
Honest Selfishness for Authentic Existence: The Objectivists Perspective

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Abstract

The issue of selfishness has been a central topic in intellectual history. Various theories of egoism; the view that selfishness is good, have been propounded over the years, though selfishness is often considered a vice and selfish actions are often judged to be wrong. Is doing what is best for oneself morally wrong? But sometimes we ought to do what is best for ourselves. In other words, we sometimes should be selfish. What makes an action wrong and right? Kantians say it is whether anyone is used as a 'mere means.' Consequentialists say it is consequence of an action that tells a wrong or right action. Egoists say it is really how an action impact self-interest. Ayn Rand argued that "selfish" is the correct designation for a person living according to the objectivist ethics and that selfishness is a virtue. This paper therefore appraises the concept of "Honest Selfishness" through a historical analysis of the concept 'selfishness' within the framework of the objectivists ethics. The validity of the claim that selfishness is virtue is examined to ascertain its implication for ethics in general. The idea of selfishness stems from the ethical discourse of a moral and immoral actions. Its relevance is felt both in the academic and practical life. The paper concludes that selfishness is wrongly defined and the action that benefits the actor is misconceived. Accordingly, a selfish person is a virtuous and authentic person.

Keywords: selfishness, self-interest, self-sacrifice, honest selfishness, authenticity, existence, authentic existence, objectivity.

Introduction

The title of this paper *honest selfishness for authentic existence: the objectivists' perspective*, is one which can evoke question like, "why is the word 'selfishness' used to denote virtuous qualities of character, when the same word antagonizes so many people?" The meaning ascribed in popular usage to the word "selfishness" is not merely wrong: it represents a devastating intellectual "package-deal," which is responsible, more than any other single factor, for the arrested moral development of mankind. In popular usage, the word "selfishness" is a synonym of evil; the image it conjures is of a murderous brute that tramples over piles of corpses to achieve his own ends, who cares for no living being and pursues nothing but the gratification of the mindless whims of any immediate moment. Yet the exact meaning and dictionary definition of the word "selfishness" is: *concern with one's own interests*. This concept is devoid of moral evaluation; it does not tell us whether concern with one's own interests is good or evil; nor does it tell us what constitutes man's actual interests. It is the task of ethics to answer such questions. The ethics of altruism has created the

image of the brute, as its answer, in order to make men accept two inhuman tenets: (a) that any concern with one's own interests is evil, regardless of what these interests might be, and (b) that the brute's activities are *in fact* to one's own interest (which altruism enjoins man to renounce for the sake of his neighbours).

Altruism declares that any action taken for the benefit of others is good, and any action taken for one's own benefit is evil. Thus, the *beneficiary* of an action is the only criterion for moral value, and so long as that beneficiary is anybody other than oneself, anything goes. Hence the appalling immorality, the chronic injustice, the grotesque double standards, the insoluble conflicts and contradictions that have characterized human relationships and human societies throughout history, under all the variants of the altruist ethics.

As a result, the indecency of what passes for moral judgments today is alarming. For instance, an industrialist who produces a fortune and a gangster who robs a bank are regarded as equally immoral, since they both sought wealth for their own “selfish” benefit. A young man who gives up his career in order to support his parents and never rises beyond the rank of Sargent is regarded as morally superior to the young man who endures an excruciating struggle and achieves his personal ambition. A dictator is regarded as moral, since the unspeakable atrocities he committed were intended to benefit “the people,” not himself. Observe what this beneficiary-criterion of morality does to a man's life. The first thing he learns is that morality is his enemy; he has nothing to gain from it, he can only lose; self-inflicted loss, self-inflicted pain, debilitating pall of an incomprehensible duty is all that he can expect. He may hope that others might occasionally sacrifice themselves for his benefit, as he grudgingly sacrifices himself for theirs, but he knows that the relationship will bring mutual resentment, not pleasure, and that, morally, their pursuit of values will be like an exchange of unwanted, unchosen Christmas presents, which is neither morally permitted to buy for himself. Apart from such times as he manages to perform some act of self-sacrifice, he possesses no moral significance, that is to say, morality takes no cognizance of him and has nothing to say to him for guidance in the crucial issues of his life; it is only his own personal, private, “selfish” life and, in the face of that, it is regarded either as evil or, at best, *amoral*.

