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A Conversion to a Flourishing-Based Ethical Egoism: Discovering Morality's Prudential Rationality

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Abstract

How do we live a moral life while also living a life of value to us? A life filled with passions, interests, and relationships? This paper tackles a possible reconciliation between morality and rational prudence that ensures a moral way of life is valuable for the agent that lives it. The author is motivated to build a moral theory that is “good for” the moral agent—an individual that has a capacity to understand the moral value and impact of their actions in relation to others. It is a theory that recognizes the human tendency to follow partial, self-interested, and typically prudent ends. The reconciliation proposed in this paper has two dominant sources of influence. The first is Gregory Kavka’s paper “A Reconciliation Project” (1984). The second is Lester Hunt’s paper “Flourishing Egoism” (1999). After a discussion of their influence, the author engages in an examination of ethical egoism that places it at the centre of the reconciliation project. In this, several objections to ethical egoism are raised and answered considering a rule the author names *the gold-copper rule*. Establishing a need to convert ethical egoism into a flourishing-based egoism. It is through this notion of flourishing egoism and Kavka’s satisfaction morality, where a reconciliation between morality and rational prudence is possible. One that can properly capture the motivations of the moral agent given their nuanced psychology.

Introduction

It is common in ethics to establish ‘the moral agent’ as possessing a certain character with respective qualifying traits and behaviours. An individual I believe has a capacity to understand the moral value and impact of their actions in relation to others. However, I equally believe that the moral agent is predominantly self-interested, posing an acute moral dilemma on their ability to act morally during instances where moral scripts do not typically apply. That is, the moral agent is at odds with their nuanced psychology, often following their desires, interests, and remaining partial to certain people while striving to live a good and valuable life. Attempting to pursue their self-interest (interest in the good of oneself for one’s own sake) and their ‘other-interest’ (interest in the good of others, for their own sake). Some may refer to the latter as altruism, but for coherency purposes altruism will be referred to hereafter as ‘other-interest’. It is not the case, however; that an ethic ensures the plausibility of pursuing both. This is because what we consider as *morality* and *rational prudence* have yet to be reconciled.¹ Thus, in this paper I strive to build a sufficient ethical theory that properly captures these competing motivations by reconciling morality with rational prudence. Therefore, I propose that morality and rational prudence are reconcilable upon the adoption of a flourishing-based ethical egoism;

¹ Kavka, Gregory S. “A Reconciliation Project”. In *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Theory*, edited by Louis J. Pojman. Wadsworth Publishing Company (1984): 621.

the plausibility of which rests on a theoretical tool for properly capturing the motivations of the moral agent that I name the *golden-copper rule*.

Reconciliation & Flourishing Egoism

The reconciliation of morality and rational prudence proposed in this paper has two dominant sources of influence. The first is Gregory Kavka's paper "A Reconciliation Project" (1984). The second is Lester Hunt's paper "Flourishing Egoism" (1999). I will begin with a discussion of the former, highlighting the key concepts that will carry forward into that of the latter.

With such, Gregory Kavka in "A Reconciliation Project" (1984) saw morality and rational prudence as reconcilable when ethical principles considered the likeliness that humans as rational agents had some sense of self-control (to withhold acting on every desire) and a level of emotional intelligence (recognizing emotions such as guilt and empathy) despite a tendency to act self-interestedly. In other words, he saw humans as predominant egoists, recognizing that while most of the time we will be inclined to follow our self-interest, there are instances in which it is practically rational to be non-egoist.²

This serves as the basis for his reconciliation project of which Kavka provokes a conception of morality that builds-in rational prudence. Motivating this project were the problems Kavka saw as limiting Thomas Hobbes' conception of moral motivation.³ Advocating that the Hobbesian conception limits itself through a solely external sanctions-based approach designed to combat Hobbes' account of humans as psychological egoists.⁴ As such, by considering humans as predominant egoists, Kavka was able to add the use of "internal sanctions" as a means for reducing the likeliness of immoral behaviour.⁵ Saving, external sanctions for those whom his argument does not convince.

Kavka, considered internal sanctions to be "built in constraints that are an important part of socialization."⁶ He was adamant that if raised in a 'normal' social context, negative internal sanctions (deep psychic distress) will follow from the thought of harming other people.⁷ Therefore, positive internal sanctions (deep psychic satisfaction) can be derived from morally praiseworthy actions.⁸ From which, he built his conception of a "satisfaction morality".

