Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal
Focusing on the Eternal Security of the Christian

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 3 – 2011

How Individualistic Moral Theories Undermine Community

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Introduction

Individual human beings seem fundamentally dependent on their immediate host communities for moral development. Intuitively, a properly functioning moral community finds itself assuming the corporate responsibility of morally educating its individual members. Aristotle seems to endorse this view by contending that human beings

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are, by nature, political animals and that anyone living outside a city-state, or for that matter, a village, is clanless, lawless and homeless.[2] Aristotle characterizes such an individual as one eager for war.[3] By making these statements, Aristotle, seemingly, ties the individual's moral development to his or her immediate community, whose smallest unit begins with a couple, that is, male and female (for the sake of procreation[4]), and subsequently building itself up to a household.[5]

When different households come together, they become a village[6], advancing toward a city state, which Aristotle defines as a complete community constituted of several villages.[7] Hence, those choosing to distance themselves from their immediate broader community do so unnaturally. Following this line of thought Aristotle argues that individuals, either unable to form a community with others, or unable to see the need to do so because they find themselves self-sufficient, are no part of a city-state; they are either beasts or gods.[8]

Large segments of African societies, from the pre-colonial era to the present, continue to echo positions similar to this Aristotelian approach. Indeed, the widely accepted belief, in Africa, that raising a child appears to be the task of the whole village, provides a good example. More ways of capturing this notion find their expressions in stories, parables and wise sayings. Trying to highlight each of them would, of course, take us far afield. However, expressions such as "Together we stand and divided we fall" provide for us a window through which we can, at least, appreciate the seriousness with which African traditions approached community-oriented moral developments of individuals.

I also note that this view is not merely Aristotelian or African; it is also Biblical. For one, the Bible underscores the importance of

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[2] Aristotle, *The Politics and Constitution of Athens*, Stephen Everson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1253a. 2–5.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a. 25–30.

[5] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b. 8–12.

[6] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b, 15–17.

[7] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b, 26–28.

[8] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a, 23–30.

human beings living in a community by stating: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."[9] These words suggest that human beings are relational creatures. Consider, also, the passage, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, urging the Christian believer not to give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing. In this passage, the author urges his audience to encourage one another, and that they should do so all the more with respect to the fact that the coming of Christ is approaching.[10] Scripture, here, seems to underscore the importance of living morally as the return of Christ approaches, and this moral living requires encouragement—encouragement made possible only when believers live together in a community. Once again, owing to space constrictions, I limit my examples to the ones already cited.

In light of the aforesaid, do we find any instances of individual moral responsibility resulting in the breakdown of the community? One could validly argue, without committing the fallacy of composition[11], that if every individual in a community is moral, then the entire community ought to be considered moral as well. To be sure, individual morality seems a fundamental requirement for the moral uprightness of any community, provided that community adopts a moral vantage-point considered determinately adequate.[12] Thus, if each member of a given community possesses the moral attribute of kindness to his or her neighbor, we would seem justified to conclude that the community in question is, in its entirety, a kind community. In this case, the individual moral responsibility of kindness would hardly result in the breakdown of the community.

However, we do find an ethical theory or theories that seem to count against the moral wellbeing of a community. Ethical theorists

9 Genesis 2:18.

10 Hebrews 10:25.

11 Such a fallacy is committed when an arguer invalidly transfers attributes of individual parts of some object or entity to the whole of that entity. For example, one commits such a fallacy by arguing that since, say, each sentence of a paragraph is well-written, the entire paragraph is well-written. The sentences could be well-written, but the entire paragraph could be illogical, or nonsensical.

12 Given the wide array of ethical theories available, the determinate adequacy of each theory seems a matter of contention. Philosophically speaking, a theory that seems logically consistent, factually correct, explanatorily powerful, and experientially relevant should seem to head toward this goal.

locate this theory, generally, under individualism, but more specifically under various kinds of egoism. Certain facets of individualism and egoism, when followed to their logical conclusions, seem to cause some forms of community disintegration. Individualism is the more general term for these theories. I will therefore give it the first, and perhaps, a shorter treatment below. I will then focus on the various strands of egoism. I intend to highlight the various ways in which upholders of these moral theories adopt a lifestyle that either have the tendency or have the capacity to break down the moral fabric of the communities in which they live. Notice that upholders of these theories consider themselves moral by virtue of the fact that they adopt the worldview in question—a worldview accepted by reputable theorists as a legitimate ethical theory—even if a majority of those theorists would, perhaps, find them unlivable. Let me begin with individualism.