Evidently, nature has not provided man with an automatic form of survival, since he has to support his life by his own effort, he has to face life as it presents itself. The doctrine that, concern with one's own interests is evil means that man's desire to live is evil, and by implication, man's existence is evil. What doctrine could be more evil than that? There is a fundamental moral difference between a man who sees his self-interest in production and a man who sees it in robbery. The evil of a robber does *not* lie in the fact that he pursues his own interests, but in *what* he regards as to his own interest; *not* in the fact that he pursues his values, but in *what* he chose to value; *not* in the fact that he wants to live, but in the fact that he wants to live on a sub-human level. If it is true that what I mean by

“selfishness” is not what is meant conventionally, then *this* is one of the worst indictments of altruism: it means that altruism *permits no concept* of a self-respecting, self-supporting man, a man who supports his life by his own effort and sacrifices neither himself nor others. It means that altruism permits no view of men except as sacrificial animals and profiteers-on-sacrifice, as victims and parasites. That it permits no concept of a benevolent co-existence among men. That it permits no concept of *justice*.

To redeem both man and morality, it is the concept of “*selfishness*” that one has to redeem. The first step is to assert *man's right to a moral existence*, that is to say, he recognizes his need of a moral code to guide the course and the fulfilment of his own life. The reasons why man needs a moral code explains the fact that the purpose of morality is to define man's proper values and interests, that which *concerns his own interests* is the essence of a moral existence, and that man *must be the beneficiary of his own moral actions*. The Objectivist ethics holds that the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own *rational* self-interest. Objectivist ethics is thus, a morality of *rational* self-interest, *honest selfishness* or *rational selfishness*. Since selfishness is “concern with one's own interests,” the Objectivist ethics uses that concept in its exact and purest sense. The attack on “selfishness” is an attack on man's self-esteem. It is an attack on man's authentic existence thereby sowing the seed of inauthenticity. To surrender oneself to this attack, is to surrender the other. Notwithstanding the necessity of honesty in our day-to-day struggles for survival, Barbara and Andrew have noted however, that “too much honesty might be seen as undisciplined openness” (93). Take for instance, individuals may be perceived as being 'too honest' if they honestly express the negative opinion of others, either without being asked their opinion, or having being asked in a circumstance where the response would be trivial.

The Concept of Honest Selfishness

The concept of honest selfishness is a combination of two words *honest* and *selfishness*. Honest connotes unbiased, openness, frankness, fairness, and uprightness. It is pertinent to take into cognizance the concept 'honest' as it relates to this study. Hence, it is moral virtue. It is concerned with the question of the ethical justification of selfishness. Following this understanding, one can say that 'honest selfishness' is the virtuous state of being selfish. It holds that selfishness is moral and valuable. Honest selfishness is what the objectivist ethics calls *rational selfishness*. Honest selfishness is the acknowledgement of self-esteem.

Selfishness, Self-interest and Self-sacrifice: A comparative analysis

The distinction between selfishness, self-interest, and self-sacrifice seems to be so blurred in public discourse that self-interest means selfishness but self-sacrifice has a different meaning from both selfishness and self-interest. Selfishness is being concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself, one's own advantage, pleasure, or welfare, regardless of others. According to Lewis, “selfishness is

the opposite of altruism or self-sacrifice; and has also been contrasted with self-centeredness” (pp. 116–117).

