue are essential to being selfish*, i.e., essential to the practice of selfishness in the real world. This point is key to appreciating the moral attractiveness of selfishness and I want to elaborate four aspects of it.

First, inherent in being a *bona fide* selfish choice is that it is a choice to act selfishly *in the face of obstacles*; obstacles, here, refers to unselfish courses of action that have some pull with one. For example, if Coco, after much internal struggle, decides to leave an abusive relationship, *that is a selfish choice*; that is paradigmatically selfish behavior, for she experiences some or even great pull to stay in the abusive relationship and she makes a conscious choice to leave it. By contrast, suppose Coco has high self-esteem and would never even consider dating an abusive man. In this case, Coco’s not getting into an abusive relationship is not an act of selfishness; the possibility of getting into one did not even occur to her. Now, if she were seriously considering getting into an abusive relationship, and then out of dedication to her own happiness decided not to, then this decision would be selfish, in a paradigmatic sense of selfishness. Inherent to the meaning of selfishness, then, is that it is the pursuit of one’s happiness *in the face of obstacles*.

Second, *life is hard for almost everyone*. Few people would claim that achieving and maintaining happiness is an easy task; and I think those who do are wrong. It is already very

challenging to accomplish a particular selfish goal, e.g., losing weight, quitting an addiction, leaving an abusive relationship, acquiring self-esteem, making peace with decline and death. Imagine then how much more challenging it is to get *one's whole life* in happy order and *across one's whole lifetime*.

Third, in its highest form, *selfishness is the deepest, most courageous and persistent commitment to achieve true happiness*. Many people will label as selfish the behavior of people who do not want to face their problems, do not want to get their lives together, do not want to achieve inner peace, deep happiness and fulfillment, but rather run away from their problems with excessive partying, drinking, drug use, gambling, sex, and—*significantly*—*helping of others*. Running away from obstacles, however, is the diametric opposite of selfishness. Rather, I would suggest that a paradigmatic illustration of selfishness at the deepest level is the psychotherapeutic process. In psychotherapy, ideally, a client turns her attention inward to face the most difficult of thoughts and emotions in order to heal, transform, grow, and continually develop herself into an ever stronger, greater, happier, more fulfilled human being. Most people are afraid to undertake this process; this illustrates my contention that selfishness is the deepest, most courageous and persistent commitment to achieve true happiness

Fourth, as there is no upper limit to one's development, by its nature selfishness *is the search for more obstacles to overcome*. The goal of selfishness is not to overcome obstacles so that one can get to a point where there are no more obstacles to overcome (a point that would never be achieved anyway), but rather to keep finding new obstacles to overcome, i.e., to keep developing, e.g., to find more and deeper ways to enjoy life, to develop inner and outer resources to contend with future adversity.

I hope I have established in this Section that selfishness, at least generally, is a very positive thing. Now let us consider the plausibility of an egoistic policy toward helping others.

### **3. Egoism and Helping Others**

An egoistic policy toward helping others would consist in helping others only to the extent that and because doing so promotes one's self-interest. Many people would claim that this policy is morally repugnant and rather than that, to count as having moral credit, helping others must stem from *unselfish* motivation. This unselfish motivation is typically understood in one or more of three ways, which I will call the sentimentalist view, the Kantian view, and the self-sacrificial view. The first—associated with moral sentimentalism, ethics of care, and virtue ethics—is that one should help others out of *feelings of concern for them*, e.g., love, caring, compassion, empathy, kindness; on this view, helping someone out of feelings of concern is contrasted against helping someone out of selfish motivation. The second, chiefly associated with Kant, is that one should help others *because it's the right thing to do*, where the presumed criterion/criteria for what makes the helping right, on this view, is (a) non-egoistic and (b) contains no prescription about what feelings one should or should not have in so helping. The third, widely accepted and advocated in the culture, is that the exact *opposite* sort of helping to selfish helping, viz., *self-sacrificial* helping of others, is morally attractive; it is morally attractive to *incur net harm to oneself* for the sake of others.<sup>viii</sup>

In this Section, I will defend an egoistic policy toward helping others against these three forms of resistance to it. In subsection 3.1, in criticism of the sentimentalist view, I will argue for an egoistic policy in regard to developing feelings of concern for others and helping others out of feelings of concern for them. In subsection 3.2, I will criticize the Kantian and self-sacrificial views in a way that lends further intuitive support for an egoistic policy toward helping others.

### 3.1 The sentimentalist view of unselfish regard for others

I agree with the sentimentalist view that it's important to help others out of feelings of concern for them. Contrary to the sentimentalist view, however, I think that such helping can be selfish; and that it should be. I will argue here that one should have a selfish policy in regard to (1) developing or trying to develop feelings of concern for others and (2) deciding when to act on feelings of concern for others.

Let us consider (1). If it would *hurt* Coco to try to develop or nurture feelings of concern for others, then she should not do so; perhaps she should even try to *reduce* her feelings of concern for them. Coco should *not*, for example, try to develop or nurture feelings of concern for people who will emotionally abuse her, because doing so will increase the chances that she will get into a self-destructive relationship with them. Now if it is in Coco's *self-interest* to try to develop or nurture feelings of concern for others, then doing so would be morally attractive. In searching for friendships and lovers, for example, if she finds that a prospective friend or lover would be *good for her*, then it would be morally attractive to allow and nurture feelings of concern for them.

Now let us consider (2). If acting out of feelings of concern for someone would *hurt* Coco, then she should not do it, e.g., she should not forgo studying for a final exam in order to tend to a friend's emotional needs, she should not keep giving tender loving care to someone who is toxic to her life. If helping friends, lovers, family, co-workers, the poor, anyone, out of feelings of concern *adds* to her life rather than *subtracts* from it, i.e., benefits her rather than hurts her—and in this connection it is important that she choose friends, lovers, and family who are *good for her*—then doing so would be morally attractive.

A great many people would already find the above egoistic policy toward developing and nurturing feelings of concern for others, and acting out of feelings of concern for others, to be

morally attractive. This is especially true for mental health counselors, who believe very strongly in the policy and try to instill it in their clients; to get their clients to leave relationships that hurt them and to nurture relationships that benefit them. This egoistic policy aligns with and explains at least a great many of our intuitions about when and why it is morally attractive to try to develop and nurture—and to try to *reduce*—feelings of concern for others, and when and why it is morally attractive to act *and not act* on such feelings, and therefore deserves serious and further consideration.

Resistance to an egoistic policy toward developing and acting on feelings of concern for others stems to a large extent from a straw-manned understanding of selfishness and a whitewashed understanding of unselfishness. Instead of using selfishness to mean the pursuit of one's actual self-interest—e.g., of one's true, long-term, deep happiness—which involves caring relationships and acting out of feelings of concern for others, selfishness is instead associated with the pursuit of so-called merely material goods—e.g., money, the things money can buy, and with the often cited and vague notions of “power,” “advantage,” and “personal gain,” which are generally associated with the pursuit of material goods—and with lack of sympathy for the well-being of others. And instead of using unselfishness to refer to behavior that *undercuts* one's true, long-term, deep happiness, unselfishness is instead associated with the pursuit and nurturing of caring relationships and acting out of feelings of concern for others.

The pursuit of material goods, the pursuit of caring relationships, the development and nurturing of feelings of concern for others, acting out of feelings of concern for others, as well as efforts to *reduce* feelings of concern for others and choosing *not* to act out of feelings of concern for others, *can be selfish or unselfish*. Doing so is selfish if it is done for the sake of one's true happiness and unselfish if it is done at a net expense to one's happiness. It would be an act of

*unselfishness*, for example, for Coco to spend money on bass fishing equipment rather than on medical treatment for her husband, whose well-being is far more important to her happiness than is bass fishing equipment. It would be an act of *selfishness* for Coco to spend money to save her husband, whose well-being is crucial to her happiness.<sup>ix</sup>

Some will resist the above egoistic policy, not due to any misunderstanding of it, but rather due to having the view that it's precisely unselfishness, understood accurately as a willingness to incur net harm to oneself for the sake of others, i.e., to be self-sacrificial, that's morally attractive. I will criticize this view in the next subsection.