I. Individualism

A. Individualism and Its Tenets

According to Norman S. Care, individualism is a view, in moral and political philosophy that gives primary moral value to individual human beings. [13] Philosophers and ethical theorists find, in individualism, the tendency to make the individual person and individual fulfillment both the locus of concern and the measure of success. [14] In liberal individualism, the individual is the primary possessor of rights. And the activity of, say, the state, is confined to the protection of those rights. [15] Thus, in secular ethics and moral philosophy, individualism upholds the view that each person becomes the arbiter of what is true, good and moral. [16] Moreover, the doctrine of individualism asserts the supreme value of the individual and sees

[13] Norman S. Care, "Individualism, Moral and Political," *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Ted Honderich, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 404.

[14] Erin Dufault-Hunter, "Individualism," *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, Joel B. Green, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 403.

[15] Simon Blackburn, "Individualism," *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 191.

[16] Hunter, 403.

society only as a means to the satisfaction of individual ends.[17] Besides merely expressing a view of human nature in which the individual is the source of moral value, individualism also postulates a political theory requiring freedom from coercion by authority—whether tradition, church or state.[18]

Following Erin Dufault-Hunter's description, individualism is a belief system within cultures, such as that of the United States of America, known, historically, for protecting and promoting the liberty of the individual, including his or her happiness.[19] According to John William Ward, individualism first appeared in the United States through the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson. It rested on a belief in the natural moral order that made the artificial order of society unnecessary. Additionally, it rested on the trust that each individual would internalize the demands of morality and justice. Consequently, the individual would direct his or her life in a manner free from restrictions of all sanctions beyond his or her unaided self.[20]

According to Ward, individualism gradually became a social ideology—a particular kind of society to develop an ideal that denied the importance of society. Ward does not specify the kind of society in question, but he generally describes it as a society that seems to create conditions of rapid change, and conditions of physical and social mobility. These conditions required that each person be the bearer of his or her own meaning and source for direction.[21]

Against this view of individualism, communitarianism, the thesis that the community, rather than the individual, is and should be at the center of our analysis and our value systems, stands in stark contrast.[22] Communitarianism emphasizes the social nature of life, identity, relationships and institutions. Communitarians tend to emphasize the value of specifically communal and public goods, and conceive of values as rooted in communal practices. They believe that

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[17] John William Ward, "Individualism," *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 15, Alan H. Smith, ed. (Danbury: Grolier Incorporated, 1981), 69.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Hunter, 403.

[20] Ward, 69.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Elizabeth Frazer, "Communitarianism," *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Ted Honderich, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005),143.

human life will go better if communitarian, collective and public values guide and construct our lives.

Moreover, individuals cannot enjoy values such as reciprocity, trust and solidity as such. Each person's individual enjoyment depends on others' enjoyment. They are committed to public goods, that is, facilities and practices designed to help members of the community develop their common and, hence, personal lives. Communitarianism is much closer to the collectivist's view I uphold.

Individualism, however, stresses individual rights and conceives of the individual as the ultimate originator of those rights.[23] Consonant with this individualism, Simon Blackburn says of former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher: "The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that there is no such thing as society, only individuals."[24] Blackburn draws our attention to this claim by Margaret Thatcher to illustrate the fact that politically, individualism is associated with the right wing.[25] This state of affairs is also quite illustrative of the American political scene.

According to Norman Care, certain forms of individualism in political philosophy find their influence in the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant. Kant argued that individual human beings are ends in themselves, and thus agree that persons are owed respect for their autonomy, which is protected by inviolable rights.[26] Hunter agrees. According to her, no single philosophy encapsulates the attractiveness and limitations of individualism as does the ethics of Immanuel Kant. Having argued powerfully for the autonomy of the individual, Kant asserted a duty-based morality that focused on individual motivation. As a rational being, each individual discerns, via Kant's famous categorical imperatives, the universal principles on which he or she ought to act. In order to be truly free in the Kantian sense, Hunter observes, each person must act as an autonomous, self-governing person.[27]

[23] Ibid.
[24] Blackburn, 191.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Care, 405.
[27] Hunter, 404.

