

Portraits of Egoism in Classic Cinema I: Sympathetic Portrayals

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1. Introduction: Egoism—Still Interesting After All These Years

Egoism is a relatively neglected ethical theory in contemporary moral philosophy. Despite the fact that two of the greatest modern philosophers, Thomas Hobbes and Friedrich Nietzsche—along with other more recent philosophers—have advanced egoism in a philosophically sophisticated way, egoism is usually just briefly presented as that which ethics is meant to overcome, or simply dismissed as not worth discussing. This is, however, by no means the case in the behavioral and social sciences. The notion that human beings in particular (and animals generally) are essentially self-interested creatures informs most of economics, and much of psychology, history, political science, and sociobiology. Sociology alone seems to share the contemporary philosophic dismissal of egoism.

Moreover, egoism is often explored in motion pictures. In this series of three articles, I want to look at some of the ways egoism is portrayed in some classic pieces of cinema. Egoistic characters are in fact quite commonly shown in movies, including in a lot of mediocre ones. However, I have chosen films that are considered by film critics to be among the finest films ever produced, and ones in which the egoism of one or more of the leading characters is an essential part of the structure of the film. I will try to show how these films explore and implicitly evaluate or critique egoism.

In this first article, I will look at two classic war films in which egoism is portrayed benignly.¹ In the next article, I will examine a pair of movies in which egoism is given a more malign face. In the final article of the series, I will look at a pair of films that offer a more Nietzschean perspective on egoism.

¹ *Stalag 17*, directed by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures 1953); *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, directed by David Lean (Horizon Pictures 1957).

2. Varieties of Egoism

In order to understand egoist philosophy correctly, it would be useful to rehearse some pertinent conceptual analysis from philosophy and psychology.

One major distinction, perhaps the crucial one, is between psychological egoism and ethical egoism.² *Psychological egoism* is the view that all actions of any person (or optionally, any animal) are done solely out of self-interest, that is, are aimed at maximizing the best results for that person. Psychological egoism is—as the name implies—a theory of behavioral science, an empirical claim about the cause of behavior.³ *Ethical egoism* is the view that the morally right action for any person is whatever leads to the best results for that person.

By the “best results” we mean the best balance of overall good long-term consequences (of the action) over bad ones. Both of the qualifiers—“overall” and “long-term”—are important to understanding this ethical perspective. So, for example, while my drinking excessively on a given occasion may maximize my pleasure for the moment, the pain I experience the next morning will very possibly make the choice on balance, overall, not maximally pleasurable. And very likely, drinking heavily over the long term will certainly not maximize my pleasure, since I will likely develop major health problems, with all of the attendant pain and the threat to longevity they bring.

This example raises another important point. We need to note that egoism of either variety presupposes a theory of “non-moral” worth, that is, some account of what counts as “good consequences.” A theory of non-moral worth—often termed a theory of happiness—is a view about what things are ultimately desirable, as opposed to instrumentally desirable (i.e., desirable as a tool to get something else). For example, to most people, money is instrumentally, but not ultimately, desirable; they seek out money not because they desire it in itself, but because it enables them to buy things that are desirable in themselves. Hobbes was a hedonist; for him (as well as for many other philosophers over the millennia), the one and only thing desirable in the end is pleasure (and the only thing ultimately undesirable is pain).

² For a more extended discussion of this distinction, and the topic more generally, see the “egoism” entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed online at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/egoism>.

³ A common distinction with regard to psychological egoism is between *somatic egoism* and *genetic egoism*, in keeping with the “selfish gene” hypothesis first popularized by Richard Dawkins (in his *The Selfish Gene* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976]), and underlying much of the sociobiology of the time. That is, one can hold that all animals act to preserve and propagate their genes. This would explain why animals will often sacrifice their lives to aid their offspring or other kin (“kin selection”), rather than just try to extend their own individual lives. However, this distinction is unimportant here.

However, egoism (either psychological or ethical) and hedonism are conceptually distinct. An egoist need not be a hedonist; Nietzsche, for example, considered power (or perhaps artistic creativity) as the most important ultimately desirable thing. And a hedonist need not be an egoist, utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham being just one of many examples of moral theorists who put forward non-egoist hedonist ethical theories.

To understand properly the egoist perspective, it is also important to be clear that egoism involves more than the trivial claim that everyone acts (or should act) to “maximize their preferences.” That claim is obvious—indeed, tautological—if one is talking about rational choice or intentional action generally. Under this view, someone who chose voluntarily to spend his life helping the poor for no compensation would still automatically be classified as an egoist. But egoism is the claim that all of any person’s preferences are (psychological egoism) or ought to be (ethical egoism) ultimately *self-regarding*.