### **3.2 The Kantian and self-sacrificial views of unselfish regard for others**

I said earlier that many people hold that helping others, to count as moral, must stem from *unselfish* motivation, and that the nature of this unselfish motivation is typically understood in one or more of three ways, viz., the sentimentalist view, the Kantian view, and the self-sacrificial view. I criticized the sentimentalist view in the prior subsection, by defending an egoistic policy toward developing and acting on feelings of concern for others.

Now I turn to criticize the self-sacrificial view, and in so doing I will also be criticizing the Kantian view. The latter—viz., the view that one should help others *because it's the right thing to do*, not because it's in one's self-interest to do so, where the presumed criterion/criteria for what makes an action right, on this view, is (a) non-egoistic and (b) contains no prescription about what feelings one should or should not have in so helping—is an expression of the view that *unselfish* regard for others is morally attractive. And this view is equivalent, or at least *de facto* equivalent, to the view that self-sacrifice for others, i.e., incurring net harm to oneself for the sake of others, is morally attractive. In criticizing self-sacrifice, then, I am also criticizing the Kantian view.

One might offer the following objection to my claim of equivalence between the two views: There are cases in which one can act out of unselfish regard for others, i.e., help others because it's the right thing to do and not because it's in one's self-interest so to help, but at the same time, one might incur no loss from doing so, or perhaps even benefit from doing so, and one might know this. In such cases, acting out of unselfish regard is not acting self-sacrificially, since one incurs no harm from so acting.

In reply to this objection, to the extent that one investigates the attractiveness or unattractiveness of unselfish regard for others by focusing on cases in which the agent, in acting out of unselfish regard, is not harmed and possibly even benefited, one's investigation is improper; and I think the preceding was a *major* understatement. If it is really *unselfish* regard for others that one wants to defend, then the *unselfishness* of the regard, i.e., the net harm to the agent, must be the salient feature in cases that one wants to offer as lending intuitive support to the purported moral attractiveness of such regard. To the extent the moral attractiveness of purportedly unselfish regard for others is defended by appeal to examples in which such regard is in one's self-interest—in an *accurate* rather than straw-manned understanding of self-interest—one is not defending *unselfish* regard for others but rather egoism; and one is *illicitly* co-opting the moral attractiveness of selfishness in trying to defend the moral attractiveness of purported unselfishness. Let us then examine self-sacrifice straight on.

Prevailing moral opinion both does and does not take seriously the view that self-sacrifice is the essence of moral excellence; that the more self-sacrificing one is, the more morally excellent one is (and this is an inconsistency in prevailing moral opinion). On the one hand, few people regard a life of self-sacrifice, or at least a life of extreme and habitual self-sacrifice, as the right way to live. Most people value and take themselves rightly to value individual happiness,

boundaries, mutually beneficial relationships (as opposed to sacrificial ones), values that they might say express a “healthy amount of selfishness.” Most people would say that there should be a “healthy balance” between selfishness and self-sacrifice; just as too much self-sacrifice is a bad thing, so is too much selfishness.

On the other hand and at the same time, self-sacrifice *is*—explicitly, loudly, and ubiquitously—upheld as the moral ideal in the culture. Mother Teresa and Jesus Christ are upheld as moral ideals because of their self-sacrifice. The same goes for fictional heroes and other real people who are regarded as heroes. They are upheld as moral ideals on grounds of the claim that they risk their lives, and die, for strangers. The more one acts to benefit others *without regard to one’s self-interest*, according to prevailing moral opinion, the more morally excellent one is. This idea is also advocated in academic moral philosophy: the notion of the *supererogatory*, of incurring *greater cost to oneself* for the sake of others than is morally required, expresses the moral ideal of self-sacrifice.

Let us get very clear on what self-sacrifice is by distinguishing it from four other types of behavior that involve helping others and that might, mistakenly, be associated with self-sacrifice. Being self-sacrificial, or altruistic, again, consists in *sacrificing* one’s self-interest *for the sake of others*; in incurring a net harm to oneself for the sake of others.

First, self-sacrifice should not be associated with *finding happiness from* helping others, e.g., a physician who enjoys helping others. Finding happiness from helping others is the diametric opposite of self-sacrifice, i.e., of incurring *harm* to oneself for the sake of others. Rather, it should be associated with a physician who is miserable as one, but who remains a physician because her parents want her to be one and out of self-sacrifice for her parents.<sup>x</sup> The question “What if you get happiness *from self-sacrifice*?” reflects this extreme misunderstanding of self-sacrifice. It should

be regarded as even more senseless than the question “What if you get happiness from being set on fire?” because it is only a contingent matter that no human beings would gain happiness from being set on fire, whereas it is *definitional* to self-sacrifice that one is *hurting* oneself.

Second, self-sacrifice should not be associated with helping others out of feelings of concern. Doing so, as I argued earlier, can be selfish.

Third, being self-sacrificial does not mean simply giving up something one desires for the sake of helping someone else. For, as I argued earlier, one could so give up a desire *selfishly*: the other person’s well-being may be more important to one’s happiness than what one gave up. If one gives up money, a career opportunity, time, or something else that is important to one’s happiness, in order to help someone one loves and whose happiness is more important to one’s own than is what one gave up, then this is not an act of self-sacrifice, but of selfishness. An act of self-sacrifice is an act in which one incurs *net* harm; not just any amount of harm and not just any lack of desire-fulfillment.

Fourth, self-sacrifice should not be associated with cases in which the purportedly negative effect on one’s well-being from helping others is miniscule (and in many such cases it is reasonable to hold that there was no negative effect at all), e.g., someone drops an orange that rolls across the street and you undertake to fetch it for her, someone on the street asks for some change and you just give it. These cases obscure the nature of self-sacrifice by downplaying the cost to the agent. And often, they are cases in which most people would simply feel like helping and gain some happiness from doing so.

Having clarified the nature of self-sacrifice, I will now turn to criticize it. My strategy for criticizing self-sacrifice will be the following. I will begin with a case of self-sacrifice that I think illustrates the moral unattractiveness of self-sacrifice. This will be my foundational case, by which

I mean the intuitive fixed point that I think captures in a palpable, real life way the essence of self-sacrifice and in my view its unattractive nature. I will then address a range of objections to the effect that my foundational case was cherry-picked and by itself does not show that self-sacrifice is generally morally unattractive. In the course of addressing these objections, I think it will become gradually and increasingly plausible that self-sacrifice is generally morally unattractive, and so *because selfishness is generally morally attractive*; and that my foundational case is a paradigmatic case of self-sacrifice, not a cherry-picked one.

The foundational case is called **Self-sacrificial Coco**. Suppose Coco's parents request that she abandon her career in America, move back to Vietnam even though her husband will leave her if she does so, and then devote herself to the family restaurant, which she must do even though she would hate it, because, as they claim, it is morally wrong for her to be selfish and morally right for her to sacrifice herself to others; in this case to her parents. Adhering to the view that self-sacrifice is morally excellent, she obeys her parents, giving up her happiness and living the rest of her life in misery.

