

## RELATIVISM, EGOISM AND REALITY

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### (§ 1) Arbitrary Distinctions

Racist, sexist, and class or caste systems appeal to what appears to be an arbitrary property, viz., race, gender, or social status, in determining how to treat other people. People of different races, genders, and castes have different properties, but those properties are not relevant to morality, at least not according to orthodox theories. Nepotism should then, one might think, be equally unacceptable. Genetic similarity is no more relevant to morality than are race, gender, or economic similarity, or, for that matter, that you are who you are.

Morality, according to many, requires that we transcend ourselves, expand the focus of our concern. We should concern ourselves as much with others as we do with ourselves. The most influential normative theories in the West, Kant's deontological ethics and Mill's utilitarianism, insist upon the moral worth of other persons. The other-regarding nature of morality is deeply entrenched in the traditions not only of the West, which have been heavily influenced by Christianity, but in many Eastern schools of thought as well. Indeed, according to some traditions, egocentrism is the root of all evil. In the texts of Mo Tzu, a Chinese philosopher contemporaneous with Socrates, we find this exhortation to *universal love*:

When every one regards his father, elder brother, and emperor as himself, whereto can he direct an unfilial feeling? Will there still be any unaffectionate individual? When every one regards his younger brother, son, and minister as himself, whereto can he direct any disaffection? Therefore there will not be any unfilial feeling or disaffection. Will there then be any thieves and robbers? When every one regards other families as his own family, who will steal? When every one regards other per-



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sons as his own person, who will rob? Therefore there will not be any thieves or robbers.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in the Advaita Vedanta worldview, the empirical self (*jiva*) with which most of us are primarily concerned, is an illusion. The real self (*atman*) is the universal mind which we share with all other people, indeed everything, since "All is one". According to monistic Vedantists, if only we were to recognize the fictionality of our psychological ego, which we designate by the pronouns 'I' and 'me', then we would lose our lust for possession, since we would see that "we" don't really own anything. Without acquisitive greed in the world, there would presumably be no crime.<sup>2</sup>

Self-effacing views are completely at odds with the spirit of capitalism governing the United States, according to which an important measure of successful living is material prosperity. It is perhaps too obvious to observe that the outspoken enthusiasm of Americans for capitalism, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other, is at least inharmonious, if not deeply inconsistent. At least this tension would seem obvious to one familiar with the biblical Jesus' claim that "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19: 24; Mark 10: 25; Luke 18: 25).

Buddhism is a third Eastern tradition which emphasizes the deleterious effects of excessive attachments to our selves, the ultimate source of all suffering. Many versions of Buddhism have evolved from the teachings of the ancient Indian Siddhartha Gautama, but the root idea is that of *anatman*, or no-self. The self is a fiction, and therefore all of the pain which "we" experience as a result of "our" excessive attachment to the self is misguided. Although Buddhism is often categorized as a religion, it is a "religion" with no God, and perhaps better characterized as a view about The Good Life. The concept of the *Bodhisattva*, the sage who postpones his own attainment of *nirvana* (extinction of desire) in order to help others find the path to enlightenment, is a moral one and illus-

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<sup>1</sup> From *Universal Love*, translated by Yi-Pao Mei, 1929, reprinted in Boss (1998), p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> One assumption made by such theories is that money and possessions are sought as ends in themselves. According to an alternative picture, in which money and possessions serve merely as means to power, the eradication of mercenary greed would not entail the cessation of crime. There would still be those who sought power for power's sake, and this might well lead to transgressions of society's morality.



trates the importance accorded to other people in the Buddhist world view.

In theories which retain the subject–object distinction and, correlatively, the dualism between self and other, total self–sacrifice, in the sense of a complete dismissal of one’s own interests and needs, is not a requirement of morality. Rather we are to think of ourselves as one among the larger group comprising our moral community. Morality is essentially social and involves considering one’s self in relation to others. Communitarian theories such as that of Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>3</sup> or Confucianism insist that we are defined in terms of our relations to others.

Another general constraint upon a genuinely *moral* theory is often said to be that the theory be overriding or authoritative. Morality sometimes comes into conflict with our egocentric aims. When it does, morality is supposed to take precedence. For example, if someone in a life–threatening situation needs your help, then your inconvenience in helping the person, the fact that doing so may make you late for an appointment, or might require exertion on your part, or could result in your shoes’ becoming dirty, is not supposed to matter. You should do your moral duty nonetheless, though it conflicts with the dictates of prudence.

The other–regarding, universal, and overriding nature are important features of the theories which many philosophers are willing to count as “moral” theories. But what is the real world like? How far are we from achieving the ideals advocated by Kant, the utilitarians and many schools of Eastern thought?