Kavka's satisfaction morality suggests that it would be a primary goal for the moral agent to be a *genuinely moral individual*.⁹ A genuinely moral individual is one who is aware of the (relative) purity of their motives and the nature and depth of their commitment and uses this as a

² Cooper, Wesley. "Critical Notice of Gregory S. Kavka Hobbesian Moral and Political Theory". In *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, edited by John A. Baker. Cambridge University Press (1989): 492.

³ Kavka, "A Reconciliation Project," 622.

⁴ Ibid, 622-623.

⁵ Ibid, 625-626.

⁶ Ibid. 626

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 627.

guide for their behaviour.¹⁰ The satisfactions of morality differ from other kinds of moral and non-moral emotions. For instance, the deep pangs felt when we do something bad, and suggests that feelings of pride or joy felt by someone lacking a constant devotion to the demands of morality in one-off instances or seeming cases of morally praiseworthy behaviour are less than the satisfactions felt by the genuinely moral individual. This illuminates a paradox of self-interest. That is, being purely self-interested in the way often considered by moral philosophers, will not always best serve one's interests because certain substantial benefits accrue only to those who are not purely self-interested. Those being, genuinely moral people. Implying that morality is uniquely tied to advantage in a way that prudence is not.¹¹ This also understands morality as superior to immorality as a general policy from the viewpoint of rational prudence.¹²

With this, Kavka's satisfaction morality and his consideration of the moral agent as a predominant egoist carries forward into Lester Hunt's flourishing egoism. Hunt's flourishing egoism is motivated towards an ethic that is *good for* the moral agent, stipulating that it is in an individual's self-interest to live a life oriented towards flourishing.¹³ For Hunt, "virtue and self-interest suggest (given historical similarities) a further hypothesis: that there is some close connection between the concept of virtue and that of self-interest" parentheses mine.¹⁴ From a virtue-ethical standpoint, positive internal sanctions may be the undertones of *flourishing* or *eudaimonia* that result in the habituation of moral actions; in which consistent and repeated instances ought to occur. Implying an inherent relationship between moral action, positive internal sanctions, and flourishing.

Consequently, Hunt's flourishing egoism excludes the possibility of caring for another for their own-sake (other-interest, or altruism) as something that too promotes the flourishing of the moral agent, causing the moral agent to develop a metaphysical understanding of their self in relation to others. Seeing others as extensions of their self and therefore, included within *their* self-interest.¹⁵ Hunt uses this to claim that the individual can care for others; however, I do not see this as a promotion of the other's flourishing. Instead, it remains a promotion of the individuals flourishing alone. Therefore, limiting the moral agent's ability to be a genuinely moral individual in the way Kavka subscribes to.

This problem encountered by Hunt is grounded in common criticisms against the theory of ethical egoism. Ethical egoism is a self-interest led moral philosophy; therefore, it is an attractive candidate for orienting our self-interest towards genuine morality. However, as stipulated by James Rachels, "Ethical Egoism does not say that one should promote one's own interests *as well as* the interests of others."¹⁶ Reasons being, that "Ethical Egoism is the radical view that one's *only* duty is to promote one's own interests... and this principle sums up *all* of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gauthier, David P. "Morality and Advantage". In *The Philosophical Review*, edited by Duke University Press. Duke University Press (1967): 461.

¹² Kavka, "A Reconciliation Project," 623.

¹³ Hunt, Lester. "Flourishing Egoism". In *Ethical Theory an Anthology (Second Edition)*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. John Wiley & Sons, Inc (1999): 178, 190.

¹⁴ Ibid, 178.

¹⁵ Hunt, "Flourishing Egoism," 182-183.

¹⁶ Rachels, James. "Ethical Egoism". In *Ethical Theory an Anthology (Second Edition)*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau. 193-199. John Wiley & Sons, Inc (2003): 194.

one's natural duties and obligations."¹⁷ Thus, the only instances where helping others is necessary for the ethical egoist is when (1) "your interests coincide with the interests of others, so that in helping yourself you will be aiding others willynilly"¹⁸. And (2) when "aiding others is an effective *means* for creating some benefit for yourself."¹⁹ Therefore, if the moral agent is a predominant egoist, this is a barrier of ethical egoism that ought to be overcome if morality and rational prudence are to be reconcilable. The next section will be devoted to a re-consideration of ethical egoism given some of its major criticisms considering the *golden-copper rule*.