B. Individualism and Its Fragmentation of Community

Having given this brief description of individualism, determining how its facets bring about societal breakdown is perhaps not too difficult. However, before attempting to articulate just how this breakdown comes about, let me draw attention to Ward's contention that some positive aspects of individualism can be located. He observes that the growth of social organizations and the inter-dependence of human beings in a complex society led to a shift away from *individualism as freedom from restraint* to *individualism as the realization of self through participation in society*. Thus freedom of the individual became freedom to do what was good for the society. This observation leads Ward to conclude that modern individualism is not in opposition to collectivism.[28]

This view of individualism is rather conciliatory, hence, desirable. Much of the tenets of contemporary American individualism seems consistent with this understanding. We are still left with the question: what can we make of individualism, as originally construed, in terms of its effect on the society? First, by contending that the individual is the source of moral value, and that the society is the means toward the satisfaction of the individual, individualism seems to promote selfishness and greed. If every member of the community is selfish and greedy by "virtue" of individualism, the sense of community no longer exists. Community, by definition, implies the notion of interested parties having something in common. Instead, we find a cluster of individuals willing to stop at nothing to attain their personal and selfish goals.

Suppose, for example, as a cheap way of waste disposal from his company, the CEO of a certain manufacturing firm empties his company's waste into a nearby river instead of taking the more expensive, but scientifically recommended way. He is assured that the more expensive way is safe and promotes the welfare of the nearby community. Given the tenets of individualism—such as freedom from coercion by authority—the CEO is entirely justified to pursue the cheaper route of waste disposal. The CEO is the source of his own morality. Therefore, with respect to his individualism, he breaks no rules or laws by polluting the source of water used by the rest of the

[28] Ward, 69.

community. After all, his needs are more important than the needs of the community.

Whereas this state of affairs follows logically if we adopt individualism, we must find it absurd. Flourishing financially by exposing other members of the community to hazardous chemicals introduced into the environment seems not only a greedy and selfish act; it is potentially hazardous to health, and therefore profoundly immoral. Very few communities need to be destroyed in this way, unless, of course, they adopt cultic tendencies. According to Hunter, some Christian ethicists think that individualism should be rejected if we find it selfish, atomistic or egoistic self-promotion.[29]

Besides being prone to greed and selfishness, individualism, though presenting itself as an ethical theory, seems to promote lawlessness by its very nature. Notice that individualism requires freedom from coercion by authority, irrespective of whether the authority comes in the form of tradition, the church, or the state. We have already noted Aristotle's description of this state of affairs when he describes such 'distancing of oneself from the community' as lawlessness—similar to that of a beast. A lawless society, inevitably, breaks down any sense of community. Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke speculated on the kind of society such a state of lawlessness could entail. Whereas they differed quite significantly in their speculations, they all seemed to agree that a sense of community seems absent when such lawlessness prevails.

To be sure, trying to enact an individualistic system of law seems quite difficult. Norman S. Care, for example, argues that the valuing of the person characteristic of individualism is especially problematic for the development of a normative theory of individual responsibility. On the one hand, the individualist notes that one is an individual, and thus to be prized. On the other hand, others are individuals, and they, too, are to be prized. Care, then, wonders how one reconciles "a principled regard for one's own rights, self-realization, meaningful relationship and material well-being with moral respect for these features of the lives and persons of others."[30]

[29] Hunter, 403.
[30] Care, 404–405.

Third, individualism seems highly relativistic. Hunter notes that some social and moral philosophers contend that the natural fruits of individualism are seen in the relativism marking modern ethical discussions in a self-centered psychology and a "me first" culture. More importantly for our purposes, Hunter notes that these relativistic fruits of individualism are seen in the fragmentation of societies contemporarily marred by isolation, loneliness and greed.[31]

Quite instructively, Walter Kaufman, in his editorial comments of Friedrich Nietzsche's individualism, underscores this loneliness when he writes: "The most important single clue to *Zarathustra* is that it is the work of an utterly lonely man."[32] In other words, the logical consequences of individualism played itself out in Nietzsche's personal life. Moreover, Adolf Hitler, having read Nietzsche, was influenced by his philosophy, which, in turn, played itself out in the ensuing massacre of the Jews.

What observations do we find these moral philosophers, such as Walter Kaufman as well as those cited by Hunter, making? They seem to make the contention that the highly relativized facets of individualism cause, directly, a dysfunctional society—one characterized by isolation, loneliness and greed. If we think, for one moment, of a community in which each person promulgates his or her own law, preferring *that* law above other laws; each person rejects some kind of an institutionalized authority; each person seems significantly unconcerned about the other person; each person seems to have no friend; and each person stops at nothing to get what he or she wants; we gradually realize that we are countenancing a fragmented and broken society.

