

Ethical Theory and Sexual Ethics

Ideas about ethics, and what counts as an ethical choice, have seen rapid change. This set of notes will suggest that there is a movement towards an evolutionary understanding of morality and outline what that emergent framework is beginning to look like for human sexual relationships.

Western culture carries the last vestiges of a religious framework but increasingly there is broad acceptance of the view that Laws and morality are a human construct. Utilitarian frameworks are well established and provide a secular mechanism for moral decision-making.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarian frameworks all argue that morality is a rational activity and can be calculated. All maintain that the morally right course of action is that which leads to the greatest good for the greatest number. For Bentham, like Epicurus, the good is defined by actions that maximize the quantity of pleasure and minimize the quantity of pain. While Mill and Singer make minor adjustments to this they agree that morality depends on the accurate prediction of consequences, and that the end justifies the means. Morality can be, and should be, calculated and **all people involved count equally** for the purpose of the calculation. Bentham and Mill recommend that we pursue our natural inclinations towards pleasure (and against pain) and that this is where morality lies. In a number of ways the recommendations that flow from this ethical framework cohere with the values of the Christian civilisation from which it emerged. The desirability of ultimate and equal respect for persons is at the heart of the Gospel message. When each person counts for one and not more than one there is an assumption that fairness and equality are at the heart of the moral life. The greatest good for the greatest number provides a secular foundation for the promotion of equality and fairness.

In line with Christian teaching there is also a working assumption that monogamy is fair and generates the greatest good for the greatest number. Children (whose needs count equally with those of the parents) need a secure family life and this would 'count' against divorce even if greater happiness could be found elsewhere by the parents. J S Mill regarded the breaking of promises and trust – which would include marriage vows – to be the worst kind of human evil. A society cannot function without mutual trust and someone who cheats on a loved one is not likely to be any more reliable outside of that relationship. Breach of promise and trust thus undermines civilised life generally. The normative principles of moral action appear to be supported by Utilitarianism – the basic principles are meant for everybody, equally and alike; that individuals have no privileges other than those belonging to the rest of mankind, and cannot set aside the interests of others in pursuit of their own. Equal consideration of the interests of others is seen as a necessary part of morality.

Just a few issues with Utilitarian frameworks will be raised here.

1. The assumption that pleasure is the sole measure of morality, and that the 'good' lies in the generation of happiness or pleasurable consequences bears careful examination. The question is whether the FACT that we do seek pleasure enables us to read off what we OUGHT to do and how we should behave. Facts may be suggestive of values but do they entail them?
2. While pleasure/ happiness/ maximisations of preferences are desirable goals in morality it is not obvious that happiness is a unitary concept. If what is 'good' cannot be universally agreed then the application of Utilitarianism in concrete situations becomes very difficult.
3. Another difficulty for Utilitarianism is the transition from individualistic hedonism (psychological or ethical) to universalistic hedonism. Sidgwick presents the argument as a debate between the Egoist and the Utilitarian:

If the Egoist...confines himself to stating his conviction that he ought to take his own happiness or pleasure as his ultimate end, there seems no opening for any line of reasoning to lead him to Universalistic Hedonism... (Quoted from J L Mackie, Inventing Right and Wrong, P142-3)

Once the notion of something objectively good is accepted the transition to universalistic hedonism is successful. But the common utilitarian may reject objective claims. They may speak in terms of what is **rational, not of what is objectively good**. It is rational for each to seek their own happiness and there is no way from this position to universalistic hedonism. James Fitzjames Stephen argues that 'Common Utilitarianism' can be stated as follows:

'Love your neighbour in proportion to the degree in which he approaches yourself and appeals to your passions and sympathies. In hating your enemy bear in mind the fact that under immediate excitement you are very likely to hate him more than you would wish to do upon a deliberate consideration of all his relations to yourself and your friends, and of your permanent and remote as compared with your immediate interest.' (From *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*; London, 1873) Common Utilitarianism is a form of egoism.

Ethical Egoism

Psychological Egoism is the view that a human being is psychologically incapable of doing anything that does not promote his or her own self-interest. It is a theory of human motivation. We can only be expected to do what we can reasonably be said to be capable of doing. If all we are capable of doing is furthering our own self-interest then all we ought to do is further our own self-interest. Psychological egoism does not exclude selfless acts but it does exclude selfless desires. A person may act to help another person, but their true desire will be self-interest e.g. helping another for their *own* peace of mind. As an empirical claim about human nature psychological egoism makes claims that go well beyond the evidence (See Mary Midgley 1979, "Gene-Juggling").