Ethical Egoism and Its Critics

I see ethical egoism as promoting an exclusionary pursuit of self-interest that encourages the ethical egoist to engage in strategies such as Rawls' maximin and Kavka's disaster avoidance. As well as entering mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements requiring a further condition of honesty. The avoidance strategies disable a reactive attitude and encourages the ethical egoist to consider immediate and long-term consequences of their actions. Entering mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements require that the ethical egoist is trustworthy because in so far as we require others to keep their promises and follow through on contracts, others equally rely on us to do the same.²⁰ As such, I see a true conception of ethical egoism as relying on the following of a golden-copper rule:

Prospectively do good unto all others considering a probability that the others will do unto you the same, but never when doing so is unilateral.

This rule will be used to answer the numerous objections against ethical egoism. The culmination of this will ensure the plausibility of reconciling morality with rational prudence through a flourishing-based ethical egoism that considers the moral agent to be a genuinely moral individual in consideration of their nuanced psychology. Beginning with the criticism that ethical egoism is self-contradictory.

As such, critics of ethical egoism initially deny it because they consider it to be self-contradictory.²¹ These critics would claim that *considering a probability that the others will do unto you*, posits a care for others that contradicts ethical egoisms' exclusionary pursuit of self-interest. This introduces the second criticism; that ethical egoism socially isolates the egoist.²²

As for the former, ethical egoism avoids the criticism of self-contradiction when the consideration of others doing unto you functions as a mode of ensuring a non-interference of others, i.e., ensuring others do not detract from the ethical egoist's ability to fulfill their self-interest. This adheres to the first part of the rule: *prospectively do good unto all others considering a probability that the others will do unto you the same*. For example, following the speed limit on busy streets to ensure the safety of all drivers (and thereby you), considering the probability that others will also drive the speed limit for the safety of all drivers. What this does is solely isolate the egoist in terms of their motivation as opposed to a social separation from

¹⁷ Ibid, 194.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gauthier, "Morality and Advantage," 473-474.

²¹ Rachels, "Ethical Egoism," 198.

²² Ibid, 197-198.

others. It is plausible then for the egoist to maintain meaningful connections with other people, such as engaging in positive dialogue, generosity, and mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements that in turn will limit the possibility of others directly or indirectly subtracting from that which is in the ethical egoist's self-interest.

But what happens in terms of conflicts of interest, i.e., situations in which an individual gains from harming others and loses from not harming others?²³ For example, competing for the same job of which there is only one open position. This would surely be an instance in which the ethical egoist ought to ensure a non-interference of others. Therefore, it seems prudentially rational for the egoist to sabotage the other individual to get hired.

This is an instance in which it is necessary to re-consider ethical egoism in line with the *golden-copper rule*, because while harming the other individual is prudentially rational, it is not moral. Instead, the egoist ought to reason that it is *more* in their self-interest to be hired or not hired on fair grounds because this will secure their ability to pursue their self-interest in the future. Meaning, regardless of outcome, the benefit of engaging in moral behaviours is greater than the cost of offensively violating moral structures. This goes alongside pursuing a non-interference of others and like the previous criticisms, a practical application of this involves the instantiation of the golden-copper rule. It also reminds the ethical egoist that morality is superior to immorality as a general policy from the viewpoint of rational prudence.²⁴ However, it is this latter criticism that motivates the conditional requirement in the rule: *ceasing to do unto all others when doing so is unilateral*.

A such, a reconciliation of morality and rational prudence is at play when the moral agent can successfully decipher when to prospectively do good unto all others, and when to not. This requires understanding two additional concepts taken from Kavka. These pertain to offensive violations; non-compliance when others are complying and defensive violations; reciprocated non-compliance.²⁵

Offensive violations are beneficial in retrospect and prospectively rational, however, they are against the tenant of rational prudence.²⁶ As it pertains to offensive violations, one may choose to offensively violate a principle of cooperation under risk or under uncertainty. Choices under risk occur when the agent has "reliable knowledge of the probabilities that the various outcomes would follow the different available courses of action"²⁷. Choices made under uncertainty occur when this knowledge is unavailable. Therefore, rationality requires either a maximin strategy: "choosing the action with the best worst outcome" or a disaster avoidance strategy: "choosing the alternative that maximizes one's chances of avoiding all unacceptable outcomes."²⁸ Both strategies favour playing it safe, aiming at avoidance or minimization of unacceptable outcomes. Thus, according to the two "safe-play" strategies, offensive violations are irrational because the violator accepts unnecessary or greater than risk of suffering disastrous

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Kavka, "A Reconciliation Project," 623.