I think it would be wrong for Coco to self-sacrifice and I think the reason it would be wrong is precisely that *self-sacrifice* is morally unattractive. And I think self-sacrifice is morally unattractive precisely because I think selfishness, as I argued in the prior Section, is morally attractive. Self-sacrifice is a form of self-destructive, i.e., unselfish or anti-selfish, behavior. I offer my claim that self-sacrifice is morally unattractive as another perspective on my claim that selfishness is morally attractive. This point is crucial to my defense of selfishness, as my criticism of self-sacrifice is a way of elaborating the moral attractiveness of selfishness. It is great to pursue one's happiness, as I argued in the prior Section. What a tragedy it would be, then, for Coco to give up her happiness.<sup>xi</sup>

I take it that most people would agree with me that it would be wrong for Coco to self-sacrifice and would be sympathetic at least in this case to the reason that I think it would be wrong, viz., that it would *be self-sacrifice*, i.e., self-destructive. Many, however, would raise objections to my suggestion that this one case illustrates that self-sacrifice is generally morally unattractive: 1. The request that Coco's parents are making is unreasonable. 2. The benefit to be produced is not that great. 3. The sacrifice in this case is extreme. In offering an example of self-sacrifice that has these three features, some might claim, I have offered a cherry-picked example of self-sacrifice, i.e., a case that does not represent the general nature of the behavior. I will proceed to argue why these other proffered considerations fail to undercut my position that Self-sacrificial Coco illustrates the moral unattractiveness of self-sacrifice.

### **3.2.1 Self-sacrifice vis-à-vis unreasonable requests for self-sacrifice**

Considering the first objection, viz., Coco's parents' request is unreasonable, one might press the objector to explain what makes a request for a sacrifice reasonable or unreasonable. I suspect that if we explored this issue, we would find that to a significant extent, people implicitly regard the requests for self-sacrifice that they think are unreasonable as unreasonable precisely because they at least implicitly regard self-sacrifice as morally unattractive; this result would provide significant leverage for the view that selfishness is morally attractive. Instead of pursuing this line of thought, however, I will grant my objector that *prima facie* some requests are reasonable and some are unreasonable, and that the distinction between the two types of requests is at least to a significant degree orthogonal to the ethics of selfishness. My reply to the objection is that, by the lights of prevailing morality, many requests for self-sacrifice would be regarded as unreasonable—e.g., asking a stranger to give you his vital organs so that you can use them to save your daughter—and yet at the same time, the performance of such sacrifices would be regarded according to

prevailing moral opinion as morally attractive. According to prevailing morality, then, whether a request for a sacrifice is reasonable does not seem to be relevant to the ethics of the sacrifice.

### 3.2.2 Self-sacrifice vis-à-vis helping others

According to some people, if we raise the stakes, e.g., the survival of millions of strangers depends on Coco's sacrificing her happiness, then intuitively it becomes more morally attractive for Coco to sacrifice her happiness. Self-sacrifice is more morally attractive if the benefit to be produced is greater. This suggestion purports to make self-sacrifice more morally attractive by appealing to the idea, widely taken as plausible, that it is more morally attractive to produce more benefit rather than less, e.g., to save millions rather than just one person. Let us call this idea *beneficence*. I have three objections to this move of appealing to beneficence to bolster the moral attractiveness of self-sacrifice. I present them in what I take to be *descending* order of strength.

First, I challenge the *right* of advocates of prevailing morality to make the move. I do not think they have the right because they would deny that beneficence bolsters the moral attractiveness of selfishness, illustrating that their primary concern is with upholding *self-sacrifice* and condemning *selfishness*, and not with *beneficence*. Consider **Greedy Coco**, whose passion is to make a lot of money. After a decade of research, she discovers a cure for cancer and sells it for as high a price as she can get away with, i.e., the price that would maximize her profit; none of which profit she will donate to charity, but rather all of which she will use to purchase a fleet of yachts and populate them with champagne pools and handsome men. Suppose her cure has saved millions of lives. Compare Greedy Coco to **Dead Coco**, who sacrifices her life to save one stranger by jumping in front of the trolley that would otherwise hit him. Prevailing morality would regard Greedy Coco as deserving of no moral credit, because she acted out of selfishness, even though she saved millions of lives, and would regard Dead Coco as a paragon of moral excellence, because

she self-sacrificed, even if the benefit she produced was pale in comparison to the benefit that Greedy Coco produced. If advocates of prevailing moral opinion want to claim that *producing benefit* is morally significant, they must first question their giving Dead Coco moral credit but not Greedy Coco.

Second, the appeal to beneficence to bolster the moral attractiveness of self-sacrifice, if we are thinking about the real world, appeals to the self-interest of the agent; and it is illicit to appeal to the self-interest of the agent in order to defend self-sacrifice. If one raises the stakes—e.g., millions of lives depend on a person’s sacrifice as opposed to one—it generally becomes more in one’s self-interest to help others, i.e., less of a sacrifice to do so. Here are three notable ways in which helping more rather than fewer becomes more in one’s self-interest. First, it is human nature that we feel concern for others, and so if many lives are at stake as opposed to just a few, we will feel more concern; we will feel more grief if millions die than if one does. Second, allowing all those people to die eliminates all the benefit that might have come to one from their remaining alive, e.g., money, friendship, sex, appreciation. Third, the higher the stakes, the more others will want one to perform the action that helps and the more they will shame one and in general treat one poorly if one does not do so.

If it is really *self-sacrifice* that one wants to defend by appeal to beneficence, then one must construct scenarios in which greater beneficence does not make it more to the agent’s self-interest to help; better yet, in which greater beneficence makes the *self-sacrifice* greater. For example, suppose that the feeling we get from helping others is the feeling of being raped and that everyone will hate us and want to kill us for helping others, including those people we would be saving; *then* consult one’s intuitions about whether beneficence bolsters the moral attractiveness of self-sacrifice. I propose that beneficence in this case would make self-sacrifice even more unattractive.

Third, I would question whether advocates of prevailing moral opinion really believe, as they profess to, that beneficence bolsters the moral attractiveness of self-sacrifice. Dead Coco 1 sacrifices her life to save one stranger while Dead Coco 2 sacrifices her life to save two strangers. It is true that Dead Coco 2 will receive more appreciation, e.g., appreciation from two sets of families rather than one, but was Dead Coco 2's sacrifice more morally attractive than Dead Coco 1's? It would seem that advocates of prevailing moral opinion would regard both Dead Coco's as equally morally attractive, in virtue of self-sacrificing.

### 3.2.3 "Small" self-sacrifice

Consider now the objection that the sacrifice I portrayed in Self-sacrificial Coco is cherry-picked on account of the self-sacrifice's being extreme. Coco is sacrificing her *entire happiness for the rest of her life* for the sake of her parents. I have not addressed cases of non-extreme self-sacrifice, e.g., she only has to sacrifice a month or a week of her life.

I have seven replies to this objection. First, prevailing morality already endorses cases of self-sacrifice that are far more extreme than Self-sacrificial Coco, e.g., giving up one's life for strangers. What justifies charging my example of Self-sacrificial Coco with being extreme? One might answer that the benefit to be produced from Coco's self-sacrifice is not large enough to make the sacrifice morally attractive; whereas if she enacted that self-sacrifice to save a stranger's life, *that* would be morally attractive.<sup>xiii</sup> However, as I argued earlier, advocates of self-sacrifice do not have the right to the move of appealing to beneficence to bolster the moral attractiveness of self-sacrifice.

Second, it's significant that extreme self-sacrifice is morally unattractive, because prevailing moral opinion upholds extreme self-sacrifice as morally attractive. Mother Teresa and Jesus Christ are not regarded as paragons of moral excellence because they practiced *non-extreme*

self-sacrifice! And it is widely believed that the more you sacrifice for others, the more moral you are; and a sacrifice of your very life would be truly morally excellent.

Third, intuitive inclination to regard non-extreme self-sacrifice as morally attractive and not to regard extreme self-sacrifice as morally attractive, actually supports egoism. Why would it be that *extreme* self-sacrifice is morally unattractive yet *non-extreme* self-sacrifice is morally attractive? Well, let me point out something right under our noses: it is an appeal to the moral attractiveness of *self-interest* that makes the latter morally attractive as opposed to the former. It is *less* self-destructive to make a small sacrifice than a large sacrifice; and *this* is the reason people are more inclined to regard small sacrifice as morally attractive. If this is the case, then I would ask: Why regard *any* self-sacrifice—any self-destruction—as morally attractive to begin with? I suggest that this position would be just as arbitrary as the position that one should maximize utility, *less five hedons*.