We all are born with a drive to struggle, stay alive, and look healthy, and selfishness is a misplaced manifestation of these. Selfishness as a quality of being selfish combines the pronoun *self*, meaning 'to or for yourself', with the suffix *-ish*-having the character of. If your actions are selfish, they all have to do with getting something for yourself, like attention, candy, or power. Selfish people prioritize their own petty needs above the significant needs of others. For example, a person who steals money from the mother to buy comic book, such a person would be seen as being selfish. Have we thought of it that mental health problem can contribute to the development of selfishness? Consider personality disorder like antisocial personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder. They cause people to be so wrapped up in their own desires that they either do not notice or come about the needs of others. Being a perennial issue in moral discuss, selfishness has won in diversity, the views of philosophers, psychologists, religious, economists and evolutionists.

Aristotle, alongside his countrymen for instance, have condemned those who sought only to profit themselves, but approves the man of reason who sought to gain for himself the greatest share of that which deserve social praise. Selfishness, in the western Christian tradition was viewed as a central vice, standing at the root of the seven deadly sins in the form of pride. Francis Bacon carried forward this tradition when he characterized “wisdom for a man's self as wisdom of the rats” (131).

John Locke was one of the key figures in early classical liberalism: an ideology that triumph notions of individualism and negative liberty. These core themes inevitably relate to selfishness. Locke for instance sought for people to exercise “self-government”, the idea that an individual should make his/her own decisions. This inherent right would allow individuals to pursue self-interests, rather than suffer the burden of any altruistic obligations. He arguably opened the door for later thinkers like Ayn Rand who argued for selfishness as a social virtue and root of social progress. Ayn held that selfishness is a virtue. Psychoanalyst turn to favour the development of a genuine sense of self, and many even speak of a healthy selfishness, as opposed to the self-occlusion of what Anna Freud called “emotional surrender”.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle claims that it is the virtuous person “more than any other sort of person who seems to be a self-lover... he awards himself what is finest and best of all” (1168b; pp28-30). The idea here is that self-interest should take the first place while the interest of others should take second place. A common analogy for self-interest is the airplane oxygen mask. What do flight attendants tell everyone before the plane takes off? They tell passengers, if there is depressurization in the cabin, oxygen masks will deploy from above. They say, make sure to put on yours first before aiding anyone else. This is not suggested to be something done at the expense of

another passenger in need, but to make sure we are in the best possible position to help ourselves and then help others. To say that some act is self-interested is merely to define a motive. This implies that, one is doing something to benefit oneself rather than to benefit others. But to further say that, the act is selfish is to render a moral judgment which is a bad act rather than a good one. Hence, H. A. Prichard argues that, self-interest is the wrong sort of reason. One does not, for example, think the reason he has a duty to help a drowning child is that helping benefits him (p.26).

Self-sacrifice is morally considered as a right action, it has to do with giving up of one's own interest or wishes in order to help others or advance a cause. Self-sacrifice also involve giving up of something that a person wants for themselves so that others can be helped or protected (Krupp and Maclejewski, 90). This action is morally good, according to Aristotle, only when they do not intentionally frustrate our natural inclinations and one gain more than he loses. Otherwise, they are morally defective. The same applies to scenarios where we sacrifice our own lives (p. 304). The concept of sacrifice tells a trading or giving away something of higher value for lesser worth. This is nothing other than inauthenticity. A life of pretense and later regrets. The possibility of true self-sacrifice without receiving anything in return is completely ruled out.

The Objectivist Ethics

Ethics, as a science, deals with discovering and defining such a code. Most philosophers took the existence of ethics for granted, as a given, or historical fact, and were not concerned with discovering its metaphysical cause or objective validation. Many of them attempted to break the traditional monopoly of mysticism in the field of ethics and, allegedly, to define a rational, scientific, nonreligious morality. To challenge the basic premise of any discipline, one must begin at the beginning. In ethics, one must begin by asking: What are *values*? Why does man need them? “Value” is that which one acts to gain and/or keep.

