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Author(s): Laszlo Versenyi

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## IS ETHICAL EGOISM REALLY INCONSISTENT?

LASZLO VERSENYI

In a recent issue of this journal, Roger Donway defends ethical egoism against Glasgow's attack<sup>1</sup> by arguing that the problem of inconsistency "is not confined to egoists alone."<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest that a much better defense is open to us if we can show that Glasgow's understanding of what ethical egoism asserts is a misunderstanding and that therefore his argument, as an argument against ethical egoism, is worthless.

"Ethical egoism," Glasgow states, "is the doctrine that the agent has but one duty, viz., to produce for himself the greatest balance of good over evil" (p. 81). "The egoist argues that Tom, Dick, and Harry, in fact everyone, ought to look after his own interest" (p. 83), and stresses "the normative character of his principle 'everyone ought to'" (p. 83). My point is that ethical egoism rightly understood holds no such doctrine or normative principle, and regards the promotion of one's own interest neither a "duty" nor an "ought."

That this is so is clearly recognized by the greatest opponent of ethical egoism. For although for Kant "to assure one's happiness" may be a duty, "the universal inclination toward happiness" is not. On the contrary, Kant is very careful in stressing that even "apart from all regard to duty, all men have already of themselves the strongest and deepest inclination towards happiness, because precisely in this idea of happiness all inclinations are combined into a sum total."<sup>3</sup> "To be happy is necessarily the desire of every rational but finite being."<sup>4</sup>

This is what makes a "hypothetical imperative which affirms the practical necessity of an action as a means to the furtherance of happiness *assertoric*"<sup>5</sup> for Kant: the fact that "there is one end that can be presupposed as actual in all rational beings; . . . one purpose which they not only *can*

have, but which we can assume with certainty that they all *do* have by natural necessity—the purpose, namely, of happiness . . . a purpose which we can presuppose a priori and with certainty to be present in every man because it belongs to his very being."<sup>6</sup>

Now this, that every man by nature desires his own happiness, is the basic premise of all ethical egoism. But this is no more a "normative principle" or an "ought" for the ethical egoist than it is for Kant. It is a statement about human nature, an analysis of practical rationality, an explanation of what it means to be a teleological, aimed, purposive being. If duty or virtue consisted in men wanting "to produce for themselves the greatest balance of good over evil," as Glasgow puts it, every man would be equally virtuous, for this willing or wanting is present in all;<sup>7</sup> it is the very essence of human will or desire and thus belongs to the nature of man as a rational being of needs. "And there is no need to ask why he who wants to be happy wants to be happy; the answer seems to be ultimate."<sup>8</sup> On this point two thinkers as different as Socrates and Kant would agree. If someone persisted in asking why a man wants to be happy, both would assume that he did not understand what "happiness" and/or "wanting" meant.

This being so, it is clear that to say a man *ought* to want to be happy is pointless, if not downright silly. But then to *command* that he act so as "to produce for himself the greatest balance of good over evil" is equally useless and silly; for this too he already wants to do by nature. What he needs is not commands or normative principles, but simply factual information about what in general and in particular is likely to make him happy, what things or ways of action are good for him by nature, and how in general and in particular he can

best attain these things and engage in these actions. In other words, what he needs is knowledge, not exhortation to do his duty. That is why, for the ethical egoist, virtue is knowledge of what is good (for me), that is, self-knowledge—knowledge of what I am and therefore need and must do in order to fulfill myself.

Commands and exhortations are just as unnecessary after such knowledge is obtained as they were before. Both Socrates and Kant saw that to know the good (for me) means to will the good; to know, and to have in one's power, the means to the good means to do the good. "Whoever wills the end, wills also the means which are indispensably necessary and in his power. So far as willing is concerned, this proposition is analytic."<sup>9</sup> Since happiness is the natural end of all men, "if we assume that the means to happiness could be discovered with certainty, this imperative of prudence would be an analytic proposition"<sup>10</sup> and egoistic ethics could proceed purely a priori.

That it cannot do so is due to the fact that "the elements which belong to the concept of happiness are without exception empirical—that is they must be borrowed from experience."<sup>11</sup> Egoistic ethics can, therefore, never be more than an empirical science whose synthetic propositions fail to qualify as apodictic moral laws. This is why Kant, aiming at an a priori morality, searches for apodictic ethical principles in pure reason rather than in the nature of man. But this is also why the ethical egoist regards the nonanalytic part of ethics a purely descriptive and empirical science—an inquiry into human nature in general and into my nature in particular, an investigation of what in general is good for all men and what in particular for each, a search for self-knowledge, that is, knowledge of the natural end and final purpose of all our aim-

directed activities.

The purpose of the preceding somewhat lengthy remarks was to show that Glasgow's conception of the doctrine of ethical egoism—that everyone *ought* to promote his own interest—is mistaken, and that his presentation of the position of the ethical egoist in column A—"I ought to do what is in my own interest," etc.—does not in any way make "explicit the essence of the doctrine of ethical egoism."

The ethical egoist's argument for considering or ignoring other people's interest is in fact quite different, and Glasgow's formulation should be rewritten to say something like this: (a) I naturally want to do what is in my own interest; and (b) Tom (or Dick or Harry) naturally wants to do what is in his own interest; thus, (c) if, and to the extent that respecting or even promoting Tom's (or Dick's etc.) interest lies in my interest, I am naturally interested in respecting or promoting Tom's interest and will automatically do so provided I know it to be the case and know how to go about it; (d) therefore, if someone wants me to respect or promote his interest, he should not bother me with exhortations, he should simply show me that to do so lies in my own interest, and I will do the same for him when I need and want his cooperation.

Now this whole argument is based on the ethical egoist's insight that each individual is an end for himself, but it in no way involves an admission that all individuals are ends in themselves and therefore necessarily ends and objects of respect or solicitude for me. Consequently, the ethical egoist's position, as understood by both Socrates and Kant, does not contain the contradiction that is inherent in Glasgow's misinterpretation.

WILLIAMS COLLEGE

#### NOTES

1. W. D. Glasgow, "The Contradiction in Ethical Egoism," *Philosophical Studies* 19 (1968): 83.
2. Roger Donway, "Can Egoists Be Consistent?" *Ethics* 80 (1969): 50.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbook), p. 67.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*.

son, trans. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co.), p. 24.

5. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 83.

6. Ibid.

7. Cf. also Plato, *Meno* 78B, *Symposium* 205A.

8. *Symposium* 205A.

9. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 84.

10. Ibid., p. 86.

11. Ibid., p. 85.