

On an Alleged Refutation of Ethical Egoism

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1.

Back in the day—the sixties and seventies—there were many attempts to refute ethical egoism by showing it to be inconsistent, incoherent, or the like. Those attempts met with numerous replies, and I believe the consensus for many years has been that the attempts all failed.¹

But did they? The most challenging of them, I think, was Richmond Campbell’s “A Short Refutation of Ethical Egoism” (1972), and as I examine the replies to it, I find none of them satisfying.² I believe, however, that Campbell’s objection to ethical egoism indeed fails. I defend that belief in what follows, for reasons that go well beyond my immediate topic. Campbell’s objection calls for an answer partly because, if it succeeds, we must reject not only ethical egoism but many other normative moral theories, such as act utilitarianism. I explain this in my final section; meantime, I examine Campbell’s objection.

2.

Ethical egoism is the view that a person morally ought to do an act if and only if, and because, the act is her best_I option, meaning the best_I of the acts open to her in her situation. (The subscript “I” means “in terms of her own self-interest.”) Campbell (1972: 250–251) objects to ethical egoism thus:

1. A situation, S, can exist in which act X is person M’s best_I option and preventing (i.e., doing an act that would prevent) M from doing X is person N’s best_I option.
2. If ethical egoism is true, M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S.

¹ These attempts and replies receive useful treatment in Österberg (1988).

² Campbell (1974) points out flaws in two of them: Mack’s (1974) and Burkholder’s (1974). Kalin’s reply (1975: sec. 6), in an important paper, is unsatisfying in at least one respect: it rests, in part, on an understanding of ethical egoism that differs from the usual one, the one that makes ethical egoism parallel with, and thus a competitor with, other normative ethical theories. As Kalin defines ethical egoism, it “uses the concept ‘ought, all things considered’ rather than ... ‘morally ought’” (Kalin, 1975: 341). Österberg’s reply (1988) to Campbell’s objection receives attention shortly.

3. If M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.
4. It is not logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.
5. Therefore (from 2 through 4), ethical egoism is not true.

My presentation of this objection differs a bit from Campbell's. The main difference is that in premise 1 I have used the word "option," which denotes an act that is open to, available to, the relevant agent. No similar term appears in Campbell's original statement of the objection, but he indicates in a later work (Campbell, 1974: 668) that the acts mentioned in that statement are assumed to "be among those acts that [the agents] can do."

My focus is premise 3. Let us not confuse it with the premise produced by altering its final part to say "then it is logically possible that M does X in S and it is logically possible that N prevents M from doing X in S." This premise does not entail 3.

Campbell accepts 3 because, he thinks, it instantiates a principle he considers self-evident:

If an agent [morally] ought to do something in a given situation and another agent [morally] ought to do something in the same situation, then it is not logically impossible for them to do these things in that situation. (Campbell, 1972: 250; see also 251)

Before I challenge premise 3, let me observe that I am not alone in doing so. Jan Österberg presents the following case:

You [Agent *A*] in your car and I [Agent *B*] in mine arrive simultaneously at a place ... where an accident has recently occurred. There is a badly injured man who will die unless he is quickly taken to the nearest hospital. As you are an expert driver, whereas I am a bad one, your car goes faster than mine, etc., you ought to drive the man to the hospital in your car. But you refuse to do that, saying that this is no business of yours. Therefore I ought to take the man to the hospital. ... This is a case [in] which ... the antecedent of [the principle that 3 instantiates] is satisfied, but the consequent is not. (Österberg, 1988: 94)

I have two comments about this passage. First, given its shortage of detail, it does not make evident that the obligations it mentions are indeed obligations from the perspective of most any viable normative moral theory (act utilitarianism, Rossian-style pluralism, etc.). Second, its target is not premise 3 itself, but the principle 3 instantiates. To challenge a principle a premise instantiates is not necessarily to threaten the premise itself (or the claim that the premise is self-evident), for the particulars of the premise may deflect the challenge. Premise 3 illustrates this fact if, in Campbell's argument, we read "prevent M from doing X" to mean, in part, "cause the nonoccurrence of M's doing X." For in the above passage, although Agent *B*'s performance of his obligatory act—the act of driving the injured man to the hospital in Agent *B*'s car—precludes Agent

A's driving the man to the hospital in Agent *A*'s car, it does not, in addition, *cause* Agent *A* not to do that act. Agent *A*'s own refusal does that. Also, it is not clear that the revisions that might remedy this flaw would preserve the essentials of the counterexample.