Ethical Egoism is not interested with what actually motivates people but with what *ought* to motivate them. Ethical egoism maintains that *each person ought to act to serve his or her own self-interest*. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his book *Leviathan* (1651) is the most famous proponent of this view. Hobbes (*Leviathan*, Chapter 15) argues that for the ethical egoist moral actions are those that benefit themselves. Egoism rejects the position that ethical behaviour requires a person to universalise moral rules and recognise others equally. According to Kurt Baier (1977, P197) an Egotist is rightly described as '*self-centred, inconsiderate, unfeeling, unprincipled, ruthless self-aggrandizers, pursuers of the good things in life whatever the cost to other people, who think only about themselves, or, if about others, then merely as a means to their own ends.*' The Egotists should behave according to the principle that they ought only do what they think protects and promotes their own self-interest – either because they don't care about others or because, even if they do, they care more about themselves. A moral principle is only acceptable if, by complying with it, the agent aims at his or her own overall good. It is in the interests of the ethical egoist that *others* are encouraged to be generous, selfless, honest, trusting and altruistic. *The ethical Egotist* can more easily operate in a world where others have traditional moral principles and, for example, are reliable and do not lie. Others are far more easily manipulated if they believe what they are told, and are loyal and loving in relationships. It is perfectly consistent for the egoist to publicly value the virtues, and even to actively promote such sentiments in others, whilst rejecting the very same principles when their own self-interest is served.

J L Mackie, upon being given a copy of Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene* as a Christmas present, 1978 wrote an article in the journal *Philosophy* praising the book and discussing how its ideas might be applied to moral philosophy. He then gave ethical egoism an evolutionary twist. He argues that altruism is always self-referential and that there is nothing wrong with self-love and what Hume called 'confined generosity'. '*The pursuit of them is a large and central part of the good life*' (page 170). He argues that **being selfish and competitive by nature**, it is unreasonable to accept that morality demands equal or fair consideration of others. Mackie notes that moral codes can grow up and survive, even if they are not egalitarian, because they serve the interests of the powerful and whilst they remain in power there is a secure social structure. The survival of the fittest allows unequal relationships in nature. Mackie argues that 'morality' such as this has a long history, and has proved to have a positive social function. He argues that Game Theory models demonstrate that non-egalitarian models of morality based on egoistic principles are inevitable when an unequal agreement is better than no agreement at all. In such situations differences of rank or race or sex are accepted as grounds of privilege.

'Where one side has less to lose by failure to agree or less to gain from a stable agreement further possibilities of unequal agreements arise. Rational bargaining can result in exploitation...rational calculation of long term self interest is not sufficient in itself to lead men to make mutually beneficial agreements, or one made, to keep them.' P119.

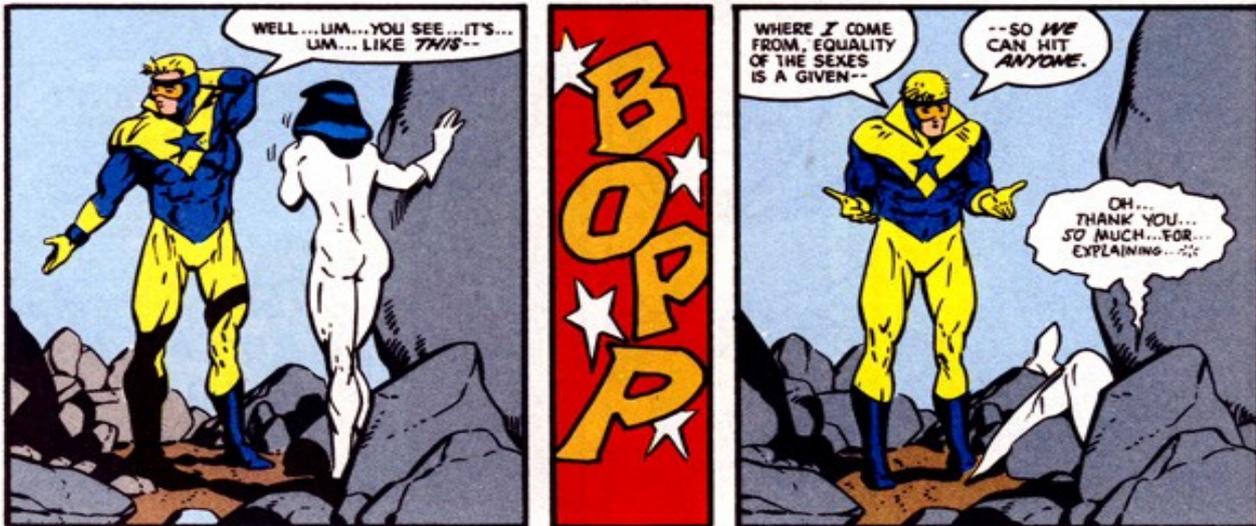
It is not only **rational** but **natural** for an individual to universalise the rule that it is right for everyone to seek his or her own happiness. J L Mackie accepts that the consequence of this is that competition and conflict between competing groups is also natural.