## (§ 2) Real Communities

In the real world, each of us participates in a variety of communities. These communities overlap. The union of all of the people with whom we have any sort of communication whatsoever comprises the group toward which we are capable of adopting a moral stance. By “adopting a moral stance”, I mean taking into serious consideration or being moved by someone’s interests and needs. Let us call this the “narrow moral community”, to be distinguished from the “wide moral community”, the group of people about whose actions one is capable of rendering judgments. For example, your colleagues and family and even the people

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<sup>3</sup> *After Virtue*, 1984.



whom you pass in the street can be a part of your narrow moral community. But anonymous women and children in Russia cannot really be a part of the narrow moral communities of most of us, since we have never seen nor come in contact with them and, in all likelihood, we never will. In other words, for most of us, the age old adage, "Out of sight, out of mind", rings true. People who live in remote regions from us simply do not affect us; they play little if any role in our decisions of how to conduct ourselves. But the distances between ourselves and those whom we do not think about need not be and are often not so remote.

Most of us in contemporary American society have developed efficient methods of tuning out those whose needs are psychologically burdensome to us. In large metropolitan areas, most people ignore the plight of beggars in the street. Sometimes a rationale is given: "If I helped every beggar I met, I would then be penniless". Often the existence of transients barely impinges upon the consciousness of successful city-dwellers. When the homeless manage to capture our attention, it is through what we act as though are, somewhat ironically, moral transgressions on their part against us. We take offense at their disruption of our relative state of equanimity. The unsuccessful elements of a successful society are often negatively judged and seldom helped. A common attitude of disdain toward the failures of society is shared among many successful Americans, who often assume the failures of society to have failed as a result of their own character. But, in fact, we seldom make any attempt to delve into the history of those whom we criticize. In reality, we assume that people are who they are, and they are responsible for their current condition, regardless of how they became that way. The burden of proof, that one's misfortune was not sheerly a matter of personal failure, is presumed to lie with the downtrodden. But most of the time we do not ask how people got into the predicaments in which they find themselves, not because we do not have the time (we would find the time, if we cared), but because we do not want to know.

At the other end of the spectrum from the anonymous lie the famous, who, being more obviously a part of what we take to be the real world, are much more frequently subject to our practices of moral judgment. People whose descriptions have earned a place in your consciousness due to their unavoidable representation in the media, e.g., the famous leaders of important countries, can be members of your wider moral community, since you most likely feel equipped to render judgments



upon their actions, based on what you know about them, on the basis of the pictures painted for you by the media.

Because these metaphors have the appropriate meaning built into them, I shall refer to the world of one's narrow moral community as that person's "sphere of regard", and the world of one's wide moral community as that person's "sphere of judgment" (see Figure 1). This terminology makes sense since it seems fairly evident that human beings tend to be quite narrow or selective about regard and most promiscuous about judgment.

The type of aid which we refuse to the needy is not always monetary. Consider the case of Kitty Genovese, a young woman who was murdered just outside her apartment building in New York City one night in the 1960's. The thirty-eight witnesses of Kitty Genovese's murder most likely condemned the atrocity as morally wrong.<sup>4</sup> But none of the witnesses considered Ms. Genovese to be a member of their narrow moral community, within their "sphere of regard". I am here assuming that if she had been their daughter, those people would have been galvanized to act on her behalf, rather than leaving action to the "someone else" who never came through.

The narrow moral community of most people is quite a bit smaller than the society in which they live, and nearly always includes the members of their immediate family and their friends. But everyone else elected to one's elite "narrow moral community", is subject to will and caprice. If you are broadly benevolent, then your regard will extend to those outside your socio-economic class. It will bother you to drive down Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles through areas where human beings live in cardboard boxes, only a few miles from areas where other human beings live in majestic multi-level homes. If you are extraordinarily broadminded, then you might even care about the millions of non-Americans who were killed solely because we escalated our involvement in the Vietnam War for what remain today inscrutable reasons. It is of course too late to do anything about the millions of Vietnamese and Cambodians whose lives ended prematurely due to U. S. involvement in the Vietnam War. But your caring about those people may very well affect how you think about war today.

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<sup>4</sup> See: "Study of the Sickness Called Apathy", reprinted in *Perspectives on Ethics* (1998), edited by Judith Boss, pp. 44-50.



Everyone who isn't a complete recluse inhabits a narrow moral community with more than one member. As we have seen, some philosophers stipulate a conceptual limit on what should count as a morality. Many consider it reasonable to classify individuals who regard exclusively their own needs and interests in making decisions about how to act, as purely *amoral* agents. For example, Gilbert Harman, a self-proclaimed moral relativist, does not treat egoism as a normative theory of morality in *The Nature of Morality* (1977). Rather, Harman distinguishes prudence from morality in such a way that ethical egoism, which identifies morality and prudence, is a type of confusion, perhaps a grand self-delusion.