My own challenge to premise 3 lacks the features just mentioned. It consists of this (eight-paragraph) counterexample:

Were Mel to climb to the mountain peak, his act would have no negative moral property (no property that would make it *pro tanto* wrong) of any significance. However, it would have at least two positive moral properties. First, it would give Mel a pleasant feeling of accomplishment. Second, it would make his mother proud, leading her to reward him by donating two million dollars, in his name, to a set of worthy charities. The resulting charitable work would significantly benefit (contribute to the well-being and happiness of) Mel himself. But mainly it would significantly benefit other people and other sentient beings. Mel knows all of these facts.³

Were Mel to try to climb to the peak, then barring any prevention of that act from Nell, he would succeed. Mel knows this. Also, he will try to climb to the peak.

If, despite no hindrances to climbing to the peak, Mel were to forgo that climb (as he is capable of doing), his act would have no positive moral properties of any significance. However, it would have at least two negative ones. First, it would result in his not receiving the feeling of accomplishment mentioned earlier. Second, it would result in no donation to charity from his mother. Mel knows these facts.

Nell knows that Mel will try to climb to the peak; she also knows that were she to prevent him from climbing there, her act would have the following negative moral properties. First, it would result in some unhappiness for Mel. Second, it would result in Mel's not receiving the feeling of accomplishment mentioned above. Third, it would result in no donation to charity from Mel's mother.

However, Nell's act would also have at least two positive moral properties. First, it would give Nell a pleasant sense of accomplishment. Second, it would please Mel's father, who worries intensely about Mel's safety. He would reward Nell by donating thirty million dollars, in her name, to a set of worthy charities. The resulting charitable work would greatly benefit Nell and, to an equal degree, Mel. For instance, the benefits to Mel and Nell, the contributions to their well-being and happiness, would be much greater than any benefits they would receive were Mel to complete his climb. They would far offset any distress, unhappiness, and so on that Mel might experience as a result of Nell's act. But mainly the donation would significantly benefit other people and other sentient beings. It would do so much more than anything that might result from a successful climb on Mel's part. Nell knows all of these facts.

³ Throughout this counterexample, "knows" means "knows or has good reason to believe."

Nell is capable of not preventing Mel's climb to the peak, that is, of doing something else. Were she to do that, thereby ensuring a successful climb on Mel's part, her act would have exactly two positive moral properties. First, it would result in Mel's having the sense of accomplishment mentioned earlier. Second, it would lead to the two-million-dollar donation from Mel's mother. However, Nell's act would also have at least two negative moral properties. First, it would result in Nell's not feeling the sense of accomplishment mentioned above. Second, it would result in no donation from Mel's father. Consequently, the people and other beings mentioned shortly ago, including Mel and Nell, would go without the benefits the thirty million dollars would produce. Nell knows all of these facts.

Were Nell to try to prevent Mel's climb to the peak, her effort would succeed. She knows this. Her method would be to sneak from Mel's backpack some crucial, not feasibly replaceable, items of climbing gear. Such an act would make Mel unable to make the climb. He would fail in his climb shortly after beginning it.

Nell will not try to do anything that could preclude Mel's climb to the peak or cause it not to occur. This is true no matter what Mel does or tries to do. Nell is capable of trying to do such an act; even so, she will not try to do (and thus will not do) any such act. Also, Mel knows this.⁴

Recall that according to premise 3, if M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S. In Mel and Nell's situation, the antecedent of this premise is true. Mel morally ought to climb to the mountain peak and Nell morally ought to prevent him from doing so. But of course the consequent of 3 cannot be true. So Mel and Nell's case refutes premise 3.

Let me digress to say that Mel and Nell's case refutes not only 3, but also an argument discussed by Mack (1974) and Campbell (1974: 665–667):

6. If M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then both M morally ought to do X and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S.
7. If both M morally ought to do X and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible for both M to do X and N to prevent M from doing X in S.
8. (A minor rewording of 3.) Therefore, if M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible for both M to do X and N to prevent M from doing X in S.

Mack (1974) and Campbell (1974) tacitly discuss this argument by explicitly discussing a more general form of it, in which "do Y" appears in place of

⁴ For two or three of the elements of this situation, I am indebted to a brief passage, used for purposes different from mine, in Österberg (1988: 94, lines 7–10).

