

Egoism: Conscious and Unconscious

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1.

CERTAIN men, who have had the courage to probe down to the very bottom of their own minds, have come to the conclusion that self-interest is the one motive of all human action; I might say of all action that is not merely mechanical and has life at the root of it.

This belief, conviction, or conclusion—term it what you will—forms the whole sum and substance of the philosophy called “Egoism,” and the man who, after due reflection, subscribes himself to it, becomes a “Conscious Egoist;” conscious! mark you—in that alone lies the difference between himself and the unbeliever; for, according to his philosophy, all men are Egoists by an inevitable law—the Supreme Law of Nature.

The question is then, with regard to Egoism, not “Are you an Egoist?” but “Are you conscious of the fact that you are an Egoist?” Call yourself what you will, if you are not a Conscious Egoist, you are merely an unconscious one.

This may seem a revoltingly dogmatic philosophy to those who are still floundering about in the shallows of ancient reasoning like little boys just learning to swim and afraid to go more than a yard or so beyond the land. But let these good people come out into the broad sea of self, let them realise their own nature, find what is best and most pleasing within them, draw it out to the full, and not be ashamed to say, or think, that by so doing they are serving self and self merely; then, in the opinion of the Conscious Egoist, they will become wise and sensible beings.

The Conscious Egoist asserts that all actions of all men are taken either in the quest of happiness or in the avoidance of pain. This is the groundwork upon which he builds up his reasoning.

Says he, “Whenever a man performs what the world might term a self-sacrifice either he finds pleasure in it or avoids pain. For instance, the philanthropist who spends his time and money in relieving the poor and needy, does it either to gain the pleasure or self-satisfaction of having done a good and charitable action, or to avoid the pain, as far as it is possible, of seeing his fellow-creatures suffer.

Or take another instance, that of the man who risks or definitely sacrifices his own life to save that of some other person. Either he does it from a natural desire to be courageous, or else the thought of seeing another creature die is more painful to him than is the thought of dying himself.

Hence we see that in these two instances the term “self-sacrifice” is not admissible; for both the philanthropist and the hero are plainly serving and not sacrificing self.

The Altruist (who is merely an unconscious Egoist) will most strenuously deny this because it would hurt his vanity to admit that his own actions are self-serving and not self-sacrificing. Says he, “It is possible to do an action which shall give pleasure to or detract from the pain of another, and yet neither attain pleasure oneself or avoid pain in the doing of it. Rather the reverse,” he argues. “It will detract from one’s own pleasure, and add to the burden of one’s own pain.”

“And yet,” says the Conscious Egoist, “You would assert that Virtue is its own reward?”

“Yes, I would,” says the Altruist.

“And you are more pleased, let us say satisfied, in being what you call unselfish than you would be if you knew you were what is called selfish?” the Conscious Egoist questions.

“Certainly,” says the Altruist.

“Then,” says the Conscious Egoist with a smile, “Your Altruism (which you call unselfishness) is merely the outcome of selfishness. Do you see the contradiction?”

The Altruist shakes his head. He will not part with his false philosophy so easily. He has grown to love it because it has flattered his individuality by representing his actions to be that which they are not. "I fail to see your point," he says in an emphatic voice, as though his failing to see a thing proved that the thing was not there to be seen. And the Conscious Egoist is seized with an exceeding great pity for the Altruist, who is very blind indeed.

2.

You will observe that I am sticking to the phrase "Conscious Egoist" in alluding to the believer in Egoism. The whole virtue of reasoning upon the subject lies in that word "conscious," which so many professed Egoists forget to prefix to themselves when arguing with the benighted ones. Says the Conscious Egoist very often to the so-called Altruist, "I am an Egoist and you are an Egoist; there is no difference between us." And the Altruist at once thinks that there is something wrong with the statement, for he sees a great difference somewhere, though he hardly knows where it is. And in this instance the Altruist is right. Both men are Egoists, certainly, and yet there is a difference between them. The one is a Conscious Egoist, the other a very unconscious one. In the case of one Egoism is recognised, in the case of the other it is strongly denied, although it exists just the same.