The word “ultimately” is crucial here, and allows us to distinguish between overtly selfish egoism and “enlightened” egoism. The idea here is that even the most devoutly egoistic person could be *instrumentally* other-regarding, that is, help others to gain their friendship which will likely be of future help in achieving the agent’s own ends. In other words, an enlightened egoist feels that he needs others to truly maximize his own happiness, and so addresses their desires accordingly. But he would do this not out of ultimate concern for other people as ends in themselves, but as tools for his own benefit. He is an *enlightened egoist* in that he realizes that working with others is ultimately the best way to benefit personally.

Regarding psychological egoism again, it is useful also to introduce a variant of it, one that philosopher Gregory Kavka calls “predominant egoism,” or what I prefer to call *default egoism*. By contrast, let us call the view implicit in standard psychological egoism *complete egoism*. Default egoism is the view that while humans are typically capable of acting truly altruistically (i.e., being ultimately other-regarding), such behavior is very relatively rare—usually confined to situations in which the cost to the agent is very small, or where those who benefit are the agent’s own family or friends.⁴ Yes, a man or woman will sacrifice for family, country, or God—but nowhere nearly as often as he or she will act out of self-interest. Acting out of self-interest is the “default mode” of human action.

I should note two last major philosophically analytical points. For one thing, conceptually, a person could hold ethical egoism without holding psychological egoism. That is, one could hold that even though it is possible for a person to behave altruistically, he or she shouldn’t. But on the other

⁴ Default egoism often dovetails with genetic egoism (defined in note 2 above): on those rare occasions a person acts genuinely altruistically, it is almost always for his or her relatives, i.e., individuals sharing the agent’s DNA, or people such as close friends or fellow soldiers (with whom one bonds as if they were siblings or other kin).

hand, if one is a psychological egoist, it seems automatically to follow that no other ethical theory besides ethical egoism is tenable. After all, if a person absolutely cannot be genuinely altruistic, then it would be odd to say that he should be, in the way that it would be strange to say that I am acting immorally because I haven't ended world poverty today. I couldn't possibly end world poverty single-handedly, so blaming me for this failure is indefensible, if not simply nonsensical.⁵

This leads to another type of egoistic theory, namely, *rational egoism*. This is the view that an act by any agent is rational if and only if it leads to the best results for the agent. Under this view, it isn't unethical to behave (ultimately) altruistically—it is just irrational. Of course, the rational egoist—just like the ethical egoist—need not hold psychological egoism, which is a rather difficult theory to defend empirically (if not conceptually as well).

It is useful to distinguish “egoism” in the sense we are using it here from four other concepts. “Egoism,” as we understand it, is either a description of what causes (or is the reason for) our actions (our behavior), or what should (or morally ought to) cause our behavior. It is a philosophic description of (or prescription for) our ultimate reasons or motives for action. The other concepts we will define and contrast are concepts more employed in psychology than philosophy. The first two are personality *traits*, while the second two are personality *types*.

First, “egotism”—while it is often colloquially used synonymously with egoism—should be distinguished from it. *Egotism* is a type of behavior, specifically, a conceited (arrogant, haughty, or boastful) manner. It is akin to *vanity*, the excessive desire to appear attractive or desirable. While an egoist (someone who always acts to maximize his self-interest) might behave egotistically, or display vanity, he might well not. That is, the egoist might think, for example, that arrogant behavior would alienate possible allies who could be useful to furthering his ends, or again, for example, that being vain would make him the target of the envious, and thus hurt him in the long run.

Conversely, an egotist need not be an egoist. I might want to help others, sincerely and ultimately, but view myself as being of superior intellectual or moral virtue, and act accordingly. That is, I might be *paternalistic*, meaning that I want to help other people while considering them too stupid or infantile to help themselves.

The second personality trait often conflated with egoism is cynicism. *Cynicism* is the trait, attitude, or mindset of being distrustful of the motives and beliefs of other people, or their integrity and sincerity. Cynicism typically manifests itself in scornful remarks, such as “Yes, he appears generous, but he is really just trying to butter her up the better to bed her down!” Now, just as

⁵ The key premise in the underlying argument here is a principle of meta-ethics: “ought implies can.” That is, to say that person P ought to do action A is to presuppose that P is physically able to do A.

an egoist need not be an egotist, and an egotist need not be an egoist, so an egoist need not be a cynic, and a cynic need not be an egoist.