Fourth, by showing that “extreme” self-sacrifice is morally unattractive, I have undercut the justification that prevailing moral opinion offers for the claim that “non-extreme” self-sacrifice is morally attractive. The justification offered is *not* that only *non-extreme* self-sacrifice is morally attractive, but rather that self-sacrifice *per se* is morally attractive; and by corollary, that the more self-sacrificing you are, the more morally excellent you are. I offered the extreme case of self-sacrifice in order to illustrate sharply the moral unattractiveness of self-sacrifice *per se*.

Fifth, as cases of self-sacrifice become less extreme, they are more plausibly explained as cases of selfish regard for others, e.g., helping out of concern when doing so serves your happiness.

Sixth, given the first five points, I submit that it should be a burden on one who advocates the moral attractiveness of any self-sacrifice to defend this claim, rather than a burden on one who denies the moral attractiveness of self-sacrifice to defend this denial.

Seventh, we can look directly at cases of “small” and putatively morally attractive self-sacrifice and discover their moral unattractiveness. Consider **Aspiring Actor Coco**, who has a deep and authentic love for acting and is working hard toward her dream of becoming a great actor. The work involves university study, waiting tables for money, and hours of daily practice in acting in her studio apartment, to craft her skill. Influenced, however, by moral messages from the culture that one should be focused less on one’s own happiness and instead sacrifice more for others, Coco decides to volunteer regularly at a soup kitchen. The volunteering eats away at her happiness. She feels stress, irritation, resentment, and dread about volunteering; she dislikes doing it; she feels that she is wasting her time; and the pursuit of her dream is delayed (she will take longer to finish college and she won’t develop her acting skills as quickly as otherwise, which may hurt her future job prospects).

Now, on behalf of my objector who wants me to discuss a “small” case of self-sacrifice, I leave it to my objector to interpret the extent of Coco’s self-sacrifice in whatever way she pleases, such that the self-sacrifice would not count in her view as “extreme” (so long as it is still interpreted as a self-sacrifice, of course). If, for example, some level of stress, resentment, setback to her career, *etc.*, would strike the objector as making the case an “extreme” case, then the objector is welcome to stipulate that a lower level applies in this case. Now, however my objector pleases to interpret the sacrifice, I would claim: It is morally unattractive for Coco to make that sacrifice. Why? Because, as I intuit, Coco’s pursuit of her happiness is a sacred thing and any setback to that, no matter how “small,” is wrong.

I would even furthermore deny the claim that some amount of self-sacrifice could genuinely be labeled as “small.” There are two reasons to reject this claim. First, an allegedly “small” amount of self-sacrifice might yield *major* negative implications on Coco’s future

happiness and success. Let us consider three ways in which “small” self-sacrifice might so yield. First, consider concrete examples of “small” self-sacrifice that may turn out to be large sacrifices: Just a “small” bit of increased stress, for example, might influence her later to take a rest instead of look at one more job ad, or might prevent her from having a sudden idea (of the “Eureka!” variety) later that day; and the act of looking at another job ad or having that idea might change her life dramatically for the better.

Second, a “small” sacrifice might make Coco disposed in the future to make “bigger” sacrifices; especially if she is making the “small” sacrifice clearly and explicitly on the principle of altruism.

Third, the moral principle of making “small” self-sacrifices undercuts *emotional freedom*. Fundamental to our level of happiness and growth, is feeling and acting on *emotional freedom*; feeling emotionally free to do what we want to do and not do what we do not want to do; by *wanting* here, I mean a primitive, felt sense impulse to do something, which includes thinking, resting, pondering, and imagining, not just acting in the world. This emotional freedom is the source of creativity, planning for the future, the discovery of more knowledge of ourselves and of the world, knowledge which may have huge impacts on our future happiness. The belief that one must serve others at “small” sacrifice to oneself will undercut the emotional freedom that is so fundamental to our happiness.

The second reason for rejecting the claim that some amount of self-sacrifice could be genuinely labeled as small is this: The claim is *prima facie* attractive only to the extent that one is *not* really talking about a paradigmatic, *bona fide* self-sacrifice, i.e., about the sacrifice of a *selfish* self. It is to a person who is *not dedicatedly selfish to begin with* that some act may plausibly be regarded as a “small” self-sacrifice. Consider, for example, **Vegetative Coco**, who sits at home all

and every day, watching television, who has no goals in life, and who feels indifferent what activity she is participating in, and in general to her life and future. Of Vegetative Coco, some would claim that it would be a “small” self-sacrifice” for her to, instead of wasting one afternoon on television, spend an hour in volunteering at a soup kitchen. I would suggest, however, that it is not even clear if she is making *any self-sacrifice at all*. If Vegetative Coco was not *pursuing her happiness to begin with*, i.e., if she was not a *selfish* self to begin with, it is dubious whether she can be correctly described as sacrificing herself for others.

By contrast, suppose that Vegetative Coco, while volunteering at the soup kitchen, has the deep spark to become an actor. And suppose that over the next few months she transforms herself into a person who has dreams (the acting) whose achievement will draw upon her *whole self over a lifetime*, i.e., transforms herself into Aspiring Actor Coco. An afternoon at the soup kitchen would be a true self-sacrifice.

Comparing Vegetative Coco and Aspiring Actor Coco, a criticism emerges of the claim that it is morally attractive to practice “small” self-sacrifice: The idea is a euphemistic cover for the claim that there is a limit to how much one is allowed to value one’s happiness. Observe that the hungrier and more fiery one’s selfishness is, the larger an allegedly “small” sacrifice is. It is wrong, according to the advocate of altruism, to value your happiness so much such that sacrifices on your part that such advocates would want to call *small* would be *significant* sacrifices. I say the altruist is wrong. I say that we only live once, every moment is precious, and there is no limit to how much we are allowed to value our happiness.

Now let us consider the plausibility of an egoistic policy toward harming others.

## **4. Egoism and Harming Others**

Causing harm to others, e.g., stealing, raping, murdering, is considered to be immoral, at least in most cases. An objection often raised against egoism is that it has the morally repugnant implication of endorsing one's harming of others to the extent and because doing so promotes one's self-interest. I will call this objection the Maleficence objection.

I will defend egoism against the Maleficence objection in two steps.<sup>xiii</sup> First, in subsection 4.1, "Prejudice against selfishness in the Maleficence objection," I will argue that Maleficence objection is often not made in good faith, but rather stems from an underlying prejudice against selfishness. To the extent that this objection is raised out of underlying prejudice against selfishness, resistance to egoism on grounds of this objection is unjustified. Second, in subsection 4.2, "Defending an egoistic policy toward harming others," I argue that an egoistic policy toward harming others well aligns with and explains our intuitions about when and why it is moral to harm and not harm others.

### **4.1 Prejudice against selfishness in the Maleficence objection**

I have three reasons for thinking that presentations of the Maleficence objection often stem from an underlying prejudice against selfishness. First, parallel versions of the Maleficence objection could be and are presented against other ethical theories, e.g., utilitarianism, but are not presented with nearly the same intended force. Stock counterexamples to utilitarianism, e.g., it would be immoral to kill an innocent person for her organs to save five innocent people, do not preclude utilitarianism from being regarded as a respectable ethical theory, i.e., as having something important to say about the moral life. Similar purported counterexamples to egoism, then, should not prevent egoism from being so regarded. Yet people take the force of such

purported counterexamples to egoism to be so great as to rule out egoism from serious ethical theory. This betrays prejudice against egoism.