The concept “value” is not a primary; it presupposes an answer to the question: of value to *whom* and for *what*? It presupposes an entity capable of acting to achieve a goal in the face of an alternative. Where no alternative exists, no goals and no values are possible. An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means—and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated*. An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*. Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward a non-existent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself* that makes the existence of values possible. Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of “value” is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of “life.” To speak of “value” as apart from

“life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible.” In answer to those philosophers who claim that no relation can be established between ultimate ends or values and the facts of reality, let me stress that the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life. Thus, the validation of value judgments is to be achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living entity is, determines what it ought to do. So much for the issue of the relation between “is” and “ought.”

To speak of “value” as apart from “life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible.” Now in what manner does a human being discover the concept of “value”? By what means does he first become aware of the issue of “good or evil” in its simplest form? By means of the physical sensations of *pleasure* or *pain*. The capacity to experience pleasure or pain is innate in a man's body; it is part of his *nature*, part of the kind of entity he is. He has no choice about it, and he has no choice about the standard that determines what will make him experience the physical sensation of pleasure or of pain. What is that standard? *His life*. Man has no automatic code of survival. He has no automatic course of action, no automatic set of values. His senses do not tell him automatically what is good for him or evil, what will benefit his life or endanger it, what goals he should pursue and what means will achieve them, what *values* his life depends on, and what course of action it requires. His own consciousness has to discover the answers to all these questions, but his consciousness will not function *automatically*. Man, the highest living species on this earth; the being whose consciousness has a limitless capacity for gaining knowledge, man is the only living entity born without any guarantee of *remaining* conscious at all. Man's particular distinction from all other living species is the fact that *his* consciousness is *volitional*.

Psychologically, the choice “to think or not” is the choice “to focus or not.” Existentially, the choice “to focus or not” is the choice “to be conscious or not.” Metaphysically, the choice “to be conscious or not” is the choice of life or death. Consciousness, for those living organisms which possess it, is the basic means of survival. For man, the basic means of survival is *reason*. Man cannot survive, as animals do, by the guidance of mere precepts. A sensation of hunger will tell him that he needs food (if he has learned to identify it as “hunger”), but it will not tell him how to obtain his food and it will not tell him what food is good for him or poisonous. He cannot provide for his simplest physical needs without a process of thought. He needs a process of thought to discover how to plant and grow his food or how to make weapons for hunting. His precepts might lead him to a cave, if one is available, but to build the simplest shelter; he needs a process of thought. No precepts and no “instincts” will tell him how to light a fire, how to weave cloth, how to forge tools, how to make a wheel, how to make an airplane, how to perform an appendectomy, how to produce an electric light bulb or an electronic tube or a cyclotron or a box of matches. Yet his life depends on such knowledge

and only a volitional act of his consciousness, a process of thought, can provide it. Man has to initiate it, to sustain it and to bear responsibility for its results. He has to discover how to tell what is true or false and how to correct his own errors; he has to discover how to validate his concepts, his conclusions, his knowledge; he has to discover the rules of thought, *the laws of logic*, to direct his thinking. Man is free to choose not to be conscious, but not free to escape the penalty of unconsciousness: destruction. Man is the only living species that has the power to act as his own destroyer, and that is the way he has acted through most of his history. What, then, are the right goals for man to pursue? What are the values his survival requires? That is the question to be answered by the science of *ethics*. And *this* is why man needs a code of ethics. Man has to be man by choice; he has to hold his life as a value by choice; he has to learn to sustain it by choice; he has to discover the values it requires and practice his virtues by choice. A code of values accepted by choice is a code of morality.” The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics, the standard by which one judges what is good or evil, is *man's life*, or: that which is required for man's survival *qua* man.