Let's start with the first claim. A psychological egoist could well view anyone who professes concern for others or appears honest, say, as being genuinely sincere, but simply acting in an enlightened way. Yes, the other person sincerely wants to help others, because he knows that it will pay off for him overall in the long run. Yes, the other person is honest, because the reputation of being honest pays off overall in the long run—honesty is the best business policy if you want to stay in business for a long time. And an ethical (or rational) egoist who is not a psychological egoist could well believe that another person is truly and ultimately other-regarding, yet that it is not ethical (or not rational). For instance, he might view the other person as being paternalistic, and thus harming not just himself but those to whom he is acting paternalistically.

Conversely, conceptually, a cynic need not be an egoist. He could be genuinely other-regarding and believe that other people are as well, but after being repeatedly deceived, defrauded, or taken advantage of, he might come to suspect the motives of other people generally (or suspect in particular a loved one who turned out to be insincere or untrue). To borrow a line from an old rock tune, he might "have his eyes hurt open." We should also note that just as paranoids sometimes have real enemies, cynics are sometimes just realistically recognizing hypocrisy in others.

Third, we ought to distinguish egoism from narcissism (as a personality disorder). A *narcissist* is someone who is excessively self-absorbed. Using the Mayo Clinic definition, a narcissist (meaning someone with the just-named personality disorder) "is characterized by dramatic emotional behavior, which is in the same category as antisocial and borderline personality disorders."⁶ Symptoms of this personality include: feelings of superiority, fantasies about power and fame, egotistical bragging, craving for admiration, being insensitive to others' feelings, feeling that people should go along with your choices, setting grandiose goals, expressing contempt for those you view as inferior, inclination to be jealous of others (and suspecting others of being jealous of you), inclination to be hurt easily, and being domineering. It also includes manipulating others for one's own ends; whereas an enlightened egoist will work with others, a narcissist will manipulate them—that is, exploit their emotions (or psychological mechanisms) to make them do what they otherwise might not do. Manifestly, narcissism can be viewed as an extreme form of either complete or default egoism.

On the other hand, however, an egoist (either psychological or ethical) need not have *any* of these feelings or traits. We can illustrate this point analogically. While a glutton is an extreme form of someone who enjoys

⁶ "Narcissistic Personality Disorder," accessed online at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/narcissistic-personality-disorder/DS00652>.

food, one can enjoy food and yet not be a glutton. So for one thing, to be an ethical egoist, one has to be willing to see everyone else be egoists as well—universalizability just seems to be a bare minimum requirement even to call a theory an ethical theory. And again, an egoist focusing on his own self-interest need not at all feel superior, brag, set grandiose goals, or what have you.

Fourth, just as we distinguished egoism, rightly understood, from the personality type termed narcissism, we especially need to distinguish it from the mental disorder (or pathological personality type) called psychopathy (or sociopathy). A *psychopath* (or *sociopath*)⁷ is a person who can be charming on the surface, but is in reality: self-centered in the extreme, dishonest (often to the point of criminality), desirous of attention and social dominance, low in fear or high in tolerance for danger, impulsive, totally lacking in empathy, incapable of feeling guilt, callous and predatory in his interpersonal relationships, unable or unwilling to take responsibility for his own actions, and a manipulative liar.⁸ While most psychopaths are not violent or even criminal, something like one-fourth of all incarcerated criminals are psychopaths. Psychopathy, like narcissism, can be viewed as an extreme form of egoism, but a very extreme form. Conversely, however, an egoist clearly need not have any of these personality traits, any more than he need have the characteristics of egotism or narcissism. But then again, an egoist might. We will see that while some of our films do not portray egoists as narcissists or psychopaths, some do.

With these concepts defined, let us look next at some of the views of egoism that some of the great filmmakers have given us.

3. The Egoist as Survivor

Let us start with two superb war movies that help us to visualize the difference between a psychological egoist and a default egoist. These films are *Stalag 17* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Both star the estimable actor William Holden (1918-1981),⁹ and I suspect that this casting was not accidental.

⁷ I use these two terms synonymously, as is commonly done—see, e.g., the Wikipedia entry on “Psychopathy,” accessed online at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychopathy>. But we should note that some psychologists distinguish the two concepts; see, e.g., Jeannie Marie Kerns, “Sociopath Vs. Psychopath: There is a Difference,” accessed online at: <http://voices.yahoo.com/sociopath-vs-psychopath-there-difference-1906224.html>. I use both terms interchangeably with “antisocial personality disorder.”

⁸ Scott O. Lilienfeld and Hal Arkowitz, “What ‘Psychopath’ Means,” *Scientific American*, December 1, 2007, accessed online at: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-psychopath-means>.

⁹ Holden’s birth name was William Franklin Beedle, Jr. All details of his life are from his IMDB biography, accessed online at: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000034/bio>.