Here the Altruist might throw in what would seem to him a weighty argument. "There is," he might say, "a greater difference between man and man than this consciousness and unconsciousness. For instance, between two persons who call themselves Conscious Egoists there may be a vast difference. The one may be fairly good fellow, one to be tolerated in spite of his opinions, while another may be a rogue, a vagabond, and a disagreeable fellow to boot. How do you account for that?" Very easily. The difference in this case is the difference that is always between man and man, and it lies in a man's ego or self, and not in his Egoism, which is merely the natural law of the ego. The ego of a man, or his individuality, is more or less limited. He is born strong in certain powers and weak in others. Even his mentality is never perfect. Sometimes a portion of it will attain or closely approach perfection, and then the man is called a genius; but this development of one portion is nearly always at the expense of another portion. Hence is genius so irregular. Well, there being, as I have said, a difference between man and man, and all men being, by a law of nature Egoists, it stands to reason that the difference between man and man is the difference between Egoist and Egoist. The same difference would be apparent if all men had the misfortune to be born Altruists (which is an impossible supposition as in reality Altruism is only an imaginative quality). But supposing that Dame Nature for a moment changed the unchangeable law, and in a fit of cruelty made all men Altruists; I doubt whether she would have the consistency to make them all alike.

Thus, the only thing in which men may not differ, according to the philosophy of Egoism, is motive. This alone is unchangeable. Christ dying in agony on the Cross, and the drunken wifebeater beating his wife to death in a fit of passion, are inspired by one and the same motive—self-satisfaction. Christ felt that out of respect for himself, or for his principles, which means the same thing, he must suffer this terrible death. The wife-beater feels that out of respect for himself he must assert his mastery over his wife. That is the way I look at it.

“But,” argues the Altruist, “if you assert that their motives are the same, you seem to me to be putting Christ and the wife-beater on a level. I fail to see how you can make any distinction between them.”

Answers the Conscious Egoist, “As I have said before, the difference lies in the men themselves, and not in their motives. One man may delight in pleasing others, while the other delights in displeasing others. In this case they will act oppositely, though from a similar motive. It is right and logical to call a man a good man or a bad man; but it is wrong and illogical to assert that there are good motives and bad motives.

A man is a good man or a bad man in our eyes accordingly as we are pleased or displeased by his behaviour. Thus all difference is relative, and we judge an object by the relation that object bears to ourselves. This is why the world loves its Saviours, its Messiahs, its Prophets, its Martyrs, its geniuses, its great inventors and discoverers—simply because they have benefited the world. Gratitude is very clearly the outcome of selfishness, like all the virtues.

3.

I am not here to defend that which the world calls selfishness, and condemns so strongly, in theory, that is. I also would condemn it; yet I would not call it selfishness, but narrowness, littleness, baseness. The man who is commonly called selfish is no more selfish than the rest of his brethren; but his mind is stunted, his conception of himself is too limited. His joys are petty, his sorrows are mean. He has misconceived himself.

The secret of good and bad egoism lies in the ego’s conception of itself. A man may be conscious of his egoism, and yet sublimely unconscious of a great part of his ego or self. The body has its needs and the mind has its needs. These needs are many and various, and a man must grasp them all, and strive to satisfy them ere he becomes a perfect Egoist. This seems almost an impossible task—a task for a God, not for a man of flesh and blood and imperfections. But we can try.

It is an unconscious recognition of his own mental need which turns a man to what he calls Altruism. It is a recognition (conscious or unconscious) of mental need which makes a man love honesty, justice, mercy and charity. It is a recognition, again, of mental need, which gives man a longing for wholeness and continence of body and mind, and breeds in him the thing called morality. Also it is a recognition of his own mental need which makes a man rebel against the lack of proportion that exists to-day in Society. He sees one person suffering from want of that which is absolutely necessary to him if he is to live, while another has all that he can wish for, both of the necessities and the superfluities of life. He feels that there is something wrong with the world ; and feels also, perhaps without realising that he does it, that the world is part of himself just as much as he is part of the world. Therefore he strives to right the world, because only when the world is perfect can he himself be perfect. Is this unselfishness? Clearly not. It is a broad, enlightened selfishness, which has widened out self so that it includes the whole universe of things. A magnificent selfishness, but not altruism.

4.

Usually, the Altruist takes Jesus of Nazareth as his pattern to live by and to perish by; and he argues that Christ preached and practised the doctrine of complete self-abnegation. This is a conclusion which can only be arrived at by those who have halted half-way in their reasoning. Christ did not preach the doctrine of complete self-abnegation. He may have imagined and even declared himself to have been doing so; but in that case he could not have fully grasped the import of his own doctrine. What Christ really advocated was the abnegation (complete if you like) of one half of self to the other half, of the physical self to the purely mental, or if you will (for to me the two words have a synonymous meaning) spiritual self.

Christ considered that half of man was good and half was evil, and that these two halves of man made perpetual war upon each other. One of them, said he, must conquer in the end and trample the other underfoot, the which depending upon the will of the individual. He preached that it was best for the individual that his evil self should be stifled and his good self cultivated to its fullest extent. Rather a one sided doctrine to him who recognises that only that is evil to an individual which is positively hurtful; yet let us examine it to find whether there is in it a trace of genuine unselfishness.