The Objectivist ethics holds man's life as the *standard* of value, and *his own life* as the ethical *purpose* of every individual man. The difference between “standard” and “purpose” in this context is as follows: a “standard” is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide a man's choices in the achievement of a concrete, specific purpose. “That which is required for the survival of man *qua* man” is an abstract principle that applies to every individual man. The three cardinal values of the Objectivist ethics (the three values which, together, are the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life) are: Reason, Purpose, Self-Esteem, with their three corresponding virtues: Rationality, Productiveness, Pride. The basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every living human being is an end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others and, therefore, that man must live for his own sake means that the *achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose—the Sunnum Bonum*. To hold one's own life as one's ultimate value, and one's own happiness as one's highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement.

The philosophers who attempted to devise an allegedly rational code of ethics gave mankind nothing but a choice of whims: the “selfish” pursuit of one's own whims (such as the ethics of Nietzsche)—or “selfless” service to the whims of others (such as the ethics of Bentham, Mill, Comte and of all social hedonists, whether they allowed man to include his own whims among the millions of others or advised him to turn himself into a totally selfless “shoo” that seeks to be eaten by others). The *moral cannibalism* of all hedonist and altruist doctrines lies in the premise that the happiness of one man necessitates the injury of another. Today, most people hold this premise as an absolute not to be questioned. And when one speaks of man's right to exist for his own sake, for his own rational self-interest, most people assume automatically that this means his right to sacrifice others. Such an assumption is a confession of their own belief that to injure, enslave, rob or murder others is in man's

self-interest, which he must selflessly renounce.

The Objectivist ethics proudly advocates and upholds *rational selfishness*, which means: the values required for man's survival *qua* man, which means: the values required for *human* survival. 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 sacrifice nor accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value. Take love for instance. To love is to value. Only a rationally selfish man, a man of *self-esteem*, is capable of love because he is the only man capable of holding firm, consistent, uncompromising, unbetray values. The man who does not value himself, cannot value anything or anyone. It is only on the basis of rational selfishness (on the basis of justice) that men can be fit to live together in a free, peaceful, prosperous, benevolent, *rational* society.

Selfishness: A Universal Guilt

To untangle the intellectual confusion involved in this viewpoint, let us consider what facts of reality *give rise* to such an issue as selfishness versus self-sacrifice, or egoism versus altruism, and what the concept of “selfishness” means and entails. The issue of selfishness versus self-sacrifice arises in an *ethical* context. Ethics is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and course of his life. In choosing his actions and goals, man faces constant alternatives. In order to choose, he requires a standard of value—a purpose which his actions are to serve or at which they are to aim. “Value' presupposes an answer to the question: value to whom and for what?” What is to be the goal or purpose of a man's actions? Who is to be the intended *beneficiary* of his actions? Is he to hold, as his primary moral purpose, the achievement of *his own* life and happiness, or should his primary moral purpose be to serve the wishes and needs of *others*? The clash between egoism and altruism lies in their conflicting answers to these questions. Egoism holds that man is an end in himself; altruism holds that man is a means to the ends of others. Egoism holds that, morally, the beneficiary of an action should be the person who acts; altruism holds that, morally, the beneficiary of an action should be someone *other* than the person who acts. To be selfish is to be motivated by concern for one's self-interest.

“Thinking, is to the self-interest of man; the suspension of his consciousness, is not. His values, life, and his choice of goals in the full context of his knowledge, is to the self-interest of man; to act on the impulse of the moment, without regard for his long-range context, is not. To exist as a productive being, is to man's self-interest; to attempt to exist as a parasite, is not. Seeking a life proper to his nature is to man's self-interest; to seek to live as an animal is not.” The selfishness of a man who is willing to die, if necessary, fighting for his freedom, lies in the fact that he is unwilling to go on living in a world where he is no longer able to act on his own judgment, that is, a world where *human* conditions of existence are no longer possible to him. The selfishness or unselfishness of an action is

to be determined objectively. It is not determined by the *feelings* of the person who acts. Just as feelings are not a tool of cognition, *so they are not a criterion in ethics*. Obviously, in order to act, one has to be moved by *some* personal motive; one has to “want,” in *some* sense, to perform the action. The issue of an action's selfishness or unselfishness depends, not on whether or not one wants to perform it, but on *why* one wants to perform it. By what standard was the action chosen? To achieve what goal? If a man proclaimed that he *felt* he would best benefit others by robbing and murdering them, men would not be willing to grant that his actions were altruistic. By the same logic and for the same reasons, if a man pursues a course of blind self-destruction, his *feeling* that he has something to gain by it does not establish his actions as selfish.