Second, the Maleficence objection, to an *enormous* extent, seems to be motivated by a consequentialist consideration, viz., by concern for the well-being of humanity in general, rather than concern about the ethics of the action of causing harm. Most people would say that it would be moral to kill an innocent person to save a million innocent persons, i.e., most people would say that if the consequences are great enough, then they trump any purported deontic consideration. And most people, if they could summon in themselves enough objectivity in relation to their concern for the well-being of humanity in general, (a) would hold that it is more important that there be less murder than that it be a moral truth that murder is wrong, and (b) would endorse the moral rightness of murdering if doing so (paradoxically) entailed that there be substantially less of it. To the extent the Maleficence objection is motivated by this consequentialist consideration, the actual and underlying objection to egoism here is that the consequences of societal adherence to egoism would be terrible.<sup>xiv</sup> Focus on the Maleficence objection rather than the actual and underlying objection betrays prejudice against egoism.

Third, people (who accept prevailing moral opinion), even if they purport to be concerned about what they take to be egoism's counterintuitive implications in regard to the ethics of causing harm to others, are actually much more concerned to condemn selfishness than they are to condemn behavior that causes harm to others, illustrating a very deep prejudice against selfishness. There are six aspects of this claim that I want to present.

First, *prejudice against selfishness makes people tend to condemn the harming of others, when associated with a selfish motive, far more than when associated with an unselfish motive.* Consider, for example, that both Stalin and Hitler killed<sup>xv</sup> *millions of people*, yet Hitler is *far more*

the go-to example that people offer as a paradigmatic evil than Stalin or any other brutal dictator. Why is this? I suggest the answer is that Stalin's killing of millions is associated with a cause that is regarded as more morally noble than the cause with which Hitler's killing of millions is associated. Stalin's murdering of millions is associated with the advancement of a political system (communism) that rests on an underlying ethics of self-sacrifice for the collective, an ethics which is widely believed good. By contrast, though Nazism (socialism) also so rests, Hitler's murdering of millions is associated in people's minds with the idea of White supremacy, which is associated in people's minds with White privilege, which is associated in people's minds with the political right, which is associated in people's minds with capitalism, greed, and money, which is associated in people's minds with selfishness.<sup>xvi</sup> Stalin's harming of others is associated with self-sacrifice while Hitler's is associated (through a chain of associations) with selfishness. What we see here is that prevailing moral opinion regards the harming of others—even the killing of millions—when it is done out of expression of the ideal of self-sacrifice for the collective, as morally superior to the harming of others when it is done (purportedly) out of selfishness.

Second, *prejudice against selfishness makes people tend to condemn someone who allows harm to others, when associated with a selfish motive, far more than someone who allows harm to others, when associated with what they take to be a less selfish motive; even, furthermore, when the magnitude of the harm allowed by the second person is far greater and when the first person has already been massively beneficent, and far more so than the second person.* To illustrate this, I want to compare what would be common reactions to the following two cases. Consider first **Painter Coco**. Suppose that Coco has a great talent for pharmaceutical science and if she becomes a pharmaceutical scientist, she will save the lives of 50,000 children who suffer from disease X (and also make a lot of money for herself). Coco, however, wants nothing to do with medical

research and would be absolutely miserable as a pharmaceutical scientist. Instead, she loves painting, that's what makes her happy, and that's what she wants to do with her life. Let us assume that the benefit her paintings will confer on others will pale in comparison to the benefit of saving 50,000 children.

Many people would say that it would be morally right for Coco to pursue her happiness instead of save the 50,000 children; to pursue her happiness and in so doing, let those 50,000 children die. And of those who would say that Coco should sacrifice her happiness for the sake of the 50,000 children, most would still have significant sympathy with her choice of pursuing happiness instead. Few people would morally condemn Painter Coco in any strong terms for pursuing her happiness.

Now consider **Price Gouging Coco**. Suppose Painter Coco, influenced by the idea that it is morally good to sacrifice your happiness for others, decides to sacrifice her happiness to save the 50,000 children. She is now a pharmaceutical scientist and is absolutely miserable. After a decade of unhappiness, she finally decides that enough is enough; now she wants to be *less* self-sacrificial but still self-sacrificial and substantially so. Out of regard for the ethics of self-sacrifice, she will still remain in her career rather than abandon it for the pursuit of painting (which would make her truly happy), but out of some regard for her self-interest, she will try to make more money (doing so will offset some of her misery as a pharmaceutical scientist). Coco decides to increase the price of her treatment. As a consequence, the families of only 20,000 of these children will be able to afford continuation of life-sustaining treatment. The remaining 30,000 children die. Let us call this Coco, who decided years ago to sacrifice her happiness by becoming a pharmaceutical scientist, and then later decided to reduce her unhappiness by increasing the price for her treatment, thereby letting 30,000 children die, Price Gouging Coco.

Most people, in contrast to their sympathy with Painter Coco, would strongly morally condemn Price Gouging Coco. Yet, Price Gouging Coco *sustained the lives of 50,000 children for several years* and then *sustained the lives of 20,000 children for subsequently indefinite years*, allowing only 30,000 children to die (*and so after sustaining them for several years*), compared to Painter Coco's allowing all 50,000 children to die several years earlier. Price Gouging Coco was *far more* beneficent than Painter Coco; yet Price Gouging Coco is condemned and Painter Coco is not. What explains this? Prejudice against selfishness. The pursuit of money is symbolic for selfishness, and this is what people are condemning when they condemn Price Gouging Coco. This prejudice is *so deep*, furthermore, that it overrides concern about the well-being of 50,000 children *and* it fuels continued straw-man representations of selfishness and whitewashes of unselfishness: Price Gouging Coco is associated with selfishness more than is Painter Coco even though Painter Coco is *more selfish* (*and* let more children die). Painter Coco decided to pursue her happiness instead of save 50,000 children; Price Gouging Coco decided to save 50,000 children and then be less self-sacrificial but *still* self-sacrificial in continuing to save 20,000 children. (Note that if Coco decides, instead of price gouging, to abandon her career as a pharmaceutical scientist to pursue painting, i.e., to pursue her true happiness, thereby letting 50,000 children die, she would not be nearly as condemned as Price Gouging Coco, even though she would be letting 50,000 children die instead of only 30,000; prejudice against selfishness makes people more approving of letting *more* children die if doing so is less associated with a selfish motive.)

Third, *prejudice against selfishness makes people tend to condemn an allowing of harm to others, when associated with a selfish motive (and even if the person who allowed harm has been massively beneficent), far more than an actual causing of harm, when associated with a less selfish or unselfish motive.* To appreciate this, consider the following variations of a Coco who harms or

advocates the harming of others, in increasing order of magnitude of harm. **Murderer Coco** (or perhaps Garden Variety Murderer Coco) murders her husband after finding out he was having an affair. **Terrorist Coco** regards Westerners as immoral for being concerned with wealth, material goods, and pleasure on Earth, and so plots to murder as many as she can. **Brutal Dictator Coco**, for the sake of securing the well-being of her citizens, murders swaths of them. **Misanthropic Environmentalist Coco** holds that mankind is a plague that threatens the non-human environment and that it would be nice if a virus came along to wipe out all human beings.<sup>xvii</sup>

Most people, if pressed to compare the moral status of these four Coco's against that of Price Gouging Coco, would officially claim that these four Coco's are more immoral than Price Gouging Coco. Setting aside, however, these moral verdicts, most or at least a great many people would feel much more *visceral repugnance* toward Price Gouging Coco than towards any of these four *and* would more publicly and widely morally condemn Price Gouging Coco than they would any of the other four Coco's. Of Murderer Coco, many people would feel sympathy and/or amusement with her rather than repugnance toward her, even though she *murdered* someone. Of Terrorist Coco, most people would fear being killed by a terrorist and would desire to eliminate any threat posed to them by terrorism, but they, or at least many, would not feel a moral repugnance towards Terrorist Coco that approaches the level they feel toward Price Gouging Coco, even though Price Gouging Coco is no threat to them, and in contrast, could be the savior of their children, and even though Terrorist Coco is a threat to their children. Rather, many would be reluctant morally to condemn Terrorist Coco and would instead reach for paper-thin justifications for such reluctance—e.g., “she has her reasons,” “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” “she’s doing what she feels is right”—while confidently condemning Price Gouging Coco for selfishness. Many would have similar reactions to Brutal Dictator Coco and Misanthropic