Norman Care also cites another problem with individualism and its relation to the community, namely, its apparent indifference to the needs of the community. Care is concerned, for example, that individualism becomes personally distressing as well as theoretically challenging when faced by the fact that millions of people in the world are destitute in one way or another. The worry depicted by Care is as follows: does individualism allow one to put oneself first in a

[31] Hunter, 403.

[32] Walter Kaufman, ed., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 103.

world so filled with misery and oppression, or require self-sacrifice in the devotion of time, energy and talent to the needs of others?[33] I suspect that if followed to its logical conclusion, individualism would, perhaps, be indifferent to such concerns.

Fifth, given its Kantian influence, Hunter notes that some Christian ethicists find Kant's influence damaging on a number of fronts, one of them being the problematic nature of the "rights" language. If the individual possesses the exclusive right to legislate morality for himself or herself in an autonomous fashion without due regard for the consequences of his actions towards his or her immediate moral community, the "rights" language unwittingly births a society of individuals seeking entitlements and protecting themselves in competitive or even in violent self-promotion and possessiveness.[34] These four observations lead me to conclude that if the individual moral responsibility of any person is guided by the tenets of individualism, the community breaks down.

Let me turn to Ward's contention cited earlier, namely: "Modern meaning of individualism is not in opposition to collectivism." By making this contention, Ward is trying to present individualism as a viable ethical option. Does he succeed? Perhaps he does, though we apparently see that, in this case, we are no longer dealing with individualism as defined. Rather, collective moral responsibility seems to have been smuggled into individualism through the back door.

Perhaps a better conciliatory tone for individualism can be affirmed. If individualism focuses our attention on persons created in God's image with accompanying inherent dignity and individual responsibility, then, perhaps, we are well on our way to locating a less self-destructive form of individualism, one that loves one's neighbor as oneself.

However, if individualism is the primary lens through which we read human experience or lens through which we determine morality, individualism adulterates our vision of ethics and community, and fails to account for our relationality, that is, "our nature as beings who

[33] Care, 405.
[34] Hunter, 404.

finally become individual 'selves' only in communion with others and with God."[35]

This observation, adumbrated by Hunter, articulates our conclusion concerning individualism. As noted earlier, individualism is only a general ethical theory that encompasses a wide array of other theories. An aspect of individualism—one that seems to undermine the existence of a moral community—needs to be considered, namely, ethical egoism.

II. Egoism

Precisely what difference do we find between individualism as a whole and egoism in particular? The former seems to be driven by the concern toward some kind of entitlement, that is, some kind of rights. The latter seems driven by self-interest. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, Thomas Hobbes is the first major philosopher, apart, perhaps, from Machiavelli, to present a completely individualistic picture of the human nature. MacIntyre contends that the apparent altruism and benevolence of human beings in many situations need to be explained, and the Hobbesian explanation is simply this: what appears to be altruism is always, in fact, disguised self-seeking in one way or another.[36]

More significantly, Paul Carus thinks that Nietzsche, the inventor of the new ideal called the "overman," is widely regarded as the most extreme egotist,[37] egotism understood, here, as the behavioral pattern in which one constantly draws attention to oneself.[38] According to Carus, morality seemed non-existent for Nietzsche, who gloried in the coming of the day in which a personality of his liking—the overman—would live *au grand jour*, that is, 'shining through'. Carus finds Nietzsche's philosophy portraying an individualism carried to

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Egoism and Altruism," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1–2., Paul Edwards, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. & The Free Press, 1972), 463.

[37] Paul Carus, *Nietzsche: And Other Exponents of Individualism* (Chicago: The Open-Court Publishing Company, 1914), 74.

[38] Louis P. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2006), 82.

its utmost extreme, sanctioning egotism, denouncing altruism and establishing the right of the strong to trample the weak.[39]

How should we define ethical egoism? Philosophers and ethical theorists seem to draw distinctions between psychological egoism and ethical egoism. Psychological egoism asserts that each person cannot do other than act from self-interested motivations.[40] One is so constituted that one always seeks one's own advantage or welfare.[41] That is, each person does in fact pursue his or her own self-interest alone.[42] Ethical egoism, however, is the view that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively.[43] According to Ethical egoism, morality requires that we balance our own self-interests against the interests of others. Understandably, ethical egoism argues, we look out for ourselves. Individuals should not be faulted for attending to their own basic needs.[44] Thus, the difference between psychological egoism and ethical egoism is that the former is an attempt to describe human nature,[45] describing what it believes humans, in fact, do. It is a psychological theory. The latter articulates what humans should do, and is, therefore, an ethical theory.[46] Let me provide a more detailed version of both views below.