²⁵ Ibid, 632-624.

²⁶ Ibid, 623.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

consequences.²⁹ This suggest that an ethical egoist, in following the golden-copper rule is not motivated to engage in offensive violations. It is often considered that because ethical egoism is a self-interest led moral philosophy, that offensive violations become a part of ethical egoists 'individual ethic' however, understanding ethical egoism in this new sense, confirms that participation in offensive violations is against the core tenants of ethical egoism.

Here lies a coincidence between morality and rational prudence: rational prudence dismisses a strategy of "clever compromise" between moral and immoral conduct under the rule: "follow the moral rules except when you believe (or confidently believe) you can get away with violating them" because this makes one likely to experience the consequences of offensive violations.³⁰ In this way, offensive violations are not prudent. Instead, the ethical egoist subsumes the golden-copper rule, in which they follow the rules to avoid an unnecessary or greater than risk of suffering disastrous consequences.³¹

Defensive violations then, can be considered as *reciprocated non-compliance*, in-line with moral duty. Defensive violations occur in the absence of reciprocated restraint. This can be understood by Kavka's copper rule: "do unto others as they *do* unto you" (founded in a principal of cooperation and reciprocation).³² The golden-copper rule follows from this with a *prospective* as opposed to *reactive* doing unto others like the timeless golden rule but provides an escape clause when it is known that others are not complying securing a freedom for the ethical egoist to ensure a moral non-interference of others. For example, exposing your opponent for trying to sabotage you from getting hired for the job that they are also attempting to get.

With this, Kavka stands between Rawls and Gauthier.³³ In line with Rawls, Kavka's disaster avoidance strategy is like the maximin principle used under a veil of ignorance.³⁴ On the other hand, Kavka grounds his predominant egoism is sociobiology. Gauthier evaluated the rational actor as an "economic man" understanding personal characteristics that sway action.³⁵ As such, Kavka also considers personal characteristics in recognizing a kind of egoism influencing practical rationality; however, he uses sociobiology to reject psychological egoism.³⁶ This builds his argument for humans as "predominant egoists". Recognizing that there are instances in which it is practically rational to be non-egoist.³⁷

However, regardless of if Kavka is correct to assume that our evolution pre-supposes an attitude that we should help others only if they promise to and do reciprocate. I beg to argue that it would be irrational to sustain cooperation when it is not reciprocated. This seems to be a negative reason against abandoning moral structures when an individual's survival, security, and/or well-being is at stake. Instances that do not implicate these three factors could argue for

²⁹ Ibid, 623-624.

³⁰ Ibid, 624.

³¹ Ibid, 623-624.

³² Ibid, 624.

³³ Cooper "Critical Notice of Gregory S. Kavka," 492.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

why one may choose a unilateral following of moral structures. However, it would not be immoral for someone to prioritize their self-interest when others do not follow.

Consequently, there is a fourth criticism against ethical egoism, limiting the potential for the ethical egoist to be a genuinely moral individual. That is, critics of ethical egoism often believe that *doing good unto all others considering a probability that others will do unto you the same*, fosters a manipulative attitude towards others in attempt to avoid certain sacrifices often required by morality.³⁸ For example, one may elect to babysit their friend's dog to receive some future favor from their friend. While not inherently unethical, as this could be considered a mutually beneficial cooperative arrangement, critics of ethical egoism purport that only viewing others as of worth when one is in a mutually beneficial cooperative arrangement with another is ingenuine and therefore, does not constitute caring for others for their own sake. This is because caring for another for their own sake often requires making certain sacrifices, such as not receiving a returned favour, and according to the critics, this is something that cannot be *in* one's self-interest.

In response, ethical egoism avoids this problem under a proper consideration of cooperation. As stated by Robert Shaver, it is not merely enough that the ethical egoist acts as if others have weight, the ethical egoist must genuinely give them weight.³⁹ By weight, Shaver can be understood as referring to moral worth or respect. Therefore, it is not enough that the ethical egoist appears to care for others to receive some self-interested end. They must genuinely care for and regard the well-being of others as an end in itself. Thus, standing by the rule that the moral agent must be a genuinely moral individual.