To explain this last remark, let me distinguish between two sorts of actors: plastic actors and persona actors. A plastic (or pliable) actor is one who tries to act his or her assigned character as limned by the screenwriter and envisioned by the director. The actor conforms to the script's character completely. The best plastic actors—one thinks here of Claude Rains and Joseph Cotten, for example—"disappear" into the character, and can believably play any role, often playing markedly different characters in different films (a lovable oaf in one, say, and a vicious killer in another).¹⁰ A persona actor is one who usually informs each character he or she plays with his or her own projected personality or identity (or a consistently projected personality, which may not be his or her actual personality). Examples of persona actors would include Humphrey Bogart and Jack Nicholson.

Holden was a persona actor: his projected personality (and I suspect his real one) was one of an intelligent, thoroughly self-interested, aloof man with a cynical sense of humor. This was crucial to his portrayals in the movies under discussion.

In *Stalag 17*, Holden brilliantly portrayed an egoistic prisoner of war named J. J. Sefton, being held in a German POW camp during World War II. (Indeed, his performance won him the Oscar for Best Actor.) Based upon a play written by two ex-POWs, the movie opens on Christmas Eve, 1944.¹¹ The camp holds POWs of various nationalities, including Russian women POWs, but the action takes place primarily in the American compound, containing hundreds of downed American airmen. Two of the prisoners, Manfredi and Johnson, attempt to escape through a tunnel the prisoners dug, but German guards are waiting for them on the other side and shoot them dead. The other prisoners realize at this point that there is an informant, a "stoolie," among them.

Sefton is quickly the target of suspicion, for several reasons. First, he is cynical about escape attempts (indeed, he seems generally cynical), telling the other prisoners that the odds are against any of them succeeding, and "what if you escape, make it back to the United States, they ship you to the Pacific, you're shot down again, this time you're in a Japanese prison camp." Second, he is a very sharp trader, indeed. He has amassed a footlocker full of valuable merchandise, or at least valuable to the average POW—candy, cigarettes, silk stockings, and so on—from his trading with both fellow prisoners and the prison guards as well. This arouses envy in his fellow prisoners—he tells them defensively at one point that they all trade just as he

¹⁰ We should not confound "plastic actor" with the commonly used descriptor "character actor." A "character actor" is an actor who specializes in playing odd or unusual characters. While some character actors are plastic actors, others are persona actors.

¹¹ The plot summaries, casting, production details, and other information for all of these movies are all readily available on IMDB.com, filmsite.org, TCM.com, and Wikipedia.com.

does; he is just a little sharper at it. Third, he had bet against Manfredi and Johnson succeeding, and won from the other prisoners a lot of cigarettes.

The next thing about which the informant tips off the guards is the location of a radio that the prisoners have been hiding (and using it to follow the war news on the BBC). The prisoners, having witnessed Sefton over in the women's compound (he had bribed the guards to be allowed the visit), come strongly to believe that he is the informant. At this point, the newest prisoner (Lieutenant Dunbar)—who had earlier told the prisoners how he had sabotaged a German train carrying ammunition (by tossing a book of matches with one lit into it)—is arrested by the guards. As it happens, Sefton knows Dunbar—Sefton had met him in the pilot training program (which Dunbar passed, while Sefton had failed) and knows that Dunbar is from a wealthy family. The arrest infuriates the other prisoners, who are now absolutely convinced of Sefton's guilt, and punish him with a savage beating. Sefton, enraged that the other prisoners have not only misjudged him, but have beaten him up in punishment, decides to discover who the real informant is.

Sefton hides in the barracks during an air raid (really, a bogus air raid which allows the Germans to talk with their informant), and hears the informant talking to Sergeant Schulz (Sig Ruman), one of the guards. He not only discovers the informant's identity—it is none other than the ultra-pure and heroic-looking head of security for the prisoners, Price (played with aplomb by Peter Graves)—but discovers as well the means of communication. Price has been tipping off the German guards by placing messages in a hollowed-out chess piece on the chess-board in the barracks.

Sefton tells his only friend and assistant Cookie that he suspects that the informant is not a turncoat American, but that the Germans have planted one of their own as a spy—perhaps a former German-American who grew up in America but returned to Germany to side with the Nazis. So if he just exposes Price, the Germans will just plant Price in another camp. The situation requires craftiness, a trait which Sefton has in abundance.

This leads to the denouement. The next day (Christmas day), the prisoners—having discovered that Dunbar will be shipped to Berlin by the SS for interrogation (and presumably execution)—decide to rescue him. They stage a distraction; Dunbar is rescued, and hidden in the camp's water tank above the latrines by the head of the Allied prisoners, Hoffy (Richard Erdman). Hoffy refuses to tell anyone—not even Price—where Dunbar is hiding. The Germans search unsuccessfully for Dunbar, at which point the German camp commander, Colonel Von Scherbach (played beautifully by the outstanding German émigré director Otto Preminger) promises simply to raze the camp.