We find that men are advised to be unselfish because it is best for themselves that they be so, to crush self because self will benefit by it. Clearly, if a man does what is best for himself for the reason that it *is* best for himself, he is mistaken in calling his action unselfish.

Therefore the term Altruist is a misnomer, even when applied to practical Christianity.

5.

As I have said before, there are two kinds of selfishness, the broad and the narrow. Let me illustrate this by giving you two types of men, first the man who is narrowly selfish, then the man whose selfishness is broad and enlightened.

We will suppose both men to be earnestly religious; the supposition is not an improbable one.

The first man, on the promises of the Bible, sacrifices himself, as he believes, on earth, for the sake of an eternity of aesthetic bliss in Heaven. He can never lose sight of the promised reward—if he did he would cease to be religious. His every act of charity is done because he knows that it will be returned to him a thousandfold. I make bold to say that this man is the most common type of religionist. He has taken the narrow view of religion, regarding it as an unpleasant means towards ultimate pleasure.

The broadly religious man believes in and follows a religion for its own sake, at the bottom reckless of eternity. “This religion,” he says, “will benefit me here, on earth. It will bring me nearer to what I would wish to be. I am most happy when I am doing good, because I know that it is good. If doing good will take me to Heaven, very well. If not, it has gone towards making a Heaven of earth.”

The Conscious Egoist, regarding these two believers, would assert that both were inspired by the same motive, the attainment of self-satisfaction, but there, most probably, the similarity ends, for each goes a different way about it according to his lights. The one whose mind is narrow and ill-lighted may attain a mean kind of pleasure at a great loss. The one whose mind is broad, open and enlightened may gain infinite pleasure at less cost to himself.

6.

I hold that if a man makes sacrifice he does not, nay, cannot, sacrifice himself wholly; but merely sacrifices one part of himself to another part.

It is a law of evolution that the fittest mental attributes as well as the fittest physical attributes, should survive; and it is this survival of the fittest which we call the victory of right over wrong, of reason over prejudice.

Man is a creature of conflicting passions; and it is best, or fittest, for the world that those passions, or impulses, should survive in the struggle which are most congenial or beneficial to the world as a whole; and it is best for the individual that he should be in complete harmony with the world and the world's spirit, otherwise, like an obstinate cogwheel in a rapidly whirling machine, he is apt to get broken and to fly off at a tangent, a useless article. Or else, if he is particularly strong as well as particularly obstinate, the machine, by which I signify the world's progress, may be stayed for a while until a stronger power than himself removes him and his influence.

7.

But I have wandered little from the direct course of my reasoning.

You see, though Egoism is such a vast subject, it does not stand much description. The shorter the description of Egoism, the better and clearer it will be. One might sum it up neatly in a little aphorism, "Egoism is everything, for everything is Egoism." This is what the Conscious Egoist advances against the idea of Altruism. He says, "I could prove to you, if there was time enough in the course of a lifetime to do so, that everything in the world and out of it is Egoism or the result of Egoism. I have proved it to myself already, and such being the case, I do not see how Altruism can exist. There is no room for it. In a vessel that is quite full of one substance there is no room for another."

8.

The thing which causes most misunderstanding between the Conscious Egoist and the Unconscious Egoist is that the Unconscious Egoist looks upon Egoism as a doctrine preached by the Conscious Egoist, whereas it is an inevitable fact merely stated by him.

The difference between a fact and a doctrine should be plain to everyone. And yet I have heard it said by people who might reasonably claim to be intelligent that there is no real difference between them. But if a fact and a doctrine are merely one and the same thing, how do you account for the multitudinous number of facts that were in existence ere ever a doctrine was preached or invented. A doctrine is a structure of reasoning raised upon a foundation of fact. The reasoning may be correct or fallacious, but this has nothing to do with the fact upon which it is based. If the doctrine is wrong, and mankind becomes conscious that it is wrong, then the doctrine will die out; but the fact remains, and another doctrine, more in harmony with it, will be raised upon its foundation.

Were Egoism a doctrine, the Conscious Egoist would approach you with these words, "Be selfish, for it is best that you should be so." Instead of which, he comes to you and says, "You are selfish; you cannot help it. Therefore you had best recognise the fact."

I say again, Egoism is given forth as a fact and not as a doctrine. The Conscious Egoist asks a man to look into himself and recognise that which is within him. "*Man, know thyself.*" If I do a good action, it is the result of Egoism. If I do a bad action, it is the result of Egoism. I am brave by reason of my Egoism, and cowardly by the same reason.

9.