A. Psychological Egoism

Saying that people *are* self-interested, and will, therefore, not give to charity is quite different from prescribing the view that people *ought* to be self-interested and, for that reason, our neighbors ought not to give to charity. Once again, the former view describes psychological egoism, while the latter is an ethical theory. According to psychological egoism, we have no choice but to be selfish. Thus, we find ourselves unable to find motivation from anything other than what we believe will promote our self interests. Stated in an

39 Carus, 74.

40 Pojman, 87.

41 William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973), 20.

42 Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 5th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 70.

43 Ibid.

44 Rachels, 69.

45 Pojman, 82.

46 Rachels, 70.

individualistic fashion, the psychological egoist could say, "I always try to promote my self-interest, and you always try to promote your self-interest."[47]

The following argument, as presented by philosopher Louis Pojman (who rejects most of the tenets of egoism), gives us a description of psychological egoism:

PE 1 Everyone always seeks to maximize his or her own self-interest.

PE 2 If one cannot do an act, one has no obligation to do that act.

PE 3 Altruistic acts involve putting other people's interests ahead of our own.

PE 4 But altruism contradicts human nature (PE 1), and so is impossible.

PE 5 Therefore, by PE 2 and PE 4, altruistic acts are never obligatory.[48]

The conclusion from this argument, of course, suggests that the psychological egoist has no interest to put another person's interests ahead of his. Hence, with respect to psychological egoism, altruism is simply invalid specifically because altruism is impossible, and owing to the fact that we can never be under an obligation to do what is impossible (ought implies can), we have no option but to act in our own self-interests.[49]

If we believe ourselves to be noble and self-sacrificing, psychological egoism argues that we only believe something illusory. In reality, we only care for ourselves.[50] Of course, this finding implies that *self-love* is the only basic principle in human nature, and that *ego-satisfaction* is the final aim of all activity and that the *pleasure principle* is the basic drive in every individual.[51] Hence, Stuart Rachels, also a non-egoist, explains psychological egoism's view of

[47] Pojman, 81–82.
[48] Pojman, 83.
[49] Pojman, 82–83.
[50] Rachels, 71.
[51] Frankena, 20.

altruism as follows: If we describe one person's actions as altruistic and another person's actions as self-interested, we overlook the fact that in both cases the person is merely doing what he or she most wants to do.[52]

Hence, so-called altruistic actions produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the person who performs them. After all, acting unselfishly makes people feel good about themselves. Without question, people sometimes act altruistically. However, a deeper look reveals that something else is going on. The unselfish act in question is, in reality, connected with some benefit for the person who does it. For example, Mother Teresa is often cited as a paradigmatic example of altruism. However, she, of course, believed she would be handsomely rewarded in heaven.[53]

Owing to the fact that ethical egoism is a moral theory that sees itself as a conclusion from the tenets of psychological egoism, I will postpone my evaluation of psychological egoism to a later section. In the meantime, let me focus on ethical egoism in the next section.

B. Ethical Egoism

As already noted, ethical egoism is the view that one's only duty is to promote one's own interests. However, to avoid possible confusions, Pojman tries to draw distinctions between four kinds of egoism: psychological egoism (which we have already covered), personal egoism, individual ethical egoism and universal ethical egoism. According to Pojman, personal egoism is the state of being self-interested by choice. In other words, one simply chooses to serve one's own best interests regardless of what happens to anyone else. Pojman finds, in this view, a phenomenal state of exclusive self-love rather than an ethical theory.[54] However, Pojman observes that some people do, in fact, live by personal egoism. Personal egoism comes closest to egotism.