Environmentalist Coco. To add a few reactions that may be particular to these two, of the first, some would add that “her goal, the well-being of her citizens, is noble.” Of Misanthropic Environmentalist Coco, many might not even condemn her at all for declaring that it would be good if all human beings were wiped out, but rather amusingly regard her as kooky and avant-garde; perhaps even, in their misanthropic moods, many would *sympathize* with her. *People will condemn a nonmaleficent savior of children’s lives over a garden variety murderer, a terrorist, a brutal dictator, and one who explicitly preaches the destruction of all mankind, due to their prejudice against selfishness.*

Fourth, *prejudice against selfishness makes people tend to describe and want to describe an allowing of harm to others, when associated with a selfish motive, as a causing of harm (which they regard as more immoral), and will want to describe and want to describe an actual—or at least very arguably an actual—causing of harm to others, when associated with an unselfish motive, as an allowing of harm to others (which they regard as less immoral).* To appreciate this, let us compare common reactions to Price Gouging Coco to common reactions to a new case, **FDA Regulator Coco** (a different Coco), whose purported job is to protect the health and safety of the public by regulating food and drugs. FDA Regulator Coco forbids the Coco would who later become Price Gouging Coco from selling her treatment to begin with, on grounds that she (FDA Regulator Coco) judges the treatment to be unsafe for the public (on grounds, say, that there is a 10% chance of death from undergoing the treatment; we can suppose this is true). Consequently, 50,000 children die due to lack of treatment.

If anyone here is to be accused of killing children, it is FDA Regulator Coco; and if anyone here is *not* to be accused of killing children—let alone to be praised for saving children’s lives—it is Price Gouging Coco.<sup>xviii</sup> Yet, even though Price Gouging Coco did not cause any children’s

deaths, people *would want to hold* that she did; they *would want to hold* that she is responsible for those deaths in a way that is normally attached to actions that cause deaths. They would use and be sympathetic to descriptions of Price Gouging Coco's actions that suggest that she actively harmed those children, e.g., "She pursued profit at the expense of those children's lives." And even though FDA Regulator Coco enacted legislation that prevented Price Gouging Coco from saving 50,000 children, most people would resist holding that she in any way brought about the deaths of those children. Why do people want to describe Price Gouging Coco's action as that of harming children, even though it clearly does not fit this description, and want not to describe FDA Regulator Coco's action this way, even though it clearly or at least far more arguably does? Prejudice against selfishness and in favor of unselfishness: Price Gouging Coco's action is associated with a selfish motive and FDA Regulator Coco's action is associated with an unselfish motive.

Fifth, *prejudice against selfishness makes people tend to describe and want to describe a causing of harm to others, when associated with a selfish motive, as intentional (which they regard as more immoral), and tend to describe and want to describe a causing of harm to others, when associated with an unselfish motive, as unintentional (which they regard as less immoral).* Supposing that both Price Gouging Coco's action and FDA Regulator Coco's action constitute a harming of children—and supposing that we will set aside the fact that FDA Regulator Coco harmed 20,000 more children than did Price Gouging Coco, who furthermore sustained those children for several years—whatever one's views of what counts as an intentional action or an intentional harming, Price Gouging Coco and FDA Regulator Coco are on a par vis-à-vis the intentionality or unintentionality of their harming. (Or at least it would be a burden on one who denies this to defend one's denial.) If Price Gouging Coco intentionally harmed those children,

then so did FDA Regulator Coco; if FDA Regulator Coco did not intentionally harm those children, then neither did Price Gouging Coco. Yet people would want to hold that Price Gouging Coco *intentionally* harmed those children while FDA Regulator Coco *did not intentionally* harm them. Why is this? Prejudice against selfishness and in favor of unselfishness: Price Gouging Coco wants to make money (a goal that is symbolic of selfishness) while FDA Regulator Coco is associated with unselfish beneficence.

Prejudice against selfishness is so deep that, even if people (probably reluctantly) conceded that Price Gouging Coco harmed no children, that rather she saved and sustained and continues to sustain thousands of children's lives, and that FDA Regulator Coco did in some significant sense actively bring about the deaths of thousands of children, they would still be more inclined to condemn Price Gouging Coco over FDA Regulator Coco. Appreciating this will further cement my third point above. *Prejudice against selfishness makes people tend to condemn someone's allowing of harm, even if this person was massively beneficent, when associated with a selfish motive, far more than someone who arguably caused massive harm, when this person's action is associated with an unselfish motive.*

Sixth, *prejudice against selfishness* infects people's intuitions about (a) what counts as a violation of autonomy and (b) the degree of immorality they ascribe to a violation of autonomy.<sup>xix</sup> Let us consider (a). Many people hold that people who are destitute and hungry, because of their desperate condition, do not fully autonomously consent to working in, say, a sweatshop, for low wages; "they have no other choice, and so they have no real choice," it is often claimed. A solution that is offered to this purported problem of employers' hiring workers without getting their fully autonomous consent, is *not to allow* these destitute and hungry people to work for such low wages (by not allowing employers to offer jobs at such wages). So, the solution to this purported problem

of not having a fully autonomous choice is *to deprive them of the choice to begin with*. Why is not allowing the poor person a choice at all *not* regarded as a violation of autonomy, let alone far more of a violation than the purported one of accepting a person's (for the sake of argument, not fully autonomous) choice to work for one? Prejudice against selfishness and in favor of unselfishness: The employer's acceptance of the poor person's (for the sake of argument, not fully autonomous) choice is associated with a selfish motive, viz., making money; while the not allowing of the poor person to make this (for the sake of argument, not fully autonomous) choice is associated with an unselfish motive, viz., protecting her autonomy (!), beneficence to the poor (the thought goes, if we mandate a higher wage, on the whole, employers will offer the higher wage rather than withdraw job offers to the poor<sup>xx</sup>).

It may be replied here that mandating a higher wage (not allowing the poor person to accept a job at a lower wage) promotes the poor person's autonomy by increasing the number and quality of her options in life, e.g., she will have jobs available at higher wages. Granting the truth of this claim for the sake of argument, this promotion of autonomy comes at the expense of decreasing the number and quality of other people's options in life, e.g., the employer who wants to hire at a lower wage. Why is the decrease in number and quality of the employer's options in life not regarded as a violation of her autonomy (or at least not one that comes into people's mental radar) while the disrespect for the autonomy of the poor person is? Prejudice against selfishness and in favor of unselfishness: Protecting the employer's autonomy is associated with enabling selfishness and protecting the poor person's autonomy is associated with unselfish beneficence.

Turning to (b), let us compare common reactions to the following two cases. Consider first **Sharp Practicing Businessperson Coco**, who, for the sake of making as much money as possible with her treatment for children, engages in all manner of activities that are normally associated

with dishonesty in business dealings, e.g., deceptive advertising, withholding information, outright lying, pressure tactics, manipulation, appeal to the consumers' emotions, trying to bypass the consumers' reasoning. Now consider **Sharp Practicing Environmentalist Coco**, who for the sake of protecting the non-human environment from what she regards as the cancer that is humankind, engages in the same sorts of activities.<sup>xxi</sup> Most people would morally condemn Sharp Practicing Businessperson Coco far more than Sharp Practicing Environmentalist Coco, even though both, let us suppose, are on a par vis-à-vis their disrespect for others' autonomy. Why is this? Prejudice against selfishness and in favor of unselfishness.