Branden supposed, for example, that a son chooses the career he wants by rational standards, but then renounces it in order to please his mother who prefers that he pursues a different career, one that will have more prestige in the eyes of the neighbours. The boy accedes to his mother's wish because he has accepted that such is his moral duty: he believes that his duty as a son consists of placing his mother's happiness above his own, even if he knows that his mother's demand is irrational and even if he knows that he is sentencing himself to a life of misery and frustration. It is absurd for the advocates of the “everyone is selfish” doctrine to assert that since the boy is motivated by the desire to be “virtuous” or to avoid guilt, no self-sacrifice is involved and his action is really selfish. Those who assert that “everyone is selfish” commonly intend their statement as an expression of cynicism and contempt. But the truth is that their statement pays mankind a compliment it does not deserve (59).

Selfishness and Authentic Existence

Having discussed exhaustively, the concept of selfishness, determining its place in authentic existence is necessary to fulfil the aim of this work. But before that is done, what is authentic existence? To be authentic is to be real, genuine, not pretending, living out nature etc. to exist means to be. Hence, authentic existence explains a life that lived genuinely devoid of pretence. A life where one faces reality as it is. It is a life where man takes responsibilities for his existence and allows existence to reveal itself as part of him. Etim affirms this when he said, “one could infer that authenticity regarding man has to do with the issue of living a real and fulfilled human life' (2017: p.60). Socrates conspicuously took a position when he opined that an unexamined life is not worth living. An examined life is a life that Dasein, in Heidegger's term, listens to call of conscience. One of the characterizing features of authentic existence according to Heidegger, is conscience.

Etymologically, conscience is derived from the Latin *conscientia*, which means knowledge. This definition propelled Heidegger's speech thus “In the phenomenon of conscience we find, without further differentiation, that in some way it gives us something to understand” (1962: p.315). It is commonly conceived as the inner voice which speaks decisively on human actions. In this way, Kant regards conscience as the final court of justice. It is through the call of conscience that the Self, which the public had robbed of his identity, in disguise of self-sacrifice, gets brought to himself.

A state of mindlessness is a state of disregard for one's own well-being. To be selfish is to be rational. And to be rational is to understand the principle that each individual ought to live through the reasoning, and by the products, of his own mind. The concepts of selfishness and self-interest are one. The only different is in the terms, but the central idea is the 'Self'. Rather than making a meaning, self-sacrifice is an inauthentic way of existence. In acting for the good of others by denying the self of its own proper existence and regretting later is worse than denying to hurt the self and hurting the other without regrets. Following the meaning of selfishness from the objectivist's perspective, a selfish person lives the most fulfilled and authentic life.

Conclusion

To be selfish is to regard your life as something precious, as something to be passionately embraced, not self-effacingly surrendered. To be selfish is to strive to achieve the best that is possible to you. To be selfish is to remain loyal to your ideals. The word that should identify the behaviour of an honest producer is used instead to identify only the behaviour of an unprincipled parasite. The promoters of altruism are guilty not of an error, but of a fraud, a gigantic distortion in which the very language by which any discussion of the merits of altruism versus egoism could be conducted has been lost. There is no way to debate whether it is proper to live selfishly, as a Howard Roark does, if the concept that ought to refer to the rational, productive, self-reliant individual has been redefined out of existence. Let us strive to be real in our endeavours and dealings with other so as to avoid a latter repercussion.

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