According to this picture, a *morality*, properly speaking, must involve *at least* two agents, both of whom are other-regarding. Agents who are completely devoid of moral sentiment, who are incapable of taking a moral stance toward another person, are *amoral*. But if part of what it means to be human is to share communities with others, then there is also a sense in which these people are utterly alien. They are akin to another life form. If a person is truly untouchable by us, then there is a sense in which he inhabits another world from our own.

### (§ 3) New Developments

In recent years, some feminist philosophers have maintained that one *ought* to prioritize the interests of those with whom one is closely related, viz., the members of one's own family. One of the rationales given is that if we do not care about our family members, then there is no chance that we will care about fellow human beings standing at a more remote distance from us. Another rationale invokes "*ought* implies *can*": we cannot help everyone, so it is not the case that we should. Our moral duties must be appropriate to our peculiar circumstances. We are in a position to help our family members, but not the entire population of our city, state, country, and least of all the world. As Nel Noddings puts the point:

I shall reject the notion of universal caring—that is, caring for everyone—on the grounds that it is impossible to actualize and leads us to substitute abstract problem solving and mere talk for genuine caring.... I am not obliged to care for starving children in Africa, because there is no



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way for this caring to be completed in the other unless I abandon the caring to which I am obligated.<sup>5</sup>

Basically this outlook sanctions what is a very common view among people in human societies, viz., that we should care more about our family members than non-family members, and we have special obligations toward our own relations, obligations which exceed those that we have toward human beings in general. For the most part, we act as though our positive duties to help other people extend only to our intimates, while our negative duties not to kill or harm people extend far beyond our family.

This deeply entrenched distinction within commonsense morality, between positive and negative duties, has been adduced by Gilbert Harman in support of moral relativism. That we commit murder (and thus act wrongly) if we kill a man with a gun, but do nothing wrong if we allow him to perish of starvation, looks to be an arbitrary distinction which demands explanation. We certainly *do* hold people morally and legally responsible for permitting their children to die through neglect. According to relativists, all of this makes sense.<sup>6</sup> For example, it will be to everyone's advantage to have a general proscription to murder while not requiring the rich to help the poor, which would benefit only the poor. If morality amounts to a set of tacit agreements to treat people in certain ways and to refrain from acting in certain ways, then the fact that we have laws against murder, yet no one can be punished by law for a stranger's death by starvation, even if he dies at one's doorstep, is comprehensible. To their own children, parents have special duties which they have incurred through their having voluntarily chosen to bring needy people into the world.

#### (§ 4) Egoism

The view advocated by those feminist philosophers who claim that we ought to prioritize those who lie in closer spheres of morality than those at a distance, is similar in some ways to Confucianism, according to which people are literally *defined* in terms of their relations to others, and duties to one's immediate family members are of much higher prior-

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<sup>5</sup> An excerpt from *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1994), by Nel Noddings, reprinted in Boss, p. 463.

<sup>6</sup> Harman argues thus in chapter two of *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (1996) and in "Moral Relativism Defended", in *Philosophical Review* (1975).



ity than duties to other members of one's community. But not all people have children, and those who do can be viewed as caring about literal extensions of their selves.

According to E. O. Wilson, a sociobiologist, when we care about our biological relations it is because we care about the propagation of our own genetic material.<sup>7</sup> Many people consider their interests to be affected by the fate of their children and what legacy they leave to the world. Whether or not we accept Wilson's view that we cannot help but be selfish, if we look closely at how we conduct ourselves on a day-to-day basis, and the manner in which we decide to act in the ways in which we do, the conclusion seems irresistible that we do for the most part conduct ourselves egoistically.

*Psychological egoism*, of which Wilson's view is representative, is the descriptive thesis according to which, as a matter of fact, *all people always act in ways which they believe will best serve their own interests*. Psychological egoism may be too strong, since it denies the very possibility of altruism. In any case, since psychological egoism is irrefutable (any alleged act of "altruism" is simply reinterpreted in terms of the agent's selfish covert motivations), it is equally immune from confirmation. If psychological egoism is true, we nonetheless have no trouble distinguishing "selfishly selfish" agents from "selflessly selfish" agents, the latter being those individuals who are naturally benevolent and other-regarding.

### (§ 5) Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoists disagree with the orthodox picture according to which morality *must* be other-regarding. *Ethical egoism* is the normative theory according to which *one ought to act so as to best serve one's own interests*. Your being you is eminently relevant to morality. Each of us ought to look after ourselves, and we ought not to meddle in the affairs of others. There is something to the idea proposed by psychological egoism, since many people tend to look out for themselves and think about others only in extraordinary circumstances. This is why the fact that ethical egoism is defended by some philosophers as the single true moral theory strikes many as ironic, if not downright farcical. Ethical egoism exhorts us to focus upon our own needs and interests, as most of us already do.

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<sup>7</sup> E. O. Wilson *On Human Nature*, 1978.