Egoism, then, is merely a mental force which makes a man move, and keeps him moving. It rests with a man's ego in which direction he will move. Men have good egos and bad egos; strong, healthy egos, and weak, morbid, unhealthy egos. Egoism is not the ego but the law of the ego.

Difference in men's actions is no sign of difference in their motives. It is simply a proof of difference, either inborn or cultivated, in the men themselves. Therefore there is no unreasonableness in saying that good actions and bad actions (by which I mean actions beneficial to the world and actions detrimental to it) are inspired by Egoism, the mere realisation of self.

10.

A question was asked in my hearing some little time ago of a lecturer in sympathy with the philosophy of Egoism, which hardly received an adequate answer, the fault being that the answer was too concise and unexplanatory to be convincing to the mind of the inquirer. The lecturer forgot that the inquirer looked at matters in quite a different light to himself, or else he realised that he had not sufficient time to begin at the root of the matter and lead upwar

The question was, as far as I remember, "If Universal Egoism is a fact, how do you account for that feeling of benevolence towards others which exists in the human mind?"

I forget the lecturer's exact reply, but I know that the inquirer was eminently unsatisfied; and I will try myself to answer the question as fully as I can, and as clearly; and, if the inquirer should read these words, I sincerely hope I shall satisfy him that, taking Egoism fully into consideration, the feeling of benevolence he alludes to is not entirely unaccountable.

In the first place, what is this feeling of benevolence? Looked at logically, it is simply a desire for the expansion of self. When there is another person, seemingly outside yourself, whose joys and sorrows affect you just as much as do your own, it is equivalent to your having two selves, for this person's very life becomes a part of your life. Therefore to strive to make that other person happy is to strive to make yourself happy at the same time, because, by reason of your extension of self, you cannot be perfectly happy unless he is in a similar condition.

This is what benevolence practically amounts to, whether it is on a large scale, and, as it does in some highly developed egos, embraces the whole human race, or whether it is on a small scale, and embraces a narrow circle of acquaintances.

Take, for instance, that man whose love is so strong that he will lay down his life to, save one he loves. It is because of his love that he does it, and what is this love? It is the merging of his own life completely into the life of another, so completely, that at the time of his apparent

self-sacrifice the body which he gave to destruction, his own body, he felt instinctively to contain less of himself than that which he was desirous of saving.

Benevolence is a mild form of love, mild because it is widely diffused. A man with a great capacity for loving may, accordingly as he is circumstanced, concentrate his love upon a single individual, or scatter it abroad among the sons of men. Or he may shed it equally overall living things, as Buddah is said to have done, who voluntarily gave his own body to be a feast for a starving tigress and her cubs, because he could not bear to see their sufferings—the greatest sacrifice I have heard of, even in mythology.

Benevolence, then, is a widely diffused form of love, as passion is love concentrated; and I argue that when a person loves, the objects of his love become part, often the greater part, of that person's own life, therefore practically part of that person's own self. Thus it is that even a Conscious Egoist may derive pleasure from acts of benevolence.

You will admit that one does find pleasure in acts of benevolence, that one is always glad to see those one loves happy and contented. I do not see how you can deny it. And when one is happy, or pleased, it is because one's ego—or self—is to a certain extent satisfied. Therefore self-satisfaction is quite consistent with benevolence, and self-satisfaction is another word for Egoism.

I have gone as far as I mean to go for the present; therefore, to conclude, let me restate my case as briefly as possible. I have said:—

1. That all actions of all men are taken in order to satisfy the cravings of the ego, or self. Therefore all men are Egoists.
2. That some are conscious of the fact and some are unconscious.
3. That among the unconscious ones there are those who assert that it is possible to be the opposite of Egoist, to wit Altruist, and that it is a man's duty to be Altruist rather than Egoist.
4. That this is an impossible theory, because the very thing which they call Altruism springs out of and is nothing more nor less than Egoism.
5. That there is no such thing as self-sacrifice; that the man who gives his life to save another values his life less than that other, or he would never do it.
6. That to say all men are Egoists does not put them on a level. It merely gives them a common motive. Widely different actions may spring from this motive. The difference, where there is one, lies in a man's ego, or self. Egoism is the law of the ego.
7. That Egoism is a fact which cannot be escaped from, not a doctrine which may be followed out at will; and it is best and most honest to recognise this fact, thereby becoming a Conscious Egoist. The motto for the Conscious Egoist is "Man, know thyself," or "Find thyself out."
8. That all those actions which it behoves a man to do who would call himself an Altruist may be done by a man who would call himself a Conscious Egoist, without the slightest inconsistency. The only difference between the two men in that case would be that the Conscious Egoist was more alive to the nature of himself than was the Altruist.

[An Altruist will reply in our next issue.]

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