Next, Pojman describes individual ethical egoism as follows: "Everyone ought to serve my best interest." Unlike personal egoism, the individual ethical egoist would instantiate this doctrine as follows: "Others ought to serve me." According to William Frankena, "An

[52] Rachels, 71.
[53] Rachels, 72–73.
[54] Pojman, 82.

individual's one and only basic obligation is to promote for himself the greatest possible balance of good over evil."[55] This doctrine claims to be a moral theory, obligating others to look after the agent's interests before everything else. Pojman also notes that individual ethical egoism is also a version of selfishness—claiming moral authority. Hence, for individual ethical egoism, moral rightness is defined in terms of what is good for "me" irrespective of whether it is good for anyone else. [56]

For example, suppose Aunt Ruth is an individual ethical egoist. All moral rightness must be defined in terms of what is good for Aunt Ruth. From this premise, whether or not a mother in India loves her child is morally irrelevant, for that love fails to have any effect on Aunt Ruth. Once Aunt Ruth is dead, morality is dead,[57] for it has no object and is, therefore, no longer binding for Aunt Ruth.

The fourth type of egoism adumbrated by Pojman is universal ethical egoism. This view urges each individual to do those acts that will best serve his or her own best self-interest. Moreover, this demand ought to be fulfilled even when it conflicts with the interests of others.[58] Thus, William Frankena seems to describe this type of egoism when he states that an individual should go by what is geared toward his own advantage even in making second- and third-person moral judgments.[59] Consistent with egoism as a whole, the selfishness motif still finds its nod even under this view, though, in some cases, selfishness appears mitigated. For example, in its most sophisticated form, it urges everyone to try to win in the game of life, recognizing that winning will require some compromises. Hence, the universal egoist will admit that, to some extent, we must all give up certain kinds of freedom and cooperate with others to achieve our ends.[60]

Ayn Rand is widely regarded as a major proponent of ethical egoism. In one of her novels, her heroes take the following oath: "I swear by my life and love of it that I will never live for the sake of

[55] Frankena, 18.
[56] Pojman, 87.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Frankena, 18.
[60] Pojman, 87–88.

another man, nor ask another man to live for the sake of me."[61] In her book, *Anthem*, we also read of her Promethean hero, who rebels against the collectivist mentality forbidding people to use the personal pronoun "I",[62] as follows:

I am done with the creed of corruption. I am done with the monster of "We", the word of serfdom, of plunder, of misery, of falsehood and shame. And now I see the face of god, and I raise this god over the earth, this god whom men have sought since men came into being, this god will grant them joy and peace and pride. This god, this one word: I.[63]

According to Pojman, this rhetoric is decidedly Nietzschean, for in his "Death of God" passage, Nietzsche claimed that since we killed God, we must ourselves become gods. Rand takes Nietzsche seriously, and for this very reason, argues that we have an inalienable right to seek our own happiness and fulfillment, regardless of its effect on others.[64]

How might we formulate an argument for ethical egoism? Pojman presents the following argument in a manner consistent with the Randian motif:

1. The perfection of one's abilities in a state of happiness is the highest goal of humans.
2. We have a moral duty to attempt to reach this goal.
3. The ethics of altruism prescribes that we sacrifice our interests and lives for the good of others.
4. Therefore, the ethics of altruism is incompatible with the goals of happiness.
5. Ethical egoism prescribes that we seek our own happiness exclusively and, as such, it is consistent with the happiness goal.

[61] As quoted by Louis P. Pojman in *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 5th Edition (Belmont: Thomson–Wadsworth, 2006), 89.

[62] Pojman, 89

[63] As quoted by Louis P. Pojman in *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 5th Edition (Belmont: Thomson–Wadsworth, 2006), 89.

[64] Pojman, 89.

6. Therefore, ethical egoism is the correct moral theory.[65]

In presenting a Randian argument for ethical egoism, Rachels approaches the argument from a different angle, without compromising the essential details of Rand's position, as follows:

1. Each person has one life to live
2. If we value the individual, and if the individual has moral worth, then this life is of supreme importance.
3. The ethics of altruism regards the life of the individual as something one must be ready to sacrifice for the good of others.
4. Therefore, the ethics of altruism does not take seriously the value of the individual.
5. Ethical egoism, which allows each person to view his or her own life as being of ultimate value, does take the individual seriously, being the only philosophy that does so.
6. Thus, ethical egoism is the philosophy that we ought to accept.[66]

Rachels present the following as another possible argument, though not necessarily Randian in motif:

1. We ought to do whatever will best promote everyone's interests.
2. The best way to promote everyone's interests is for each of us to adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.
3. Therefore, each of us should adopt a policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.[67]

Besides these forms of justification, we find, in ethical egoism, a Kantian bent consistent with Kant's Universal Law Formulation,