Ethical egoism congratulates us for doing what we ought to do morally speaking, when all along we thought that we were selfish, morally remiss! Although to many ethical egoism is counter-intuitive for its rejection of the "other-regarding" criterion, the thesis does satisfy the universalizability criterion, at least on the face of it, since ethical egoists can and do claim that it is each person's duty to "look out for number one".

This view has gained some popularity through the writings of Ayn Rand, the founder of the "objectivist" movement. In Rand's view, altruism, far from being morally praiseworthy, is in fact vicious, at least whenever it involves self-sacrifice. Rand attempts to derive ethical egoism, a normative theory, from a basically Aristotelian framework according to which the goal of a human being's life is a life *qua* human being, which must involve its highest faculty, viz., reason. Reason is to govern our lives, and ultimately reason is the basis of morality. But, according to Rand, reason dictates that we develop our own potentials and not meddle in the affairs of others, even though they might not consider assistance a form of "meddling".

That Rand's view has enjoyed some success as a popular philosophy in contemporary America probably has more to do with the fact that her writings have been widely disseminated by wealthy capitalists who find solace in a theory according to which selfishness is a virtue than with the soundness of the picture which she paints in novels such as *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. The objectivist heroes are people who lead active, productive, successful and creative lives, and this necessitates their rejection of orthodox Western morality, according to which we ought to concern ourselves with the plight of others. It is Rand's opinion that *laissez-faire* capitalism is the only moral system, since it alone bears out the ultimate objectivist maxim: "Hands off!" Far from having an obligation to help other people, it is, according to Rand, immoral to do so, except in those cases where doing so will be to our own personal benefit. We can have no interest in strangers, since for all we know they may not share our values, and so we can have no obligation to help them. When we do assist people whose values clash with our own, we act immorally.

Objectivism explicitly rejects the requirement that a morality be "other-regarding", but a rationale is given: "morality", as it has been conventionally understood, is destructive and even evil, for it stifles potentially great artists and stunts the growth of all creators. Supposing that all people had the potential to be great artists, it is unclear whether they



would be anything more than “second-handers”, who live off the ideas of others, were they to become card-carrying objectivists. In other words, Rand’s view embodies the paradox encountered in any allegedly normative injunction to be creative, or to be radically individualist, or to be unique. Any person who follows another thinker’s advice to be an artist, thereby evinces the fact that he is not.<sup>8</sup> A second peculiarity in Rand’s position is that it in effect denies the very possibility that a person might decide to create her life in the image of a saint. That sort of creation would be an immoral one, according to Rand.

In her essays, Rand reveals that her concept of “productivity” is in fact largely economic, and the “artist” looks suspiciously like a CEO (Chief Executive Officer). Rand claims that, due to our capacity for thought, we are fundamentally “traders”, and we should conduct ourselves accordingly:

The Objectivist ethics holds that *human* good does not require human sacrifices and cannot be achieved by the sacrifice of anyone to anyone. It holds that the *rational* interests of men do not clash—that there is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire the unearned, who do not make sacrifices nor accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value.

The principle of *trade* is the only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material. It is the principle of *justice*.<sup>9</sup>

In theory, objectivism may seem to be an enticingly optimistic outlook. But, in reality, this “philosophy” is amenable only to those who are already in a position to benefit from capitalism, in other words, those who already possess the resources needed to engage in free enterprise, the business of “trading”. People with nothing have nothing to trade. Freedom from intervention hardly suffices to confer upon an agent the freedom to produce. With its insistence upon the paramount importance of property rights and conservative government, objectivism is an ideology tailor-made for white men in power. The veritable cult of Ayn Rand followers in capitalist America is easy to comprehend given that her theory enjoins us to “look out for number one”, and this is supposed to be not

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<sup>8</sup> This problem is encountered (unwittingly) by popular followers of Nietzsche, who fail to recognize that when they attempt to become *Übermenschen* they thereby prove that they are slaves.

<sup>9</sup> *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 28-9.



merely, as we had thought, a matter of prudence, but further our moral duty, since prudence *is* morality, according to ethical egoism.

What is interesting about the favor which ethical egoism has found in this society is its effect upon the character development of Americans. We are inundated by the media with the ideas that success is key to “The Good Life”, that “Money is power” and “Power is success”. Ethical egoism presents itself as a normative theory with as alleged moral dictate that *we ought to be selfish*. But to tutor our intuitions in this way would inevitably transform our moral conscience. If we could truly come to believe that it is immoral to help other people, whenever that would involve even an iota of self-sacrifice, then eventually we would recognize that guilt for such behavior is irrational. In other words, through adopting ethical egoism, we might lose what gives rise to the little motivation we ever had for acting morally in the ordinary sense of that word: our conscience.