At this point, the prisoners decide that they must help Dunbar escape the camp. Price volunteers to help Dunbar get out, whereupon Sefton exposes him as a spy. He convinces the other prisoners that Price is the spy by tricking him with a question about the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor—Price replies with 6 p.m., which was not the time of the event in Cleveland (where

Price claimed to be from), but *was* the time of the attack in Berlin—and by pulling out of Price’s pocket the hollowed-out chess piece.

The prisoners, now aware that they have been duped, seize Price. To their surprise, Sefton announces that *he* will help Dunbar escape—because, he makes clear, he now thinks that the odds are better for success, and (he frankly notes) if he succeeds in rescuing Dunbar, he expects that Dunbar’s wealthy family will reward him—both perfectly good egoistic considerations. When night comes, the prisoners tie tin cans to Price, and throw him out into the yard. As Price runs about, trying to free himself from the noisy cans, the guards gun him down, which creates the diversion needed for Sefton to get Dunbar out of the tank and cut through the barbed wire around the camp.

The movie ends here. We, the viewers, never learn whether the protagonists succeed in escaping Germany. That is, we never know whether the egoist’s calculations work out for him. In a moving scene, the movie closes with Cookie whistling “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again.”

What sort of egoist is Sefton? The best description would be a psychological and a rational one. He is focused on his own survival, and he uses his wits to achieve that goal, and live as well as he can in the difficult circumstances. But he is certainly not an egotist—he doesn’t boast at all about his skills. Nor is he a narcissist—he doesn’t manipulate, envy, or attempt to dominate the men around him. Even less is he a psychopath, lying, cheating, or manipulating people with no feeling. He simply trades with them, employing no coercion or fraud. This is exemplified by his treatment of Dunbar: Sefton tells him in no uncertain terms that if he (Sefton) succeeds in rescuing Dunbar, he will expect to be rewarded. And he can form working relationships. With Cookie, for example, he is fair and even protective—Cookie’s behavior indicates that he is either shell-shocked or otherwise mentally disturbed.

The second movie also centers on a WWII POW camp, again starring William Holden. The movie—*The Bridge on the River Kwai*—is not just an excellent war movie; it is one of the greatest films ever made, winning a then-record seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor.

The story is loosely—very loosely—based on the construction of the Burma-Siam railway by the Japanese Imperial Army. The Japanese used American, British Commonwealth, and Dutch POWs, as well as forced civilian labor. 13,000 of the POWs and upwards of 100,000 civilians died during the construction. In particular, the fictional story is about the real building of a bridge over the Mae Klong.¹²

The movie opens in a Japanese POW camp in western Burma, one containing mainly British Commonwealth prisoners, with some Americans. We meet one of the chief protagonists, an American prisoner USN

¹² See the Wikipedia entry for “The Bridge on the River Kwai,” accessed online at: http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bridge_on_the_River_Kwai.

Commander Shears (William Holden, in another fine performance). We watch with Shears as a new group of British prisoners, led by the second main protagonist, Lt. Colonel Nicholson, march into the compound. They are whistling the stirring “Colonel Bogey March” (the music score for this movie won an Academy Award as well). Nicholson is played perfectly by the ultimate persona actor, Alec Guinness, in arguably the finest performance of his distinguished career—a performance that won him the Oscar for Best Actor. Emerging from his office to meet the new prisoners is the third main protagonist, the camp commandant Colonel Saito—played equally magnificently by the legendary silent screen actor Sessue Hayakawa, who was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his performance in this movie. A battle of personalities immediately breaks out when Saito tells the assembled prisoners that their assigned work is to complete the building of a bridge over the Kwai River, and that the British officers are to work alongside the enlisted men. Nicholson replies that the Geneva Conventions forbid this. Saito doesn’t respond.

The next morning, as the men march off, Nicholson orders his officers to stay, which enrages Saito, who slaps Nicholson and threatens him with summary execution. Here the British medical officer Major Clipton (James Donald) steps in, and Saito decides instead to force the British officers to stand in the hot sun. Later in the evening, he puts Nicholson in a small, corrugated steel box called “the oven,” to languish without food and water, and puts the officers in the punishment hut.

What we discover is that Saito is himself in a difficult position. He must finish the bridge under a tight deadline. And if he fails in this task, Saito will be obligated to commit ritual suicide (seppuku, or “hara-kiri”). However, the project is way behind schedule for several reasons: the Japanese engineers have placed the bridge in a bad location (with bedrock too far down for the supports to rest on it), the ill-motivated prisoners are working as slowly as they can get away with, and the prisoners are covertly sabotaging it wherever they can. This is precisely what the prisoners ought to do, because the railway will allow the Japanese to better supply their troops, extend and solidify their empire all the more, and in so doing, kill or capture all the more Commonwealth soldiers. Saito gives in, using the excuse of celebrating the Japanese victory in their 1905 war with Russia to grant a general amnesty. With this, two major plot twists occur, which will eventually set up the dénouement.

