BAUMER AND GLASGOW ON ETHICAL EGOISM

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Abstract:

In this paper I have investigated the claim that egoism is incapable of being a moral action-guide. Egoism is that normative view in ethics which claims that a person has an obligation to perform or refrain from performing some act, if and only if so doing is in that person's (the agent's) own best interest. William Baumer and W.D. Glasgow have both presented arguments which purportedly show that egoism leads to contradictions and inconsistencies which prevent it from being a moral action-guide. In my refutation of these charges I argue that Baumer's argument begs the question against egoism by employing a non-egoistic definition of 'right', and that Glasgow's arguments involve various ambiguities and equivocations. I conclude, then, that at least from a logical point of view, egoism is as acceptable a moral action-guide as any non-egoistic view.
Baumer and Glasgow on Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism is a normative view which throughout the history of ethics has in one form or other been suggested as a possible moral code. This fact has annoyed many moral philosophers because egoism states that an individual's only moral obligation is to perform those acts which are in his (the agent's) own best interest. An egoist believes that he has a moral obligation never to sacrifice his own best interest for the interests of any other person. Now such a view not only runs contrary to the natural inclinations of many people, but in addition many moral philosophers contend that egoism cannot possibly be a moral code of behavior. One reason for this latter belief is that most moral philosophers assume that a moral code demands that one impersonally consider his moral obligations, and not simply consider what is in one's own best interest. As a result, being moral may very well commit a person to the performance of acts not in his own best interest, and for this reason many philosophers have regarded egoism and morality as simply incompatible.

If one begins with the assumption that the moral point of view is an impersonal or dis-self-interested point of view, then egoism, of course, will immediately be ruled out as a possible moral action-guide. Such an assumption, however, is regarded by many as a question-begging assumption against egoism. Defenders of egoism contend that the issue between egoism and non-egoism is a substantive moral issue, and thus egoism cannot be ruled out as a possible morality simply by choosing to define morality in a non-egoistic normative fashion. For this reason, many contemporary philosophers have attempted to find some normatively neutral reasons (i.e. reasons which would not beg the question against egoism) for rejecting egoism as a possible moral action-guide. For the most part, these various arguments advanced against egoism have fallen into three categories: (1) egoism is self-contradictory, (2) egoism forces its adherents to have inconsistent attitudes, and (3) egoism cannot fulfill the social harmonizing function moralities are intended to serve. It is my belief that none of the arguments against egoism with which I am acquainted, whether they be of type (1), (2), or (3), are successful in demonstrating that egoism cannot possibly be a morality.


2 Besides those of Baumer and Glasgow, some of the other
In this paper, though, I will limit my considerations to those arguments advanced by William Baumer and W.D. Glasgow. According to Baumer egoism is self-contradictory, while according to Glasgow egoism forces its adherents to have inconsistent attitudes and this inconsistency also leads to a contradiction.

Before I consider the arguments of Baumer and Glasgow in any detail, it will first be helpful to define 'egoism' more precisely. Ethical egoism (or simply egoism) is a normative view which states that each and every person has a moral obligation to perform an act X, if and only if X is in that person's (the agent's) own best interest. Of course, this is not the only way one could define egoism, but this particular definition is attractive for two reasons: (1) it is one of the most plausible ways of defining egoism if it is to be a viable candidate for a moral code, and (2) it is consistent with the definition of egoism used by most contemporary moral philosophers, and in particular with the definition of egoism employed by Baumer and Glasgow.

1.

Baumer attempts to prove that egoism is self-contradictory. His argument for this is as follows. If act x is in A's best interest, then according to egoism, A ought to do x. If A ought to do x then it cannot be wrong for A to do x. And, if it is not wrong for A to do x then A has a right to do x. As far as I can see the egoist can agree with everything thus far. However, Baumer goes on to argue that if A has a right to do x then no one else has a right to prevent A from doing x. This is so according to Baumer, "Since to say that someone has such a right of prevention is to say that the act prevented is in some sense wrong, and the same act cannot be both in some sense wrong and also permissively right, at least on balance."