But it would be misleading to identify ethical egoism with Ayn Rand’s picture, since objectivism is a specific amalgamation of disparate elements from a variety of theories (including Aristotle’s, Nietzsche’s, and Adam Smith’s). So let us re-consider ethical egoism in its generic form, in order to clarify the distinction between this absolutist view and the limiting case of metaethical relativism, viz., ethical subjectivism.

Ethical egoism stipulates the criterion of right action to be that the prospective action best serve one’s own interests. What those interests are is left open. For hedonists, the relevant interests are the experience of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. For non-hedonists, such as Rand, “interests” are not exhausted by pleasure and pain. What is in one’s best interests may in fact be painful. The crucial point is that, according to ethical egoism, it is possible for an agent to be mistaken about what is in fact in his best interests. In other words, although it is an unorthodox theory, ethical egoism retains the commonsense idea that it is possible to act immorally, in a substantive sense. It is possible to act wrongly, in an absolute sense.

### **(§ 6) Relativism vs. Ethical Egoism**

Relativism rejects the entire picture of what we ordinarily take to be morality as “vain and chimerical”. There is no such thing as absolute wrongness. An act is wrong only relative to some moral framework, but agents are free to adopt and abandon moral frameworks as they please.



This implies that there is no substantive sense of immorality, since when an agent acts as though in conflict with what he thought were his moral principles, he thereby illustrates that they were not really *his* moral principles. Ethical egoism is not the same as ethical subjectivism, the version of relativism where the agent occupies his own moral community. For ethical egoism accommodates our ordinary view that agents sometimes act immorally, since it is obvious that we sometimes act in self-destructive ways that sabotage our own interests. Prudence *is* morality, according to ethical egoists, and some people act imprudently.

Whether, upon closer scrutiny, ethical egoism can accommodate the requirement of universalizability is another matter. For if it is my duty to best serve my own interests, then it would seem that in many circumstances the way to do this will be to make it the case that other people are not doing the same. This may depend ultimately upon what in fact is in my own best interests.

Consider Thrasymachus, the colorful character of Plato's *Republic*. Like all good Sophists, Thrasymachus views success in society as the ultimate human *telos*. The "problem" for a relativist is only to decide which morality to embrace. If he wants to secure power and achieve eminence in his society, then the relativist may well concur with Thrasymachus, that the happiest man is he who acts unjustly<sup>10</sup> while securing the reputation of a great leader:

The just is everywhere at a disadvantage compared with the unjust. First, in their contracts with one another: wherever two such men are associated you will never find, when the partnership ends, the just man to have more than the unjust, but less. Then, in their relation to the city: when taxes are to be paid, from the same income the just man pays more, the other less; but, when benefits are to be received, the one gets nothing while the other profits much; whenever each of them holds a public office, the just man, even if he is not penalized in other ways, finds that his private affairs deteriorate through neglect while he gets nothing from the public purse because he is just; moreover, he is disliked by his household and his acquaintances whenever he refuses them an unjust favour. The opposite is true of the unjust man in every respect....Consider him if you want to decide how much more it bene-

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<sup>10</sup> *Dikaiosyne*, the ancient Greek word for "justice" had broader reference than does the modern term. Some translators substitute "righteousness", "rightness", and/or "morality" for "justice". In other words, "justice" for the Greeks was not a concept restricted to legal contexts, but connoted the morality of individual agents as well.



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fits him privately to be unjust rather than just... when a man, besides appropriating the possessions of the citizens, manages to enslave the owners as well, then... he is called happy and blessed.<sup>11</sup>

Thrasymachus insists that injustice is a good thing, even a virtue: "Injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is a stronger, freer, and more powerful thing than justice".<sup>12</sup> Thrasymachus presents a relativistic picture of morality along the lines of that painted by cultural anthropologists:<sup>13</sup>

Each government makes laws to its own advantage: democracy makes democratic laws, a despotism makes despotic laws, and so with the others, and when they have made these laws they declare this to be just for their subjects, that is, their own advantage, and they punish him who transgresses the laws as lawless and unjust. This then, my good man, is what I say justice is, the same in all cities, the advantage of the established government, and correct reasoning will conclude that the just is the same everywhere, the advantage of the stronger.<sup>14</sup>

There is some equivocation on Thrasymachus' part, since he seems to own that it is possible for agents to misconstrue what is in fact their best interests. Thus it is not entirely implausible to interpret Thrasymachus as defending the absolutist normative position of ethical egoism. But the salient point is that Thrasymachus certainly does *not* consider the conventionally accepted principles of morality (not to lie, cheat, steal, kill, etc.) as binding upon all agents. In other words, Thrasymachus rejects our ordinary conception of morality. Whether to read Thrasymachus as a full-fledged metaethical relativist or an ethical egoist who decries the blind submission to the rules of society as childish, need not be definitively settled here. We may consider Thrasymachus' advocacy of a "free-rider" policy for one's self as exemplary of one strain of ethical egoism.