[65] Ibid.
[66] Rachels, 78–79.
[67] Rachels, 76.

which states: Always do that act, which you can, at the same time *will* (that is, desire) that it becomes a universal law.[68] Rachels adumbrates this Kantian bent as follows: We have a duty not to harm others. If we make a habit of doing things that harm others, people will not mind doing things that harm us. Thus we avoid harming others to our advantage. Second, we have a duty not to lie. If we lie to other people, we will suffer all the ill effects of bad reputation. Thus, we become truthful to our advantage. We have a duty to keep our promises. If we fail to keep our promises with others, they will find us unreliable. Therefore, from the point of view of self-interest, we should keep our promises.[69]

We see versions of the Golden Rule embedded in these formulations. The only difference we find between these formulations and the Golden Rule lies in the fact that the Golden Rule, as promulgated by Christ, for example, is not motivated by the sort of self-interest characterized by egoism. Rather the Golden Rule seems closer to altruism. At any rate, these outlines give us an overview of psychological egoism, ethical egoism, and their entailments. Let us now see how both views cause the fragmentation of the immediate community hosting their adherents.

C. Psychological Egoism and Its Fragmentation of Community

In light of our description of psychological egoism, how might subscribers to this view threaten the fabric of a given moral community? Rachels observes that philosophers have, indeed, worried about this theory, and that if it is, in fact, true, it would seem to have devastating consequences for morality in general.[70] First, if psychological egoism is true, then individuals act deterministically rather than freely. Rachels observes that if people are moved only by their own welfare, talking about what we ought to do would be pointless, for if we are merely self-interested beings, we will behave selfishly no matter what our well-meaning but naïve moral theories tell us to do.[71] Hence, moral instruction, under this view, would be

[68] Immanuel Kant, *A Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11

[69] Rachels, 79.

[70] Rachels, 70.

[71] Ibid.

innocuous, and moral growth meaningless. Similar to individualism in general, moral agents in the community in question will be characterized by consistent selfishness and greed.

Second, if psychological egoism is true, and if individuals act deterministically under the spell of selfishness, then custodians and upholders of ethical norms will pointlessly attempt to correct bad behavior, for the citizens of that community will already be predisposed and pre-determined to behave in a certain way—that is, selfishly—irrespective of the punitive or correctional institutions we put in place. Judicial systems will, of course, be pointless, as well, under this view. Crime will continue unrestrained, for individuals will remain powerless to act unselfishly, even if they wanted to do so. Any community or society of this kind is, clearly, dysfunctional and undesirable, even from a Kantian view of ethics—the view that, supposedly, gives ethical egoism an affirmative nod. The Universal Law Formulation, for example, would require the autonomous individual to reject this way of life.

However, selflessness and altruism seem, quite intuitively, key ingredients for the flourishing of any community, especially for relatively less affluent societies, such as those we find in the Global South. They would not be, of course, the only ingredients we find; but they must be key, nonetheless. Notice that ethical egoism articulates this view as a conclusion based on the postulates of psychological egoism. This observation implies that if psychological egoism is deemed flawed—and, I think, it is—then ethical egoism will be flawed as well. To ethical egoism we now turn.

D. Ethical Egoism And Its Fragmentation of Community

Different philosophers, such as Rachels, Pojman and Frankena, find logical and existential difficulties with ethical egoism. For example, Pojman finds ethical egoism both inconsistent and paradoxical.[72] I am convinced their evaluation of ethical egoism is quite correct. My task, however, is not to highlight those flaws or difficulties. What I propose to do, in the following lines, is to demonstrate how ethical egoism causes, directly or indirectly, the fragmentation and breakdown of any human community. To get an

[72] Pojman, 94–95.

idea of the nature of those difficulties, I advise the reader to consult the works of these philosophers, as well as those of other ethicists.

Meanwhile, in order to highlight the flaw attending ethical egoism, I draw attention to the following possible instances. Following Rachels,[73] I intend to show, from these instances, that contrary to the egoist's belief, ethical egoism promotes instances of wickedness. Consider, for example, A pharmacist, subscribing to some version of ethical egoism. He wishes to increase his profits. His egoism allows him to fill prescriptions of cancer patients using watered-down and diluted drugs. This act gives him more drugs to sell, though diluted, without having to buy additional drugs. By doing so, he profits financially and promotes his self-interests irrespective of how this action affects the community of cancer patients around him. Needless to say, the patients will fail to get the proper treatments they both need and deserve, and will, therefore, quite likely get sicker and, perhaps, die. This state of affairs is quite consistent with personal and individual ethical egoism, and, with respect to them, quite moral.