After this initial argument, Baumer goes on to reason as follows. A situation might arise in which A and another egoist B have conflicting interests, and the only way for either A's or B's interest to be satisfied is at the expense of the other. Given such a situation, egoism would force its adherents to say that A has an obligation, and corresponding right, to do x since x is in A's best interest. And, according to Baumer's definition of 'right', to say that A has a right to do x implies that no one else has a right to prevent A from doing x. Yet, egoism would force its adherents to say that B has an obligation, and corresponding right, to prevent A from doing x, since x is incompatible with B's best interest. This being so, an egoist would be forced into making the following contradictory statements: no one has a right to prevent A from doing x, and someone (B) has a right to prevent A from doing x.

The major difficulty with the preceding argument is that it simply begs the question against egoism by employing a non-egoistic definition of 'right'. The contradiction which purportedly follows from egoism does so only because Baumer has defined 'right' in such a way that to say that A has a right to perform x implies that no one else has a right to prevent A from performing x. An egoist, however, would immediately reject such a non-egoistic use of the evaluative term 'right'. For an egoist, to say that A has a right to perform some act, only implies that it would not be morally wrong for A to perform that act, and not also, as Baumer suggests, that no one else can have a right to prevent A from doing that act. Egoism, remember, is that view which claims that a person's only moral obligation is to himself. It rejects the claim that there are any moral obligations owed to other people, such as Baumer has slipped into his definition of 'right'. For example, from Baumer's definition of 'right' it follows as a matter of logic that an egoist, B, may be morally obliged not to interfere with the acts of A (in particular, when A is performing an act to which he has a right), even when so doing is not in his (B's) best interest. Thus, if an egoist were to accept Baumer's definition of 'right' then he would of course be guilty of a contradiction. But to

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4 I do not mean to imply here that an egoist will never be obliged to perform acts which will benefit others. An egoist may be obliged to perform many such acts. However, an egoist will only be obliged to perform such acts, when so doing is necessary for his own best interest to be served. An egoist will never be obliged to perform or refrain from performing some act toward another when so doing is not in his (the agent's) own best interest. It is in this sense that an egoist's only obligation is to himself.
accept such a definition of 'right' is to abandon the egoistic position from the very beginning. For B to agree that A's performing an act to which he has a right implies that B has no right to prevent A from doing that act, even when B's so doing is contrary to B's best interest, is by itself incompatible with B's egoism. It is for this reason that an egoist would never accept such a definition of 'right', and for Baumer merely to assume such a definition in his argument against egoism is a case of begging the question.\footnote{There may be some question as to what precisely I mean by 'a question-begging argument'. I mean this. If one accepts the assumption that the issue between egoism and non-egoism in ethics is a substantive normative question, then the following would be a question-begging argument against egoism; any argument in which one merely assumes some non-egoistic normative premise, i.e. an assumption in which some evaluative or prescriptive expression, such as 'good', 'right', or 'ought', is used in a non-egoistic normative fashion. For a non-egoist merely to assume the truth of some non-egoistic normative thesis would be equivalent to assuming the falsity of that which he is attempting to disprove, and this is what it means to advance a question-begging argument.}

Given an egoistic definition of 'right' the egoist could explain away the apparent contradiction as follows. A in the example given above can say that he (A) has a right to perform some act, and yet simultaneously and without contradiction say that B has a right to prevent A from doing that act. To say that B has a right to prevent A's act does not imply, as it would on Baumer's use of 'right', that there is something morally wrong with A's act. To say that B has a right to prevent A's act only implies that such a prevention is right for B. Consequently, the contradiction which Baumer generates can arise only by beginning with a non-egoistic definition of 'right'; given an egoistic definition of 'right' no such contradiction will arise in egoism.

2.

Mr. Glasgow contends that egoism forces its adherents to have inconsistent attitudes, and furthermore, that this inconsistency leads to a contradiction. Glasgow's argument concerning the inconsistency of egoism may be stated as follows: a situation might arise in which Tom's doing x is in Tom's best interest but not mine. In such a situation, if I were an egoist, I would be forced to approve of Tom's doing x because it is in Tom's best interest, and not approve of Tom's doing x because it is not in my interest. An egoist, remember, believes not only that he himself, but also
everyone else, ought to do what is in their own best interest. This being so, in the above situation I, an egoist, would be forced to be inconsistent in my attitude toward Tom's doing x.