If one truly believes that life on earth is the only life, and that upon bodily death one ceases forever to exist, then it may seem eminently reasonable that the only happiness to be achieved is happiness here and now, and this involves succeeding by the standards of society as they

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<sup>11</sup> Plato's *Republic* (trans. Grube) Book I: 343d-344c.

<sup>12</sup> Plato's *Republic* (trans. Grube) Book I: 344c.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Ruth Benedict, "A Defense of Cultural Relativism" reprinted in *Perspectives on Ethics*, 1998, edited by Judith Boss, pp. 62-66.

<sup>14</sup> Plato's *Republic* Book I: 338e-339a.



happen now to be. In Thrasymachus' view, one needs wealth in order to procure the objects of one's desire. Money is power, so the more money one has the happier one will be. But this implies that one should cheat whenever this can be done with little risk of apprehension, since cheating will result in the maximization of one's own interests. The "free-rider" manages to benefit from the moral conventions of society while conducting himself "beyond the pale".

Even if one holds that interests are not exhausted by mercenary interests, it is arguable that other less subtle thinkers might well interpret ethical egoism in just Thrasymachus' manner. In other words, it seems counter-productive and self-destructive to advocate ethical egoism, since some agents will undoubtedly (though perhaps erroneously) view the theory as a license to swindle other people, including the well-meaning advocate of "enlightened" ethical egoism.

As the Epicureans observed more than two thousand years ago, an important source of our anguish is fear.<sup>15</sup> The Epicureans in fact maintained that our greatest sources of fear are engendered through our reflection upon death and the fate which the gods hold in store for us. The route to happiness, according to the Epicureans, was to dispel these fears by revealing them to be fundamentally irrational. Once the irrationality of these fears had been demonstrated (through an atomistic analysis) then people could live in peace and tranquillity, the essence of The Good Life. Epicurus famously claimed that "Death is nothing to us", a succinct expression of the idea that upon our deaths, the atoms comprising us disperse into the cosmos. And Epicurus similarly dispelled the common fear of gods by pointing out that they, too, were hedonists (being constituted, as are we, of certain arrangements of atoms), and therefore would not trouble themselves with petty human affairs.

### (§ 7) The Real World

According to orthodox models, *Ethical Egoism*, the normative theory according to which one ought to act so as to best serve one's own interests, whether in the form advocated by Ayn Rand, Thrasymachus, or the Epicureans, does not strictly speaking qualify as a "moral" theory. But this is intuitive, since *Ethical Egoism*, through a not-so-subtle form of *léger-de-main* merely re-defines selfishness as "moral". In reality, most people seem to share a sphere of regard with at least one other person,

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<sup>15</sup> See: *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, trans. Bailey, 1926.



and this is why most of us can retain positive images of ourselves in spite of the fact that we ignore the vast majority of persons and issues that could in principle affect us. We tend to look at the good things that we have done for those around us and assess our own characters by weighing those against the few bad things we've done to those same people. In general, our memory for the former tends to be much keener than our memory for the latter.

To stipulate as a conceptual limit that moralities be social implies that having the purely analytic ability to solve puzzles and render moral judgment does not make one a moral agent. In fact, in this picture, such an ability is neither sufficient nor necessary to being a moral agent. In contrast, having the ability to extend one's moral regard toward others, to be able to care about and actually inhabit a sphere of regard with at least one other person is necessary to moral agency. For example, it seems quite reasonable to say that agents such as Rhoda Penmark of Mervyn LeRoy's film *The Bad Seed* (1956) or Alexander Delarge of Stanley Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) are *amoral*.<sup>16</sup> These agents do not lack the ability to calculate what they should and should not do, according to conventional morality. On the contrary, their powers of intellect are especially keen, and that is precisely why they can wreak havoc upon others and often devise the means by which to protect themselves from apprehension. The ability to work through game theoretical exercises, such as prisoner's dilemmas, etc., is a purely cognitive ability involving the manipulation of language assumed to have certain meanings and the application of rules to determine outcomes. In other words, this form of "moral reasoning", is no more than a specific version of game theory, where the constructs and principles employed have valuational and normative components.