“prevent M from doing X.” Mack believes that Campbell implicitly relies on this argument when advancing premise 3. Mack further believes, owing to an unwarranted reading of the consequent of premise 6, that 6 is false.⁵ Campbell, on the other hand, denies that he relies, or needs to rely, on 6 and 7 to support 3, though he also believes that on a proper reading, 6 and 7 are true.⁶

Mel and Nell’s situation refutes premise 7. In that situation, it is true both that Mel morally ought to climb to the peak and that Nell morally ought to prevent him from doing so. Thus, situations can exist in which the antecedent of 7 is true, though of course the consequent of 7 is false.

3.

Although my counterexample has many elements, none are superfluous. They provide detailed support for the claim that despite the impossibility that Mel climbs to the peak and Nell prevents him from doing so, Mel morally ought to climb to the peak and Nell morally ought to prevent him from doing so. They armor that claim against objections.

For instance, it clearly will not do to object that, first, Mel and Nell can do their supposedly obligatory acts in only a minimal, or non-robust, sense of “can,” but second, the ought-implies-can principle, in its most plausible form, uses “can” in a robust sense. This will not do in Mel’s case because climbing to the peak is not just logically possible for him. It is a genuine option for him, something he has the ability and opportunity to do. For as Mel knows (partly owing to what he knows about Nell), were he to try to climb to the peak, he would succeed. In addition, he is capable of trying to climb there, as evident from the fact that he will try to do so. For roughly similar reasons, preventing Mel from climbing to the peak is a genuine option for Nell.

Nor will it do to say that even if Mel can make the climb in a robust sense of “can,” the claim that he morally ought to do so is unsubstantiated—or, at best, substantiated relative to just one or two moral theories. This objection fails given Mel’s knowledge and the properties of his two options. Given those things, climbing to the peak is Mel’s morally required act. This is both a judgment of common sense and something that utilitarians, ethical egoists, and Rossian-style pluralists can all accept. The same goes for Kantians, normative virtue ethicists, and so forth, at least if we fill in a few more details. Similar remarks apply to Nell’s available act of preventing Mel’s climb.⁷

A possible reply to these points about Mel is that, because Mel’s successful climb to the peak will result in no thirty-million-dollar donation, his climb is morally undesirable. This reply fails because what will cause the donation to go

⁵ For details see Mack (1974: 660–661) and Campbell (1974: 665–666).

⁶ In these remarks I am interpreting more than paraphrasing. For one thing, Mack and Campbell pin their statements not to the above argument itself, but to the more general form of it just mentioned.

⁷ An incidental point: As just indicated (in my remark about ethical egoists), climbing to the mountain peak is Mel’s best₁ option and preventing his climb is Nell’s best₁ option. Thus, their situation supports premise 1 of Campbell’s argument.

unmade is an act of omission uncaused by Mel, namely, Nell's doing nothing to prevent Mel's climb.

A closely related reply is this: Were Mel to forgo his climb, his father would donate the thirty million dollars, making the act of not climbing to the peak, rather than the act of climbing there, Mel's morally required option. This reply fails because it is Nell's prevention of Mel's climb, not the mere nonoccurrence of that climb, that can lead Mel's father to donate the money.

Another reply begins with a question: Is Mel aware of the moral properties of Nell's options? If he is, then he knows that the state of affairs in which he climbs to the mountain peak is morally inferior to the one in which he tries to climb there and Nell prevents his success. The latter state of affairs, unlike the former, involves the thirty-million-dollar donation.

This reply goes nowhere. Yes, the second state of affairs it mentions is better than the one in which Mel succeeds in his climb. And perhaps Mel knows this. However, a possible state of affairs, known about or not, is not the same as an *option*, an *available act*. This is especially true in the present case. First of all, there is something strange, perhaps incoherent, in the thought of an option, an available act, consisting of trying to climb to a mountain peak and being prevented from success by the *independent* act of another agent. In any case, such a thing is not an option for Mel. It is not even perceived as an option by Mel. For as Mel knows, Nell will do nothing that could prevent his climb to the peak.

A further objection, this one about Nell, is that my claim that Nell morally ought to prevent Mel's climb is unsubstantiated. It is unsubstantiated, that is, if the phrase "prevent M from doing X" means, in part, "cause the nonoccurrence of M's doing X." For Nell's act of preventing Mel's climb, as I have described it, is not an act of *causing* the nonoccurrence of that climb.