Furthermore, a manipulative attitude can easily backfire for the ethical egoist if not properly concealed. Hunt explains that:

“If people were to realize that I act as if I value their well-being simply in order to get something out of them, all sorts of results that are bad for me will tend to follow: to one extent or another, other people will object to being “used” in this way and will refuse to cooperate with me. They will also dislike me, and they will think I am a bad person.”⁴⁰

As such, it is rational for the ethical egoist to reason that it is good for them that others are cooperative, like them, and think they are a good person; “thus, to the extent that these results can be expected to follow from it, egoistic behavior undermines the aim of egoism.”⁴¹ Furthermore, if Kavka is correct that we are in fact predominant egoists then this would be an instance in which it is prudentially rational to be non-egoist.

Critics of this claim will assert that it merely replaces a manipulative attitude with a self-defeating attitude.⁴² This self-defeating attitude in turn, further proves that ethical egoism is self-

³⁸ Hunt, “Flourishing Egoism,” 182-183.

³⁹ Shaver, Robert. “Egoism”. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2021 Edition)*, edited by Edward N. URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/egoism/> (2021): 1-2.

⁴⁰ Hunt. “Flourishing Egoism,” 179-180.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 183.

contradictory.⁴³ However, Hunt asserts that this is not additional proof for a contradiction of ethical egoism.⁴⁴ In so far as ethical egoism does not contradict itself by securing a care for others as a mode of non-interference, it also deems that we genuinely should have these other-regarding behaviours and attitudes. Therefore, Hunt reveals that “egoism would (according to itself) give the true account of why we ought to do and believe these things.”⁴⁵

The next test of this solution would then be to apply it to cases of caring for others of whom we have varying kinds of relationships with. As such, if our moral agent is an ethical egoist, to help others, they must have a certain level of care for others. Following the philosophy of Ayn Rand, as it pertains to individuals that the moral agent has special relationships with (marked by friendship, love, or mutually beneficial arrangements) helping these others does not require a sacrifice of self-interest because sacrifice “is the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one or of a non-value.”⁴⁶ Individuals that the moral agent has special relationships with have value to the moral agent. Therefore, the moral agent has a certain level of care for these people.

Apart from individuals the moral agent has special relationships with, Kavka would suggest that the moral agent adheres to the copper rule. However, this is insufficient in that this applies to some others and not *all* others. As such, considering ethical egoism as the instantiation of a golden-copper rule—*prospectively do good unto all others considering a probability that the others will do unto you the same, but never when doing so is unilateral*—the ethical egoist *can* and *will* care for all others. Only when ethical egoism is interpreted by a golden-copper rule, can it be explained why the ethical egoist will sometimes act as a non-egoist to help all others and why this is consistent with the philosophy of ethical egoism. At this juncture it can be made evident that “all others” means “all *moral* others” and does not apply to immoral individuals. Based on the above argument, it would not be the case that moral structures under this rule would require the moral agent to sacrifice their self-interest at the hand of the immoral and that this is a morally responsible action.

Reconciliation

In essence, our re-consideration of ethical egoism, brings us to an alternative understanding of morality, i.e., that which captures morality’s prudential rationality as inspired by Kavka and Hunt. However, additionally sees to it that such an ethic recognizes what it means to be human today, in line with our complicated and biased psychology. It understands that we will often act morally because it secures two competing motivations: it serves that which feeds our well-being, and it also serves that which is necessary for living a meaningful life with others. Living a meaningful life with others is exactly this notion of caring for others for their own sake, recognizing their worth in virtue of being humans. Thus, although in most cases we will be inclined to follow our self-interest, it is also possible for us to recognize that forgoing our self-interest is not a loss. Rather, it is an essential part of morality and is therefore, a critical constituent of our flourishing. However, it is only prudentially rational if others are participating

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 180.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 182.

along this same scheme. Thus, in moments where individuals violate codes of morality, threaten our individual well-being, and where moral scripts do not typically apply, it is through exercising rational prudence that we can secure our individual possibilities of living a meaningful and moral life. Therefore, a flourishing-based ethical egoism is merely that which says morality ought to be in our self-interest and lets us discover morality's prudential rationality; stating that we ought to *prospectively do good unto all others considering a probability that the others will do unto you the same, but never when doing so is unilateral.*

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