For a great many people in the real world the narrow moral community is in fact coincident with their family and socioeconomic and professional peers. Because our relations with family members, friends and acquaintances differ in degree, not in kind, this model explains why nearly everyone thinks of himself as *moral*, as basically a *good person*. For to be *moral*, in one's own eyes, according to this model, one need only take seriously the needs and interests of the other members of one's narrow moral community. The fewer people you elect to your narrow moral

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<sup>16</sup> I discuss *The Bad Seed* in some detail in "Moral Blindness and Moral Responsibility: What can we learn from Rhoda Penmark?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 1996.



community, then, the easier it will be for you to satisfy the demands of your morality upon you. For the people outside your "sphere of regard" do not, to you, exist as moral persons. They may not exist at all, i.e., you may have no consciousness of them whatsoever. It is undeniable that the vast majority of humanity lie beyond the purview of your regard, on the other side of the horizon. They serve as nothing more to you than background noise, if even that. We "tune out" what we do not want to hear, and we frequently "tune out" the atrocities occurring here and abroad, if for no other reason than that our very sanity at times demands it. But at other times, this process of "tuning out" seems to be a willful selection on the part of the agent motivated by a desire to minimize discomfort or even simple inconvenience. We purposely distance ourselves from others as a way of protecting ourselves from the vulnerability of *caring*, which has emotional and often other costs as well.

According to this model, ordinary people and saints differ in degree, not in kind (see figure 2). It is not the intensity of *moral sentiment*, a natural concomitant to genuine *moral regard*, that makes a man a saint. Rather it is the *broad scope* of his sentiment, his compassion for nearly all of mankind. Any man would feel intense moral outrage at the violation of his own daughter. And any father deserving of the name would act to the best of his ability so as to help his own daughter avoid harm. He would also make every effort to rectify damages done to her. But very few men can adopt the perspective of surrogate father to any violated woman, and least of all to someone lying at an enormous distance from the origin of his sphere of regard.

This model explains the perhaps surprising phenomenon of members of organized crime who have loving wives and children and deeply committed long lasting friendships. Narrow and wide moral communities seem fairly well-defined for members of the Mafia.<sup>17</sup> The men in the upper echelons of organized crime are governed by complex systems involving virtues and vices such as honor and shame, courage and cowardice, rashness and restraint. Furthermore, upper-level members of the Mafia give explicitly *moral* justifications for the murders which they order. They invoke the very same sorts of concepts that the rest of us do in other contexts.

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<sup>17</sup> On Mafia dynamics, see: *Mafia Business: The Mafia Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1987), by Pino Arlacchi, and *True Crime: Mafia* (1993), edited by Laura Forman. I discuss prudence and loyalty in: "A Critique of Group Loyalty", *Independent Review*, vol. III, no. I, Summer 1998.



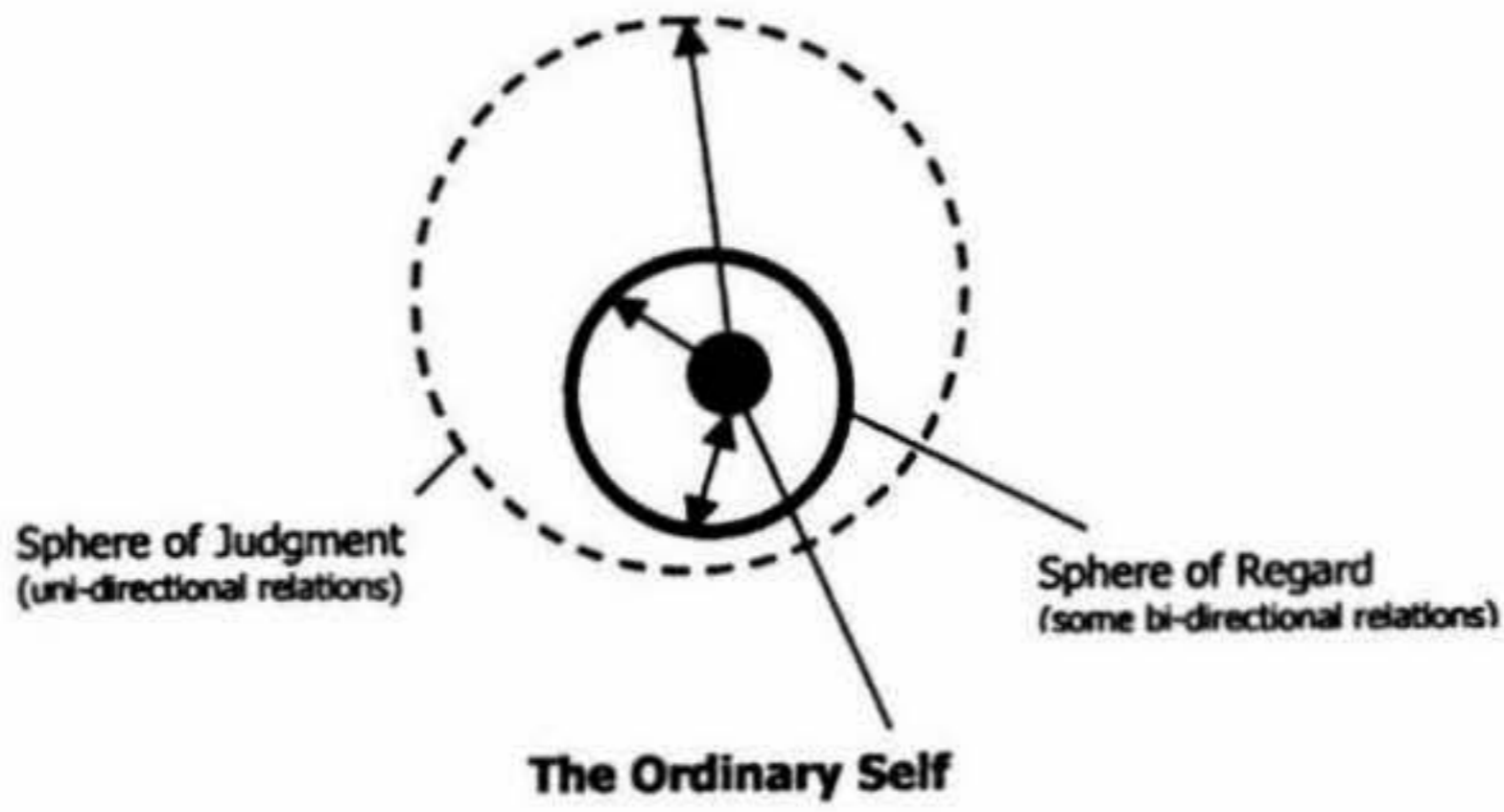
But there is no question that highly pragmatic people have little difficulty distancing themselves from anyone who looks as though he may become a source of inconvenience to them. *Crassly* pragmatic people have little difficulty distancing themselves from anyone who looks as though he may become a source of inconvenience to them, *even* in cases where the individuals in question have already invested a great deal of trust in them.