First, when Nicholson inspects the bridge, he also observes the behavior of the prisoners. He decides that for the good of their morale, they should now—to put it bluntly—collaborate with the enemy. Over the protests of his officers, he orders his engineers to help build a “proper” bridge. It is important here to note that Nicholson doesn’t seem to be motivated egoistically. While his contest of wills with Saito may well be to a large extent personal, his devotion to his officers and men—as well as his principles—seems quite sincere. He is indeed other-regarding in his preferences here, so much so that it leads him to collaborate.

Shears, by contrast, is certainly some kind of egoist. We see this early on in the film, where Shears trades a lighter he has taken from a corpse (he is on burial detail, burying the prisoners that die in the camp) for some time in sick bay. Also, after burying one of the prisoners, he gives a cynical “eulogy,” which leads the viewer to think that the death was essentially pointless.

In the second plot twist, Shears and two other prisoners attempt an escape. The others are shot dead, but even though Shears is wounded, he manages to make it to a village, and the villagers help him get to safety. While he is recuperating at Mount Lavinia hospital (in Sri Lanka), and making time with an attractive nurse, the film’s fourth major protagonist appears. Major Warden (played superbly by Jack Hawkins), who heads up the commando forces, asks Shears to volunteer to be part of a commando team that will go back and destroy the bridge. Shears does what any good egoist would do, and refuses, revealing that he is not an officer at all, but just an ordinary sailor who donned the uniform of a dead officer to get better treatment as a POW. However, Warden not only knows this already, he uses it as a threat (impersonating an officer is a major crime in the military). Shears gives in, and agrees to go along. (Warden, realizing that Shears is being coerced to join the team, gives him a concession—Shears will be given the “simulated” rank of major.)

We then return to the Japanese POW camp, where we see Nicholson pushing his men to finish the project—even to the point of now allowing the British officers to work, if the Japanese officers will work as well. Saito agrees, and we see that the two have developed some kind of bond—if not a friendship, then a collaborative partnership—centered on the completion of the bridge (which Nicholson now views as a kind of monument to the British Army, and perhaps himself as well).

We cut back as the commandos are parachuted in. One dies in the landing, and in a later skirmish with a Japanese patrol, Warden is injured. This forces a major change in Shear’s role. He and the other healthy commando team member—Canadian Lieutenant Joyce (Geoffrey Horne)—have to help carry Warden on a stretcher, with the help of some Thai village women and the village chief.

Together, the team finally reaches the bridge. That night, while the Thai villagers and Warden wait on the hill above the river, Shears and the Canadian plant explosives on the bridge, taking care to place them below the water line to hide them. But in the morning the commandos discover that the water level has dropped, revealing the wiring from the detonator to the explosives.

The dénouement occurs when Nicholson and Saito decide to do a final inspection of the bridge, as a Japanese troop/munitions-train approaches. (The train is to inaugurate the opening of the bridge by being the first train to cross it.) Nicholson sees the wire, he calls it to the attention of Saito, and they go down to inspect. Nicholson starts to pull up the wire to see where it leads, which prompts Joyce to come out from hiding and kill Saito. Nicholson,

showing how strongly his priorities have shifted, holds Joyce back from the detonator, and calls for help from the Japanese guards, even as Joyce explains to him that they are an Allied commando unit. The Japanese kill Joyce, and when Shears swims across the river to push the detonator trigger (which shows how strongly *his* priorities have shifted), he also is shot. As he lies dying, Nicholson—recognizing him as the shallow egoist from the camp—says, “You?” to which the dying Shears hisses, “You!” Nicholson then has a change of heart, exclaiming “What have I done?” At this point, Warden, on the bluff above the scene, fires a mortar round, which wounds Nicholson, who staggers over to the detonator, and as he dies, collapses on it, setting off the charges. As the bridge is destroyed, the Japanese train tumbles into the river.

In the final moving scenes, we see Warden try to get the Thai women ready for them all to flee. However, the women—who form a kind of Greek chorus here—shrink from him in horror, having witnessed him mortaring his own crew below. Warden tells them defensively that he had to do it to make sure that the men couldn’t divulge information to the Japanese. We also see Clipton—the medical officer who is the voice for civility and humanity in the film—on the bluff on the other side of the river, exclaim as he watches the death and destruction below, “Madness! . . . Madness!”

