Comments on Hills’s: The Beloved Self

(The full title is “The Beloved Self  *Morality and the Challenge from Egoism.)*

This book is a ‘curate's egg.’ It has some really good features and some rather nasty features. On the nasty side, the index is useless – page numbers all wrong. On the good side, Hills has enriched the idea of ‘egoism’ and derived some interesting and important consequences from this enrichment.

Egoism and Sidgwick

I assume that Hills’ use of the term ‘egoism’ is, at least in part, derived from Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*. Sidgwick describes the fundamental *principle* of Egoism as follows:

“We must … understand by an Egoist a man who when two or more courses of action are open to him, ascertains as accurately as he can the amounts of pleasure and pain that are likely to result from each, and chooses the one which he thinks will yield him the greatest surplus of pleasure over pain.” (p. 121) This, I take it, is Sidgwick’s *definition* of an ‘egoist.’

Sidgwick hastens to add that this principle “…by no means implies the ordinary empirical method of seeking one’s own pleasure or happiness.” (Ibid) His idea is that an egoist may believe “that he has some surer, deductive method for determining the conduct which will make him most happy in the long-run.” (ibid.)

[Sidgwick is, of course, aware of the relationship between egoism (in his sense of the term) and Utilitarianism. Chapter 3 of Section IV of his book is dedicated to this relationship.]

Egoism and Hills

What does Hills mean by ‘Egoism’? She says “In this book, I am concerned only with rational egoism as a challenge to the practical authority of morality, so references in this book to ‘egoism’ are always references to ‘rational egoism’. (p.14)

*Rational egoism.* Everyone has reason to do what is in her own interest, and no other reasons for action. The grounds of this reason are the interests of the agent. (p. 68)

Here are Hills’s big three forms of (rational) egoism:

*Standard egoism.* Each agent has reason to maximize her own happiness; and no other reasons for action. The grounds for this reason are the agent’s own happiness (or that the agent’s own happiness is good for her). (BS p.19)

(This form of egoism is linked to Utilitariansm.)

*Kantian Egoism.* Always treat humanity in *your own* person as an end, never as a mere means. (p. 59)

(This form of egoism is, of course, linked to Kantian ethics.)

Here is the third:

*Rational virtue egoism.* Everyone has reason to do what the person with the egoist virtues would characteristically do in the situation, and avoid doing what she would characteristically refrain from doing in the circumstance, precisely because this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do (or for the reasons why this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do). There are no other reasons for action. (p. 77)

*Egoist virtues.* The egoist virtues are the traits of character that (for the most part) promote non-moralized flourishing better than any other character traits. (ibid)

(This form is obviously linked to virtue ethics.)

We can, I think, create three new egoisms by blending together the egoisms Hills provides.

*Egoism one and two.* Each agent has reason to maximize her own happiness. The grounds for this reason are the agent’s own happiness (or that the agent’s own happiness is good for her). In addition she has reason to treat humanity in *her own* person as an end, never as a mere means. There are no other reasons for action.

*Egoism one and three.*  Each agent has reason to maximize her own happiness. The grounds for this reason are the agent’s own happiness (or that the agent’s own happiness is good for her.) In addition she has reason to do what the person with the egoist virtues would characteristically do in the situation, and avoid doing what she would characteristically refrain from doing in the circumstance, precisely because this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do (or for the reasons why this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do). There are no other reasons for action.

*Egoism one two and three.* Each agent has reason to maximize her own happiness. The grounds for this reason are the agent’s own happiness (or that the agent’s own happiness is good for her.) In addition she has reason to do what the person with the egoist virtues would characteristically do in the situation, and avoid doing what she would characteristically refrain from doing in the circumstance, precisely because this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do (or for the reasons why this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do). Furthermore she always has reason to treat humanity in *her own* person as an end, never as a mere means. There are no other reasons for action than these.

We now have not three but *six* different egoisms. Hills provides careful and interesting discussions of her three egoisms but, of course, no discussion of the other three.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The mixed egoisms violate Hills’s t notion that every kind of egoism is somehow linked to some single present-day theory of ethics. Should we take each of the mixed egoisms to be linked to mixed theories of ethics? What would those look like?

To repeat my earlier question: Hills often speaks of ‘egoism.’ (For instance: “Sidgwick, Hume, and Glaucon didn’t think that egoism was true…..” p. 32) What does ‘egoism’ mean in these cases?

Egoism and badness

Is egoism, by definition, a bad thing? To put the question in a different way: Is a good, or indifferent, egoism *possible*? How about this:

*Theistic egoism*, A believer in God has reason to do what she believes God would want her to do, or, at least would tolerate her doing, and to avoid doing what she believes God would want her to avoid doing.

Perhaps Hills would say that this is *not* a form of egoism.

*Moralism*, Each agent has reason to do what common sense morality requires of her and not to do what common sense morality forbids.

(I am making this up. It is not something from Hills’s book. I think it expresses what Hills calls ‘morality’.)

*Ethical Dualism*, Each agent has reason to maximize her own happiness and reason to do what common sense morality requires and not do what common sense morality forbids.

(Again this is *not* something in Hills’s book. It is, nevertheless, a traditional dualism in ethics. Anselm held it, or something roughly like it, and so, I think, did Butler.)

*Ambitious vindication.* A valid argument based on premises that an egoist would accept that egoism is false. (p. 90)

This, I think, is what Hills would most like to find; but doesn’t.

There are some weird false, or definitely questionable, hints or suggestions in the book. For instance, Hills says that Wittgenstein was not the kind of person who regularly tells lies; But, nevertheless, …’he questioned whether he really had reason not to lie for his own benefit.’ (pp. 89-90) Perhaps Hills has forgotten that she has told us that this questioning took place when Wittgenstein was eight or nine years old. (p. 11) As an adult he might well have wanted to know a bit about the kind of lie and the nature of the benefit before making his decision. (He might have thought, contrary to Kant, that one has reason to tell little lies that save people’s lives.)

Here is another odd suggestion. Hills says that “Sidgwick ended the *Methods of Ethics* in despair*”* (p.29) I have no idea what, if any, her evidence for this is. Perhaps she is just imagining how he must have felt when he found himself unable to prove to an egoist that morality out-ranks self-interest in cases where there is a conflict between the two. It looked to him as if egoism of some sort is as defensible as morality.

I have only touched upon a few topics mostly in the first section of the book.

In spite of my quibbles, the book is impressive. Hills knows what is going on in present day ethical theory. ( More or less all of the important people are mentioned – and their ‘errors’ noted.) The book is one long attempt to point out “what the subject-matter of moral epistemology ought to be.” (p. 253) No small ambition.

1. Hills says “…one of the themes of Part I of the book is that there are very many egoist theories.” (p.244) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)