This objection fails because an element of Mel and Nell's situation is that Mel will try to climb to the peak. He will do so in a way that would normally bring success. Were this not so—for instance, were he not even to attempt the climb—it would be implausible to say that the act of removing his climbing gear not only precludes his climb to the peak but also causes that climb not to occur. However, given the facts of Mel and Nell's case, were Nell to remove Mel's climbing gear shortly before he attempts his climb, her act would not only preclude Mel's climb to the peak but also cause its nonoccurrence.

A final objection, again concerning Nell, is that if a person morally ought to do something—climb a mountain, say—then it would be morally wrong to prevent him from doing it; thus, preventing him from doing it cannot be morally required of another person.⁸ This objection is open to several counterexamples.⁹ Mel and Nell's case is one of them. Given the details of that case, especially the properties of Nell's two options, it is implausible to deny that Nell morally ought to prevent Mel's climb. Thus, something is wrong in the objection. Its

⁸ Baumer (1967: 74–75), Baier (1965: 95). Interestingly, Baumer and Baier each weave this assertion into an *objection* to ethical egoism. Mel and Nell's case thwarts those objections.

⁹ See, e.g., Kalin (1971: 76) and Quinn (1974: 459–460). Österberg (1988: 91) is pertinent also.

defect, possibly, is that it confuses pro tanto wrongness with wrongness *sans phrase*.

Still, to be on the safe side, perhaps I should add to Mel and Nell's situation the claim that because Mel morally ought to climb to the peak, preventing that act is pro tanto wrong. While I am at it, perhaps I should add that because removing Mel's climbing gear is an act of theft, it is pro tanto wrong. These minor additions do not ruin my counterexample to premise 3.

4.

Some might suggest that we revise premise 3 so that it avoids my counterexample. On this subject I have two points. First, the revisions of 3 which, in my view, most naturally suggest themselves are demonstrably flawed. Second, even if we could find a revision of 3 that avoids this problem, we would still be some distance from reviving Campbell's argument.

The second point is the more important of the two, but let me briefly illustrate the first. In Mel and Nell's situation, only Mel, not Nell, will try to do his morally required act. So perhaps we can protect 3 from my counterexample by making the antecedent of 3 say, in part, that each agent will try to do her morally required act—or perhaps better, that each agent will try to do that, the efforts of the two agents being equal in degree (or skill, etc.). This turns 3 into this:

- 3.1. If M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, and further, M will try to do X in S and N will try to prevent M from doing X in S, where M's and N's efforts will be equal in degree, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.

This revision of 3 is ineffective. Suppose we make four changes to Mel and Nell's situation, keeping the knowledge claims about the resulting four facts—for instance, the claim that Mel knows the first and the fourth—the same as in the original situation. First, were Mel to make a modest effort to climb to the peak, then barring any prevention of that act from Nell, he would succeed. Second, Mel will make that modest effort. Third, were Nell to try hard (as she is capable of doing) to prevent Mel's climb, she would succeed. Fourth, Nell will make only a modest, and thus ineffective, effort to prevent Mel's climb.

The result of these changes is that although each agent will try, to the same degree as the other, to do her morally required act, the essentials of the counterexample remain intact. The revised counterexample refutes 3.1. It also refutes the premise—call it 3.2—consisting of 3.1 shorn of the words “where M's and N's efforts will be equal in degree.”

I could give further illustrations,¹⁰ but let me go on to my second, more important, point: Even if we find a revision of 3 that is not demonstrably

¹⁰ Here is one, discussed by Österberg (1988: 94–95): If, first, M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, and second, each agent has her moral obligation independently of what the other agent does or will do, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and

flawed, we are still a far cry from reviving Campbell's argument. I frankly doubt that the revised version of 3 will be self-evident. No doubt it will look something like 3.1 or 3.2, probably with a more elaborate antecedent. It will be far from an obvious truth. Also, although it will no doubt follow from premise 3—as do 3.1 and 3.2—that fact will do nothing for it. Premise 3 is false. In sum, even if we find a successful revision of 3, a major task still awaits—that of finding a strong defense of it.