'...we shall want egoism also as a moral principle: we want people to see it as not only legitimate but right and proper that they should pursue what they see as their own well-being.' P 173. People's goals and happiness's are 'irreversibly diverse' and we should '*reject the unitary notion of happiness and identify the good for man rather with the partly **competitive** pursuit of diverse ideals and private goals*' p178.

Survival of the fittest should be recognised, anticipated and accommodated as part of the moral life. Competition and conflict are a natural part of life. People are entitled to do whatever is needed in order to pursue their best interests, and ought to do this, because it is rational and also natural. Ethical egoism appeals to evolution, which, as Bishop Gore said, '*Is a case of each for himself, as the elephant said when it danced among the chickens*'.

BOOSTER

GOLD



If each is equally entitled to seek their own interests this will inevitably result in conflict. Booster delivers the news that by his time, of the 25th Century, feminism has triumphed and men are entitled to engage on equal terms in physical violence with women. This, it is claimed, represents true gender equality. **The mistaken assumption is that equality is separable from fairness when in fact fairness is the goal of equality. Ethical egoism gives permission to ignore fairness and pursue only what is rational and natural. It is rational and natural for a man to choose to use his physical strength to his own advantage. If a woman wants equality she has to be able to take a punch, or accept inequality.**

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Once competition and conflict are agreed as 'normal and proper' Mackie argues that truth-telling is 'not obviously reasonable' P182-3 and that 'A prudent man will not squander his limited stock of convincing lies, but use it sparingly to the best effect' rather than be exposed publicly as untrustworthy. He argues that agreements should be kept 'provided that no strong reason for doing otherwise turns up.' p184

J L Mackie (Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong 1977, p115) uses game theory analysis to explain the mechanism of ethical egoism.

'Tom and Dan are manning two nearby strongposts in an attempt to hold up an enemy advance. If both remain at their posts, they have a fairly good chance of holding off the enemy until relief arrives, and so of both surviving. If they both run away, the enemy will break through immediately, and the chance of either of them surviving is markedly less. But if one stays at his post while the other runs away, the one who runs will have an even better chance of survival than each will have if both remain, while the one who stays will have an even worse chance than each will have if they both run. Suppose these facts are known to both men, and each calculates in a thoroughly rational way with a view simply to his own survival' The Egotist wants to run away and leave the other to die. The egoist knows that agreeing to stay is not enough. Lying and breaking an agreement is something the other will do if the situation is extreme. Each may selfishly therefore agree to be chained to the post if the other soldier agrees to be chained as well. It is **rational** because each achieves better the egoistical goal of their own personal survival by agreement. *'There can be psychological substitutes for physical chains and external penalties. Military tradition of honour and loyalty to comrades can serve as invisible chains.'*

Ethical Egoism as a sexual ethic

In this analogy the post stands for moral rules. In sexual ethics the egoist wants to do exactly what suits them in terms of sexual activity. But they also need the co-operation of others. In order not to be cheated on they may agree to be chained to the post of not cheating – for as long as it suits them. In order not to be lied to, they may agree to be chained to the post of not lying – for as long as it suits them. An egoist may therefore appear to follow moral rules, especially if the risks of not doing so are perceived to be too great for their reputation or career, but when their convenience or self-interest is no longer served they will do as they please. In human sexual relationships it would be rational and natural for everyone to pursue their own sexual interests. This gives permission to powerful males (physically or financially) to use coercion or violence to achieve their desired sexual goals.

In terms of a sexual ethic the recommendation would perhaps be something like this: *'In sexual matters everyone should be self-centred, inconsiderate, unfeeling, unprincipled, ruthless self-aggrandizers, pursuers of their own sexual ends, whatever the cost to other people, think only about themselves, or, if about others, then merely as a*

means to their own ends.'

This is an emergent set of 'values' seen in many areas of modern life. It is the value system of mainstream online pornography. A number of issues arise:

1. Ethical egoism is widely regarded as untenable because it struggles to make general recommendations and becomes quickly self-destructive if others accept their recommendation and do as the egoist does.
2. Ethical egoism cannot resolve a conflict of interest in a moral way. Two ethical egoists in conflict would have to accept that the other be entitled to do whatever it took to progress their own interest.
3. Ethical egoism assumes that what is natural is good. Being civilised is not regarded as natural or good. Reversion to primal instinct and the law of the jungle is regarded as natural and therefore good. Civilisation depends upon a more sophisticated understanding of the moral life than this.
4. The assumption that we are advanced animals with a drive for survival and that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with living in line with instinct lies behind this theory. Therefore the strong are entitled to dominate the weak, and take what they want, if they perceive that it is in their interests to do so. The assumption is that morality has a naturalistic explanation driven by an evolutionary pressure to facilitate the passing on of the finest genes in the pool. The question is whether this is a complete explanation and whether there are other 'goods' to which a human is, by nature, attracted.

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