The first point to notice about the preceding argument is that the word 'approve' is used rather ambiguously, and in fact I think it is misused. For example, Glasgow states that after recognizing that x is in Tom's best interest, I, an egoist, must approve of x. But 'approve' here only means that I recognize it is what Tom ought to do. However, when I realize that Tom's doing x is not in my interest, I do not disapprove of x in the sense that I believe Tom ought not to do x. Rather, I only hope that Tom will not fulfill his obligation. The inconsistency which Glasgow points out, then, arises not because of an inconsistency in egoism, but because of Glasgow's equivocal use of the words 'approve' and 'disapprove'.

I think it might be further objected that Glasgow has misused the words 'approve' and 'disapprove'. Just because an egoist would hope or want Tom not to do x, it does not follow that he disapproves of Tom's doing x. For example, on occasion I may not want to keep one of my promises, and yet from this it surely does not follow that I disapprove of keeping that promise. Consequently, at most the only "inconsistency" to which egoism might lead occurs in situations in which one approves of acts one does not want to be performed, or conversely disapproves of actions one wants to be performed. This, however, if it can be correctly termed an inconsistency, is not peculiar to egoism. Non-egoism could just as easily lead its proponents into situations in which they morally approve of acts they do not want performed, and also situations in which they disapprove of acts they want performed. In any event, egoism certainly does not force a person both to approve and to disapprove of a single act in any one sense of those terms, and to this extent Glasgow's criticism that egoism forces its adherents to have inconsistent attitudes is without foundation.

Although Glasgow claims that the contradiction in egoism follows from the inconsistent attitudes it produces, the two are in fact independent of one another. Consequently, Glasgow could accept my objections thus far, and yet still contend that egoism is self-contradictory. This latter charge of Glasgow's can be stated as follows. In approving Tom's right to do what is in his own best interest, an egoist is in effect admitting that there are other people who are autonomous ends-in-themselves. However, according to Glasgow, it is just as basic to any egoist to deny that apart from himself there are any individuals who are autonomous ends-in-themselves.
For this reason, egoism is not only inconsistent but self-contradictory. It commits each egoist to the contradictory theses that there are other people besides himself who are autonomous ends, and also that there are no other people besides himself who are autonomous ends.

The difficulty with this second argument is again an ambiguity, this time centering around the words 'autonomous ends-in-themselves'. This expression can be taken in various ways, and I think an egoist can admit that in some sense there are other autonomous ends besides himself, and yet deny that there are any other in some other sense of those words. So long as an egoist does not both affirm and deny that there are other ends-in-themselves in any one sense of the words, then he will not have contradicted himself. For example, an egoist can admit that there are other ends-in-themselves in the sense that each person has just as much right to do that which is in his or her own best interest as he himself does. Yet, without contradiction he can simultaneously maintain that no person is an end-in-himself in the sense that other people have unconditional moral obligations toward him. Now it might be objected by Glasgow that it is simply false to say that someone has a right to do something, and yet to also say that no one has any obligation to respect that right. And, of course, this would be false if one were espousing a non-egoistic concept of right, in which to say that a person has a right entails that everyone else has an obligation not to restrict that right arbitrarily and in fact has an obligation to assist that right as the situation might demand. An egoist, however, would reject such a non-egoistic notion of right, and if Glasgow must revert to such a use of 'right', then his argument against egoism would be question-begging. Logically speaking, then, there is nothing to prevent an egoist from claiming that there are other people who are autonomous ends-in-themselves, in the sense that they have just as much right as any other person to do what is in their own best interest, and yet simultaneously claim that no one is an end-in-himself in the sense that other people have an unconditional obligation to respect that right of self-interest. So long as it is in these two different senses that the egoist both affirms and denies that there are other ends-in-themselves, then he will not contradict himself as Glasgow suggests.

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