Now let me make due on addressing the harm and benefit that result from Price Gouging Coco's treatment and FDA Regulator Coco's regulation, respectively. Let us suppose that some children die from Price Gouging Coco's treatment (or that we can expect that some will die based on available information) and let us suppose that some children are saved from FDA Regulator Coco's regulation (viz., those same children that would have died). Consider the following reactions that people would have. 1. People would be inclined to credit FDA Regulator Coco for saving those lives and inclined to ignore all the children's deaths she enabled. 2. People would be inclined to blame Price Gouging Coco for the deaths of the children who died due to her treatment and would be inclined to ignore all the lives she saved with her treatment. 3. People would be inclined wholly to ignore the fact that FDA Regulator Coco's saving of lives involved a massive violation of autonomy (*forcibly preventing* the treatment from being sellable to the public) while Price Gouging Coco's saving of lives involved no violation of autonomy (people are not forced to buy her treatment). 4. People would be inclined wholly to ignore the fact that the children's deaths that were enabled by FDA Regulator Coco's regulation resulted from *forcibly preventing* the parents from buying the treatment while the children's deaths due to Price Gouging Coco's

treatment resulted from their parents' *choosing* to buy her treatment. 5. People would be inclined to question whether the parents' choice was really autonomous (e.g., were they "fully informed"? Was Price Gouging Coco fully honest and transparent about the nature of her treatment?) while ignoring that, granting—charitably—any and all sharp practice one wants ascribe to Price Gouging Coco, any lack of full autonomy involved in the parents' choice *pales* in comparison to the lack of autonomy involved in being *forcibly prevented* from buying the treatment. What explains these reactions? Prejudice against selfishness and in favor of unselfishness.

The intuitive reactions that I presented and discussed above I think well illustrate that the Maleficence objection to egoism often stems from an underlying and strong prejudice against selfishness. If it is really the harming of others that people want to condemn, then Environmentalist Coco, Brutal Dictator Coco, FDA Regulator Coco, Terrorist Coco, and Murderer Coco should be condemned—and FDA Regulator Coco should be condemned *far more* than Murderer Coco—and Price Gouging Coco should not even be on people's mental radar when reflecting on the ethics of harming others. Also, Stalin should be condemned on a par with Hitler. And if it is really beneficence that people care about (as opposed to self-sacrifice), Price Gouging Coco should be put on a moral pedestal, especially when compared to Painter Coco, who saved no lives, let alone Murderer Coco, who took one, *let alone* FDA Regulator Coco, who took 50,000.

## **4.2 Defending an egoistic policy toward harming others**

Egoism aligns with and well explains our intuitions about when and why it is morally right to harm and not to harm others.

In general, real life cases of harming others that are judged immoral are also self-destructive, in at least one of the following ways: (1) the particular act hurts the harmer, psychologically, (2) the act is part of a pattern of behavior that is self-destructive to the harmer,

(3) the act or pattern of behavior stems from underlying *unhappiness*. The harmer would be *happier* if she reduced how much she harms others, e.g., if she learned ways of increasing her happiness that involve less harming of them. Furthermore, in general, the degree of immorality ascribed to acts of harming others tends to correlate to the degree of self-destructiveness of the acts: Most people consider physical harming more immoral in general than emotional harming, and note that physical harming is in general far more self-destructive than emotional harming. Most people are in general afraid of hurting other people's feelings, *let alone physically harming* them. The psychological toll of physically harming others is in general greater than the toll of emotionally harming them.<sup>xxii</sup>

And, in general, real life cases of harming others that are self-interested are judged as morally permissible. For example, most people believe that it is moral to harm others in self-defense, i.e., to harm or even kill one's rapist or potential murderer. Most even believe that it can be moral to kill innocent people in self-defense. Suppose a hostile nation lands an army of tanks on U.S. soil and whose mission is to kill as many Americans as possible. The hostile nation has strapped innocent babies to their tanks, in hopes that we will chose to let ourselves be destroyed rather than to kill those innocent babies. (Suppose there is no way to neutralize the tanks without killing the babies.) Most people believe that it would be moral to kill those innocent babies. Considering emotional harming, one of the greatest emotional harms that people inflict on others is that of ending a romantic relationship with them. Most people believe that it is completely moral to do so, notably, when ending the relationship *serves one's happiness*.

There is, then, tremendous overlap between self-destructive harming and harming that is generally judged as immoral. And there is tremendous overlap between self-interested harming and harming that is generally judged as moral.

Opponents of an egoistic policy toward harming and not harming others would have us believe that these overlaps are merely happy coincidences. Of the first overlap, the opponent would claim that it is nice that cases of immorally harming others are generally not in our self-interest, but that this is not the reason such harming is immoral; many opponents would furthermore suggest that this reason is *irrelevant*. Of the second overlap, the opponent would likewise claim that selfishness is not what morally justifies physical harming in self-defense. She would offer other considerations that justify such harming, e.g., a moral right of self-defense, the Doctrine of Double Effect.

These coincidences are not believable and constitute an extremely unfair dismissal of egoism. It is far more plausible to infer from the overlaps what they straightforwardly suggest: An egoistic policy toward harming (and not harming) others, viz., harm and do not harm others to the extent and because it serves one's self-interest to do so, is true.

This policy is all the more plausible in light of the case for the moral attractiveness of selfishness that I have so far developed. We would find the following sentiment objectionable (and just plain bizarre): "It makes me truly happy, my dear husband, the love of my life, to emotionally abuse you and perhaps would make me truly happy to murder you so that I can inherit your money, but I will concede that it is wrong for me to emotionally abuse you and would be wrong for me to murder you; so I will sacrifice my happiness for you by going to therapy, so as to reduce the chances that I will murder you and to reduce how much I emotionally abuse you." We would find this alternative sentiment very attractive: "*For my own happiness*, I am going to go to therapy to figure out what is going on inside me that motivates me to emotionally abuse you and to consider physically harming you." It is a very morally attractive act to go on a deep soul-search, to explore and heal the labyrinthian depths of one's soul, to figure out why one is abusing others and

otherwise sabotaging the development of healthy relationships, *for one's own sake*. This is an *extremely* selfish act and that's why it's so morally attractive. To the wife's claim, "My husband, I will go to therapy for *your* sake, not mine," he, if I may use him as my mouthpiece, would rightly respond, "No, do it for *you*."

Though I think that proffered justifications for harming others that purport not to be self-interested—e.g., a moral right of self-defense, the Doctrine of Double Effect—are false, I think I understand their motivation: Since, according to prevailing moral opinion, selfishness is at best amoral, people are motivated to find grounds other than selfishness for justifying self-interested harming. It is a way of having your selfishness—e.g., being morally permitted to physically harm others to preserve your life, to end a relationship for the sake of your own happiness—while eating it, too, i.e., denying that selfishness is what morally justifies your behavior. Well, from my vantage point of being pro-selfishness, the project of finding non-egoistic defenses of selfish harming does a disservice to selfishness, for it further ingrains in people's minds the false idea that selfishness is at best amoral.

If other justifications—e.g., a moral right of self-defense, Doctrine of Double Effect—have some proper role in moral reasoning, I suggest they do so because they help guide selfish living in the real world. Consider for example the idea that self-defense is morally right and that it's good to have this in mind *because*, in the real world, cases of self-defense are paradigmatic among the cases in which physically harming others is beneficial to us.

Now, one might object that even if an egoistic policy toward harming others and not harming others is generally morally attractive, there will still be cases, at least theoretical and probably also realistic, in which acting selfishly requires immorally harming others, e.g., assaulting and murdering innocent people. Let us call these cases *hard cases*.

Granting for purposes of argument that there are hard cases, i.e., theoretical and realistic cases in which acting selfishly requires immorally harming others, I want to offer five replies that will mitigate how much of a problem hard cases pose for egoism.

First, hard cases do not negate the above work I have done so far in defending egoism, i.e., in defending that selfishness is generally morally attractive and in defending a general egoistic policy toward helping and harming others; or at least one would need to supply an argument that hard cases do so.

