

“EGOISM” AND “ALTRUISM”: SOME DEFINITIONS IN LIGHT OF RACHELS, RAND AND MAUGHAM

We have agreed on a definition of “egoism” (the psychological phenomenon, not the doctrine) as “the agent’s pursuit of her self-interest.” “Psychological egoism” is the doctrine that egoism is the only human motive. “Ethical egoism” is the view that it *should be* the only motive, i.e. that people *should* act only in their own self-interest.

2 other egoism-related phenomena:

1. “*Kantian egoism*.” Acting out of one’s own self-interest *except* when doing so uses another person as a means to one’s own ends. (This is named after Kant’s fundamental moral principle that one should never treat other human [he would say “rational”] beings as mere means to one’s own ends.)
2. “*Moralized egoism*.” Acting out of one’s own self-interest except when doing so violates basic rules of common sense morality (see Rachels, 83-84 for “common sense morality”).

These definitions acknowledge that pure self-interest as ordinarily understood can conflict with common sense morality or with Kantian moral principles. Some philosophers have denied that this is possible, Plato being the most famous. Plato thinks that if you understand your own interest properly you will realize that you can never benefit personally from being immoral. This optimistic but extremely implausible view has been rejected by most philosophers, although there remains disagreement about the *extent* of conflict between morality and self-interest. Although Rand is not consistent in her use of “egoism” in the passages we read, some of the things she says suggest that by “egoism” she means 1, and possibly 2. In doing so, she places herself somewhat in this Platonic tradition. In further work in this course, including your papers and exams, I want you to use “egoism” in the way it is defined in the first paragraph and the other handout on egoism; if you wish to make use of Rand’s definition of egoism I would like you to call this “Randian egoism.” But I would keep in mind that by doing so you would come close to ruling out as definitionally impossible any real conflict between a person’s self-interest and her use of other persons, or other immoral behavior.

We saw that Rand is concerned with some other phenomena, which she tends also to call “egoism,” such as acting with integrity to one’s creative vision, acting with no concern for what other people think of you, or being self-sufficient and not needing other people. These are important phenomena or possible ideals, but I want us to use “egoism” the same way, and so I don’t think these things should generally be called egoism, *except* in recognition that this is what Rand calls them.

Altruism:

We have defined altruism (as a psychological phenomenon, not a doctrine) as “a concern for another person for her own sake.” Psychological egoists deny that such a thing exists, and ethical egoists think that we should not engage in altruism in this sense. (Ethical egoists do not deny that we should engage in *beneficence*, but only when doing so promotes our own interest.)

You might think that “Kantian egoism” is actually a form of combination of egoism and altruism (keeping “combination motives” in mind). And this is a possible way to look at it. But I think of “altruism” as going beyond the Kantian principle of not using others; that is a negative principle—it tells you *not* to treat others as a means. Altruism involves a *positive concern* for the well-being of another person, and so goes beyond this.

This definition of “altruism” focuses on other *persons* and their good. But the character of Dirk Stroeve suggests that there is a more general version of altruism, that would be something like this: “a concern for the creation, preservation, or enhancement of something of value beyond its personal value to the agent, i.e. beyond her self-interest.” This “something of value” does not have to be a person. It could be animals, or creativity, or beauty, or specifically natural beauty. (Someone who gives up eating meat, when she loves meat, because she does not want to contribute to harming animals, would be an “animal altruist” or at least be engaging in an animal-altruistic act.) Some such things of value could involve *both* the good of persons and of non-persons; some environmental concern has this character.

Let us call this more general form “*general altruism*.” The more *specific* forms can then be, for example, “beauty altruism,” “nature altruism,” “animal altruism,” etc. The reason these do not sound quite right is that the ordinary use of “altruism” tends to imply that the concern in question is for persons and their well-being; so I suggest that when “altruism” is used in an *unmodified* way, we understand it to mean “person altruism.”

Keep in mind that both “egoism” and “altruism” as motives are ‘subjective’ in that the agent’s motive is *what she takes to be* her own self-interest, or *what she takes to be* another’s good or something of intrinsic value.