This is a film that works at every level—the visual, the literary, and the philosophic. It is spectacularly filmed; the director, David Lean, was legendary for his cinematographic vision. The characters and dialogue are compelling, and the film raises some interesting questions about the nature of heroism and (for that matter) collaboration.

However, for present purposes, I simply want to ask, what kind of egoist is Shears? I think that the answer is that while Sefton (of *Stalag 17*) is a psychological egoist—an egoist throughout the film—Shears is a default egoist. His behavior, both in the camps and in the hospital, is straightforwardly egoistic. But after Warden is shot, Shears moves into taking charge of the mission, and dies valiantly trying to destroy the bridge. The exceptional position he is in produces his exceptional behavior. Put another way, his egoism is defeated by his devotion to destroying the bridge—whether that devotion comes from latent patriotism, psychological entrenchment in the completion of the mission, or just a hatred of his former captors, we cannot really tell.

In both of these fine films, egoism is portrayed, if not favorably, then at least not as a wicked wellspring of action. The egoist is not egotistical, vain, narcissistic, or psychopathic. Here it helps that both films feature the handsome and charismatic William Holden. (It is a simple psychological fact that people associate moral worth with physical appearance, a point to which I will return elsewhere.) It also helps that in both films, the egoist is a soldier trying to survive in the extremely hostile environment of a fascist enemy POW camp. Certainly, in both films, the egoist is portrayed as cynical (see Appendix). Yet he harms no one, and betrays no one—indeed, he finds the spy and rescues the endangered prisoner in the first film, and helps to

complete the commando mission in the second. He is surely no villain—indeed, he *acts* heroically, even if his *motive* is egoistic.

The true “villains” in the movies are the men who at first appearance seem to be the greatest other-regarding heroes: Price, the all-American “security” chief who turns out to be a German spy devoted to aiding an evil regime; Nicholson, who so identifies with (first) his men and (then) the bridge he helped the Japanese to build that he winds up by (initially, at least) helping the Japanese to save it, at the cost of the lives of some of the Allied soldiers (including the man he had dismissed as a shallow egoist); and Warden, the equally duty-bound head of the commandos who is all too willing to blow his men to pieces to keep them from divulging information to the Japanese.

The essential difference between Warden and Shears is illustrated beautifully by a piece of dialogue. When Warden and his crew parachute in to start their mission, recall that Warden is injured. Warden then orders Shears to leave him behind and complete the mission with Joyce, knowing of course that he won’t be able to rescue him afterward. This provokes Shears to bark out at Warden, “I’m not going to obey that order. You make me sick with your heroics. There’s a stench of death about you. You carry it in your pack with you like the plague. Explosives, L-pills¹³ . . . They go well together, don’t they? With you, it’s just one thing or the other: destroy a bridge or destroy yourself. This is just a game [to you, Warden]—you and Colonel Nicholson. You’re two of a kind, crazy with courage, for what? How to die by the rules—when the only important thing is how to live like a human being!”

In the next article of this series, I want to turn to a couple of classic films that present egoists with major personality disorders.

Appendix

It might be useful here to compare the cynical and egoistic character Sefton, with another famous cynical character from another war film that transcended its genre (the “war romance”), the classic *Casablanca* (1942).¹⁴ I refer here to that film’s main protagonist, Rick Blaine (played superlatively by Humphrey Bogart, who was nominated for the Best Leading Actor Oscar for his performance in the movie). I want to thank my former student, Phuc Le, for posing the question to me as to whether Rick Blaine, so obviously cynical, should also be considered an egoist.

¹³ “Lethal pills” are pills that a captured agent should take to kill himself rather than reveal important information under torture.

¹⁴ I won’t review the movie in detail, as it is very likely familiar to the reader, and is well discussed in the TCM.com entry, accessed online at: <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/10/Casablanca>, as well as the Wiki entry, accessed online at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/casablaca_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/casablaca_(film)).

In brief, the movie opens in 1941 in the Moroccan city of Casablanca. The city is nominally under the control of Vichy France, but is increasingly under the control of the Nazis. The city is one of the remaining places where refugees from Europe have a chance to escape to freedom. The film centers on Rick, the owner of Rick's Café Americain, which we see immediately is the most important night spot in the city (and has an illegal casino in back).

One night, Rick's acquaintance Ugarte (exquisitely played by the eminent character actor Peter Lorre)—admits to Rick that he possesses two "letters of transit" that were stolen from some German couriers. Rick agrees to hide them (even though this puts him at great personal risk), although he shows disgust when Ugarte tacitly admits that he had a hand in the murder of the couriers. Subsequently, the police (under the supervision of the genially corrupt prefect of police Vichy Captain Louis Renault) arrest Ugarte, who cries out to Rick to help him. Rick watches as he is hauled away, and to the rebuke of an onlooker, makes the seemingly egoistic comment, "I stick my neck out for nobody." (But of course, in even taking the letters from Ugarte, he was sticking his neck way out for the man.) Louis is wonderfully acted by persona actor Claude Rains, who was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor for his work in this film.