Second, the problem of hard cases should not preclude egoism from being regarded as a respectable ethical theory, i.e., regarded as have something important to say about the moral life. There are hard cases for currently respected ethical theories as well, e.g., utilitarianism, Kantian ethics. Denying respectable standing to egoism on grounds of hard cases is a bad faith move.

Third, the problem of hard cases is actually less of a problem for egoism than for at least many other ethical theories, in the following respect: In general, non-egoistic ethical theories require that one *submit* to harm if another person's harming one is morally right, whereas egoism does not so require. According to utilitarianism, if it maximizes happiness for society to enslave a minority, then the minority must submit to enslavement; according to egoism, the minority would be allowed—*encouraged*—to fight back. According to Kantian ethics, if the survival of mankind requires that Coco tell a lie, and if Coco decides to tell the truth, the rest of us must allow her to do so; according to egoism, we would be justified in using any means necessary to get Coco to lie. According to egoism, supposing that it is in Coco's self-interest and therefore morally right for her to orchestrate a genocide against a group of people, it is also morally right for them to kill her first.

Fourth, the above work I have done so far in defending egoism should make people start to question their judgments in least some hard cases; e.g., would it really be immoral to kill an

innocent stranger in order to save the love of one's life? Even if one holds to a "Yes," egoism at least explains why it would be *more moral* to kill the stranger to save one's lover than to kill one's lover to save the stranger: the moral attractiveness of selfishness and the moral unattractiveness of self-destructiveness.

Fifth, realistic hard cases have more force than unrealistic ones, and—please take the following strong claims as food for thought—the best way to minimize realistic hard cases is for egoism to become the dominant morality. Had egoism become the dominant morality in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the West and remained so until now, we would never have had the Middle Ages or Communism, and so the questions “Was it in the self-interest and therefore according to egoism morally right for a man, drafted into the Crusades, to kill a bunch of Muslim soldiers?” and “Was it in Stalin's self-interest and therefore according to egoism morally right for him to kill millions of Russians?” would never have been realistic. *Any hard case that would not exist or have existed were egoism to be the dominant morality or had it been so, is not a fair test for egoism as far as realistic hard cases go, and the fact that the hard case would not exist or have existed counts in favor of egoism.* Instead of the Middle Ages, we may have had the Age of Enlightenment, individual rights, economic freedom, the Industrial Revolution, modern medicine, modern technology, and a far greater degree of well-being for humanity generally, *a millennium earlier*.

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<sup>i</sup> By calling selfishness, i.e., the pursuit of self-interest, morally attractive, I mean that it in general merits the esteem that is given to other behaviors that are generally regarded as moral behaviors, e.g., beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for autonomy, honesty. Selfishness is, at least generally, not something base, distasteful, or inferior as compared to behaviors that are regarded as moral (such as the aforementioned examples).

<sup>ii</sup> In the writings of Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse, for example, we will find much argumentation for the position that conformity to widely accepted moral norms advances people's self-interest in general and in the real world. See for example Foot's 2001 and 2002; and Part III of Hursthouse's 1999. Ayn Rand has also been interpreted as holding this position; see Smith 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> I take no position on what theory of self-interest—e.g., hedonist, desire-fulfillment, or objective list—is correct. I will use self-interest in a way that will be uncontroversial to most people.

<sup>iv</sup> By gain, I mean fulfill a desire, without implying either way whether the desire-fulfillment actually benefits, i.e., promotes the self-interest of, the person who has gained.

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<sup>v</sup> For some defenses of this empirical claim in the virtue ethics literature, see Foot's 2001, Chapter 7 and Hursthouse's 1999, Part III. This empirical claim is also supported by the following considerations: (1) common wisdom, as acquired from life experience and reflection on people in real life, (2) the testimony of practicing mental health counselors who deal with real life day in and day out.

<sup>vi</sup> Note here furthermore that it is actually the prevalence of the view that it is morally attractive to incur harm to oneself for the sake of another's gain that to a large extent enables these examples of "selfishness" to exist. The more people there are who are willing to be harmed for the sake of another's gain, the more there will be people who gain at the expense of others.

<sup>vii</sup> One might claim here that, even supposing that selfishness can make the exercise of virtue morally attractive, so can unselfish regard for others, e.g., the courage that is displayed by those who risk their lives for strangers. I will address the claim that unselfish regard for others is morally attractive in Section 3. My focus here is on elucidating selfishness as a ground for the moral attractiveness of virtue.

<sup>viii</sup> This view might be regarded as a form of the Kantian view, but I separate it because the Kantian view is usually understood to be silent on what effects such helping has on one's well-being; by contrast, according to the third view, it is precisely incurring net harm to oneself for the sake of others that makes one's helping morally attractive.

<sup>ix</sup> It is a strawman of the notion of helping someone solely because they benefit you to dissociate such helping from being motivated by feelings of concern. It is in Coco's *self-interest* to find love, to feel love, to nurture love, and to act from love. If Coco's saving her husband is not motivated by love for him, *this* is a sign that she was *not* selfish in her selection of a husband and conduct in her marriage. If a certain behavior that seems morally repugnant, e.g., Coco's coldly saving her husband rather than lovingly doing so, would tend to arise only due to prior *lack* of selfishness, this fact offers *support* for egoism.

<sup>x</sup> In clarifying the nature of self-sacrifice, we already begin to question whether it is morally attractive.

<sup>xi</sup> Michael Thompson, remarking on this self-sacrificial view of virtue, writes: "to bring someone up into such 'virtue,' to counsel its acts, is to injure her. How could that be any more respectable, morally speaking, than binding her feet?" (2008, p. 154, fn7).

<sup>xii</sup> Would it?

<sup>xiii</sup> The second step is the one in which I directly challenge the Maleficence objection. The first step lays important groundwork for my direct challenge. It, hopefully, will soften the reader to hearing the direct challenge.

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<sup>xiv</sup> It should be regarded at least as an open question whether social adherence to the pursuit of *actual* self-interest would lead to terrible consequences; it might instead lead a renaissance of human flourishing.

<sup>xv</sup> I use “kill” broadly here to include ordering the killing of people.

<sup>xvi</sup> I am silent here on to what extent these associations are justified.

<sup>xvii</sup> The inspiration for Misanthropic Environmentalist Coco is a quote from David M. Graber, National Park Service biologist, in his 1989, pg. 9: “We are not interested in the utility of a particular species, or free-flowing river, or ecosystem, to mankind. They have intrinsic value — more value, to me — than another human body or a billion of them. Human happiness, and certainly human fecundity, are not as important as a wild and healthy planet. I know social scientists who remind me that people are part of nature, but it isn’t true. Somewhere along the line — at about a billion years ago and maybe half that — we quit the contract and became a cancer. We have become a plague upon ourselves and upon the earth. . . . Until such time as Homo sapiens should decide to rejoin nature, some of us can only hope for the right virus to come along.” Compare this program, and that of Murderer Coco, Terrorist Coco, and Brutal Dictator Coco, to Price Gouging Coco’s program: “I just want to make as much money as I can to reduce my unhappiness.”

<sup>xviii</sup> The children who would die from Price Gouging Coco’s treatment and the children’s lives that would be saved due to FDA Regulator Coco’s regulation will be discussed below (when I get to the sixth aspect).

<sup>xix</sup> Violation of someone’s autonomy is often taken to be a particularly significant form of harming others; for this reason, I give it individual treatment.

<sup>xx</sup> Classical economists, especially Austrian economists, argue that this thought is false.

<sup>xxi</sup> See Simon’s 1996, Chapter 36, for examples of such practices.

<sup>xxii</sup> In support of the claim that cases of emotional harming that are judged as immoral are generally self-destructive, notice that we think it is no harm to the emotional abuser if her victim—*selfishly*—stops willing to be abused. I suggest that her victim’s decision no longer to tolerate abuse is *good for* the abuser; it makes more likely—even if just slightly—that the abuser will learn more self-interested ways of dealing with her pain.