I mentioned finding a strong defense. That defense must indeed be very strong. To accept it, thereby accepting a version of 3, is tacitly to accept a version of Campbell's argument. (This is partly because the other premises in that version will be acceptable, as are premises 1, 2, and 4 in the original version.)¹¹ Also, if I may jump ahead a bit (to section 5), to accept a version of Campbell's argument is implicitly to conclude that many familiar normative moral theories, such as act utilitarianism, fall to a simple *reductio*. However, to believe that those theories crumble so easily, all in the same way, is very difficult. This is why I say that the strong defense must indeed be very strong. Until someone finds that defense and the version of 3 it supports, we need not accept Campbell's argument.

5.

Let me close with two things. The first is a speculation about why premise 3 is false. The second is a demonstration that if Campbell's argument were sound, it would implicitly refute much more than ethical egoism.

According to premise 3, if M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S. The problem with this premise (I speculate) is that, first, it is not self-evidently true. Instead, if it were true, it would draw its truth from more basic principles. Second, the most likely candidates for those principles fail to lend truth to 3. Those candidates, I believe, are the following:

9. If M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it morally ought to be the case that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.
10. If it morally ought to be the case that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.

Premise 9 calls to mind the *agglomeration principle*, according to which, if M ought to do X and M ought to do Y, then M ought to do both X and Y.¹²

N prevents M from doing X in S. This premise, if substituted for 3, requires that we modify other premises in Campbell's argument. And as Österberg observes, the modifications then damage that argument.

¹¹ Note 7 is pertinent here. So too is the assumption that the version of 3 in question is not demonstrably flawed. It would be demonstrably flawed if substituting it for the original version of 3 forced us to make damaging changes to other premises.

¹² This widely discussed principle owes its name to Williams (1965: 118).

Even if that (controversial) principle is true, I believe that premise 9 is false. Many things could explain this fact—or do so at least partly. To give just one example, perhaps “ought”-judgments of the kind in the antecedent of 9 differ from the one in the consequent by not reducing to claims to the effect that if things were morally ideal, a particular proposition would be true. In short, they are not equivalent to sentences of the form “It morally ought to be the case that A does D” (Schroeder 2011).

At any rate, I believe that premise 9 is false. Although situations are possible—Mel and Nell’s, for one—in which the antecedent of 9 (which is the antecedent of 3) is true, the consequent of 9 is never true. A contradiction-realizing state of affairs—one that holds only if a sentence and its negation are both true—is not the kind of thing that morally ought to be the case. (Note that to challenge this point is in effect to challenge 10.) So premises 9 and 10, the most likely sources from which 3 might derive truth, create an unsound argument for 3.

A possible reply is that the consequent of 9 is simply a rough substitute for the sentence, “In S, both M morally ought to do X and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X,” which can be true. This reply fails. For one thing, if the consequent of 9 were such a substitute, then 9 and 10 would reduce to premises 6 and 7, treated in section 2. Premise 7 is false, and hence 6 and 7 lend no truth to 3.

Let me now turn to the point that if Campbell’s argument were sound, it would implicitly refute much more than ethical egoism. Recall that my key claim about Mel and Nell—that Mel morally ought to climb to the mountain peak and Nell morally ought to prevent him from doing so—is true from the perspective not just of one, but of multiple normative moral theories. This is an indirect way of saying that premise 1 of Campbell’s argument—the premise that a situation can exist in which act X is person M’s best₁ option and preventing M from doing X is person N’s best₁ option—stands up even if we replace “best₁ option” with, say, “utility-maximizing option” or “option which, while being a pro tanto duty, is unopposed by any more stringent pro tanto duties.” With some further small changes, Campbell’s argument then becomes a putative refutation of act utilitarianism, or of Ross’s pluralism, and so on.

Let me be fully clear. If Campbell’s argument were sound, the following argument would be sound as well:

- 1’. A situation, S, can exist in which act X is person M’s utility-maximizing option and preventing M from doing X is person N’s utility-maximizing option.
- 2’. If act utilitarianism is true, M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S.
3. If M morally ought to do X in S and N morally ought to prevent M from doing X in S, then it is logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.

4. It is not logically possible that M does X in S and N prevents M from doing X in S.

5'. Therefore (from 2' through 4), act utilitarianism is not true.

In short, if Campbell's objection to ethical egoism were sound, a variation of it would refute act utilitarianism. And other variations would refute other familiar normative ethical theories.¹³ Consequently, my refutation of premise 3 has broad implications for normative ethics.

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¹³ Burkholder (1974: 653–654) makes a similar point about a "certain type of argument" (of his own devising) against ethical egoism, noting that Campbell's argument is one variety of that type.