Shortly after this, the famous Czech resistance leader Victor Laszlo (elegantly acted by Paul Henreid) enters with his wife Ilsa (bewitchingly portrayed by Ingrid Bergman). Laszlo has come to buy the letters of transit for his wife and himself, but is too late. We learn in a flashback that Rick and Ilsa had been lovers in Paris two years before (while it was still a free city, and while Ilsa wrongly believed that her husband was dead). The two (Rick and Ilsa) were preparing to flee, as the Germans were closing in on Paris. We learn in passing that Rick is wanted by the Gestapo. Yet at the last moment, as he is waiting for her on the train out of the city, she sends a goodbye note instead. He is visibly crushed.

Returning to the present, that evening Rick is trying to cope with the sudden appearance of Ilsa (which breaks his heart again) by getting drunk. Ilsa tries to explain why she couldn't come with him in leaving Paris, but in a drunken rage he insults her. The next evening, after Rick allows Laszlo to conduct the orchestra in a rousing rendition of *La Marseillaise*—to drown out the Nazis' singing—the Nazis order Rick's Café to be shut down. Later, as Laszlo attends a local Resistance meeting, Ilsa has a chance to explain her actions to Rick, and tells him that he will now have to do the thinking for both of them.

Rick then orchestrates a clever way out. He arranges for Victor to get the letters, and for Louis to arrest Victor in the act of taking possession. But Rick double-crosses Louis, and arranges it so both Ilsa and Victor escape (because he realizes how important Victor's mission is and how much Ilsa means to Victor). As the couple boards the plane, Rick has to shoot the head of the Gestapo in Casablanca, Major Strasser (admirably acted by Conrad Veidt). Louis, after some hesitation, tells the police who have arrived to round

up “the usual suspects.” The movie closes with Rick and Louis leaving together to join the Free French forces to fight the Nazis.

What are we to make of Rick? Does his cynicism betoken egoism? I think not. First, while Rick is cynical during most of the movie, we see that his cynicism ends when he discovers that Ilsa did what she did in Paris because she found out that her husband was in fact alive, and that she still loves Rick.

More to the point, everything we learn about Rick in the film shows that he is no egoist. First, he ran arms for the Ethiopians fighting the fascist Italian army, and fought with the loyalists fighting the fascists in Spain. (He dismisses this self-deprecatingly by saying that he was well-paid to do this, but the cynical Louis reminds him that the fascists would have paid him even more.)

Second, while he loved and loves Ilsa, in the end he makes her leave with her husband for the greater good. (He makes to her the famous remark that “the troubles of two individuals don’t amount to a hill of beans” in this great battle against fascism.) Note that he risks death in arranging their escape.

Third, he obviously has a close friendship with his pianist Sam (wonderfully played by Dooley Wilson) and many of the employees in his café. These are no mere friendships of convenience, as we see when he makes sure that when his rival Ferrari (head of the local criminal underground) takes over the café, those friends will be taken care of well. (Ferrari is memorably portrayed by veteran character actor Sidney Greenstreet.)

Fourth, faced with a Romanian couple desperately gambling at his roulette table to get enough money to buy their exit from Casablanca, he lets them win (and so sustains a personal loss of income).

Fifth, in the end, he leaves with Louis to fight the fascists again.

Finally, the whole message of the film—not a subtext, but really the *leitmotif*—is the need for personal sacrifice for the goal of defeating evil. It is unlikely that an egoist would be the hero of such a piece.

So Rick is no egoist. His temporary cynicism is a manifestation of disillusioned ideals and a broken heart, not—as is Sefton’s cynicism—of egoism. Rick not only sticks out his neck for others, he does so repeatedly, risking his life each time. His friend Louis even comments at one point that he suspects that Rick’s cynicism is a pose, and that Rick is a romantic at heart. And Laszlo tells Rick at one point (when Rick makes a cynical remark about the world being put out of its misery), that he sounds like a man trying to convince himself of what he doesn’t really believe in his heart.

In fact, after *Casablanca*, during the period of his greatest popular and artistic success, Bogart made a number of films now considered classic cinema in which he played the hero as cynical on the surface because of past disappointed ideals, but who faces evil when the need arises. These films include: *To Have and Have Not* (1944); *The Big Sleep* (1945); and most importantly, *Key Largo* (1948).