Consider another instance where an egoist paramedic, wishing to satisfy his sexual desires, rapes his unconscious patients. Since his ethical egoism is based on the claim from psychological egoism that we cannot help but act selfishly, he finds himself helplessly addicted, or believes he is addicted to his sexual passions. Nothing forbids such individuals from becoming sexual offenders.

Another instance, cited by Rachels, involves egoistic parents, who mix their baby's formula with acid, and feed their baby with the new solution. They then fake a lawsuit against the company for introducing harmful baby products into the market. Their aim, of course, is to get money selfishly for their pleasures and happiness. Such a state of affairs is a logical outcome of egoism, hence, perfectly moral with respect to egoism.

Rachels cites a few more examples to underscore the absurd consequences of ethical egoism. Consider the case of a thirteen-year-old girl, kidnaped by a neighbor and kept, shackled, in an underground bomb shelter for 181 days, where she was sexually abused. Or think of a case where a sixty-year-old man shot his letter carrier seven times because he was ninety-thousand dollars in debt.

[73] Rachels, 81–82.

He thought that being in prison would be better than being homeless. Once again, both the kidnapper and the sixty-year-old man are acting morally with respect to ethical egoism.

Suppose a cannibalistic cultural community adopts ethical egoism. Suppose, further, that this culture is unfortunate enough to live through an extended period of famine or drought. Most of its neighboring communities decide to relocate to distant lands, searching for food. The culture, owing to its sentimental attachment to its ancestral land, decides to stay in their drought-stricken land. If each individual member of that culture chooses to live consistently with his or her own ethical egoism, devouring one another for each individual's survival would not be far-fetched, but seems a logical outcome of their egoism. Altruism and heroic actions to save one another, in such a state of affairs, will hardly be an option. Suppose each member, then, chooses to devour the other member. The community's final self-destruction will not be difficult to see.

Besides demonstrating the proliferation of wickedness, ethical egoism, in some instances, perpetuates pain and suffering by demanding egoistic behavior. We find this truth in Pojman's argument against egoism, as follows: Helping others at one's own expense is not only not required, with respect to ethical egoism; such an act is morally wrong. Thus, if in the absence of evidence that helping a certain individual, call him *A*, will end up to my advantage, I must refrain from helping *A*. For example, if I can save the whole of Europe and Africa from destruction by pressing a button, then I would be acting immorally by pressing that button if I have nothing to gain from pressing the button. Hence, by this logic, the Good Samaritan was morally wrong in helping the injured victim and failing to collect payment for his troubles.[74]

Third, Egoism seems to have no concern for posterity. A 1975 *New York Times* magazine article, published in January 19, was entitled "What Has Posterity Ever Done for Me?" The article asked the following questions: "Suppose that, as a result of using up all the world's resources, human life did come to an end. So what? What is so desirable about an indefinite continuation of the human species, religious conviction apart?" The article then observes further:

74 Pojman, 95

It may well be that nearly everybody who is already here on earth would be reluctant to die, and that everybody has an instinctive fear of death. But one must not confuse this with the notion that, in any meaningful sense, generations who are yet unborn can be said to be better off if they are born than if they are not.

For any person concerned about the survival of one's community, these sentiments seem counter-intuitive. The rising debt ceiling currently bedeviling the United States' economy often finds its enormity expressed in terms of its economic implications for later generations. Moreover, communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America would quite likely cringe at the thought of failing to put frameworks in place for the preservation and continuation of later generations.

Conclusion

Individualism and egoism (both psychological and ethical), when followed to their logical conclusions, pose a deep threat to the survival of any community. Individualism is vulnerable to greed and selfishness. Psychological egoism is deterministic, thereby making morality and its consequences quite pointless. Ethical egoism seems to proliferate wickedness; it seems to promote the pain and suffering of other individuals; and it seems to care very little for posterity. If individual moral responsibility is defined in these terms, the community hosting individualistic and egoistic moral agents must find itself at risk of disintegration. By contrast, the moral instruction and development of any individual must be seen to take place within a community. The individual finds his or her identity and sense of belonging within his or her host community. Therefore, the community is an indispensable custodian of morality.

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