Although we may feel better about ourselves if we can be persuaded to believe that through selfishness we attain to morality, this is a temptation which we should resist, especially in view of the already all-too-selfish outlooks of contemporary Americans. To describe ethical egoism as a "moral" theory stretches usage unduly. "Ethical egoism" equates prudence with morality, but this is a conflation.<sup>18</sup>

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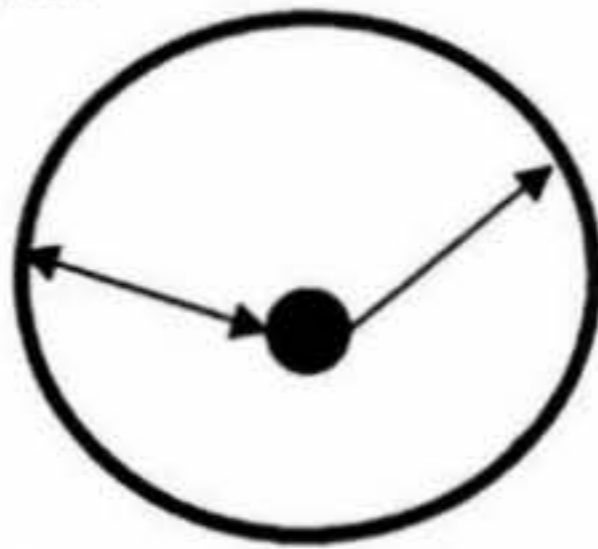
<sup>18</sup> I would like to thank Gilbert Harman, Berel Lang, Michael Donlin, T. P. Uschanov and Charles Calhoun for reading and reacting to parts of this essay. I would also like to thank Brooke Spangler, Julie Calhoun-Roepnack and Daniel Hellerman for assistance with the Figures, and Bill and Elna Jacks for help with a biblical reference.





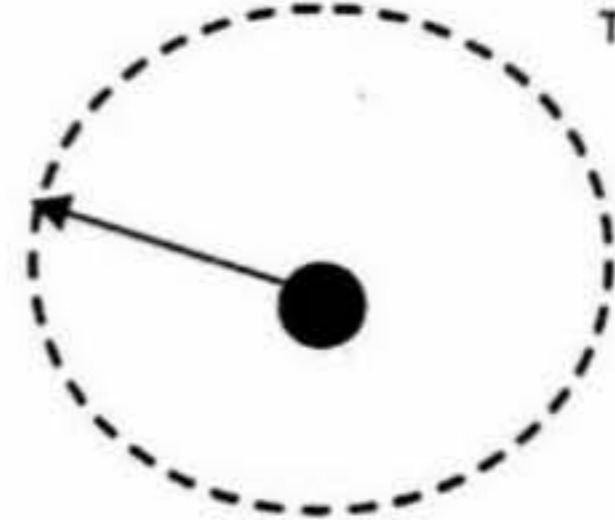
**Figure 1: The Moral Self in its Conscious Relations with Others**

Sphere of Regard =  
Sphere of Judgment



**Saint:** agent has concern for all  
of whom he is aware

Sphere of Regard =  
The Self



**Sociopath:** agent judges  
but has no concern for others

**Figure 2: Saints and Sociopaths**



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