



Selfishness and Self-Love

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Modern culture is pervaded by a taboo on selfishness. It teaches that to be selfish is sinful and that to love others is virtuous. To be sure, this doctrine is not only in flagrant contradiction to the practices of modern society but it also is in opposition to another set of doctrines which assumes that the most powerful and legitimate drive in man is selfishness and that each individual by following this imperative drive also does the most for the common good. The existence of this latter type of ideology does not affect the weight of the doctrines which declare that selfishness is the arch evil and love for others the main virtue. Selfishness, as it is commonly used in these ideologies, is more or less synonymous with self-love. The alternatives are either to love others which is a virtue or to love oneself which is a sin.

This principle has found its classic expression in Calvin's theology. Man is essentially bad and powerless. He can do nothing - absolutely nothing - good on the basis of his own strength or merits. „We are not our own,“ says Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1928, Book III, Chapter 7, § 1, p. 619), „therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions. We are not our own; therefore, let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own; therefore, let us, as far as possible, forget our-

selves and all things that are ours. On the contrary, we are God's; to him, therefore, let us live and die. For, as it is the most devastating pestilence which ruins people if they obey themselves, it is the only haven of salvation not to know or to want anything by oneself but to be guided by God who walks before us.“¹

¹ From „For as it is...“ the translation is mine from the Latin original (J. Calvin, 1838, p. 445). The reason for this shift is that Allen's translation slightly changes the original in the direction of softening the rigidity of Calvin's thought. Allen translates this sentence: „For as compliance with their own inclinations leads men most effectually to ruin, so to place no dependency on our own knowledge or will, but merely to follow the guidance of the Lord, is the only way of safety.“ However, the Latin *sibi ipsis obtemperant* is not equivalent to „follow one's own inclinations“ but „to obey oneself.“ To forbid following one's inclinations has the mild quality of Kantian ethics that man should suppress his natural inclinations and by doing so follow the orders of his conscience. On the other hand, forbidding to obey oneself is a denial of the autonomy of man. The same subtle change of meaning is reached by translating *ita unicus est salutis portus nihil nec sapere, nec velle per se ipsum* „to place no dependence on our knowledge nor will.“ While the formulation of the original straightforwardly contradicts the motto of enlightenment philosophy: *sapere aude* - dare to know, Allen's translation warns only of a dependence on one's own



Man should not only have the conviction of his absolute nothingness. He should do everything to humiliate himself. „For I do not call it humility,“ says Calvin (1928, Chapter 12, § 6, p. 681), „if you suppose that we have anything left... we cannot think of ourselves as we ought to think without utterly despising everything that may be supposed an excellence in us. This humility is unfeigned submission of a mind overwhelmed with a weighty sense of its own misery and poverty; for such is the uniform description of it in the word of God.“

This emphasis on the nothingness and wickedness of the individual implies that there is nothing he should like about himself. This doctrine is rooted in contempt and hatred for oneself. Calvin makes this point very clear; he speaks of „Self-love“ as of a „pest“ (1928, Chapter 7, §4, p. 622).

If the individual finds something in himself „on the strength of which he finds pleasure in himself,“ he betrays this sinful self-love. This fondness for himself will make him sit in judgment over others and despise them. Therefore, to be fond of oneself, to like anything about oneself is one of the greatest imaginable sins. It excludes love for others² and is identical with selfishness.³

There are fundamental differences between Calvin's theology and Kant's philosophy, yet, the basic attitude toward the problem of love for oneself has remained the same. According to Kant, it is

knowledge, a warning which is by far less contradictory to modern thought. I mention these deviations of the translation from the original which I came across accidentally, because they offer a good illustration of the fact that the spirit of an author is „modernized“ and colored - certainly without any intention of doing so - just by translating him.

² It should be noted, however, that even love for one's neighbor, while it is one of the fundamental doctrines of the New Testament, has not been given a corresponding weight by Calvin. In blatant contradiction to the New Testament Calvin says (1928, Chapter 24, § 1, p. 531): „For what the schoolmen advance concerning the priority of charity to faith and hope, is a mere reverie of a distempered imagination...“

³ Despite Luther's emphasis on the spiritual freedom of the individual, his theology, different as it is in many ways from Calvin's, is pervaded by the same conviction of man's basic powerlessness and nothingness.

a virtue to want the happiness of others, while to want one's own happiness is ethically „indifferent,“ since it is something which the nature of man is striving for and a natural striving cannot have positive ethical sense. (Cf. I. Kant, 1909, esp. Part I, Book I, Chapter I, § VIII, Remark II, p. 126:) Kant admits that one must not give up one's claims for happiness; under certain circumstances it can even be a duty to be concerned with one's happiness; partly because health, wealth, and the like, can be means which are necessary to fulfill one's duty, partly because the lack of happiness - poverty - can seduce a person from fulfilling his duty. (Cf. *ibid.* Part I, Book I, Chapter III, p. 186.) But love for oneself, striving for one's own happiness, can never be a virtue. As an ethical principle, the striving for one's own happiness „is the most objectionable one, not merely because it is false,... but because the springs it provides for morality are such as rather undermine it and destroy its sublimity...“ (*ibid.* - in particular *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*; second section, p. 61.) Kant differentiates in egotism, self-love, philautia - a benevolence for oneself; and arrogance - the pleasure in oneself. „Rational self-love“ must be restricted by ethical principles, the pleasure in oneself must be battered down and the individual must come to feel humiliated in comparing himself with the sanctity of moral laws. (*ibid.* - in particular Part I, Book I, Chapter III, p. 165.) The individual should find supreme happiness in the fulfillment of his duty. The realization of the moral principle - and, therefore, of the individual's happiness - is only possible in the general whole, the nation, the state. Yet, „the welfare of the state - *salus rei publicae suprema lex est* - is not identical with the welfare of the citizens and their happiness.“⁴

In spite of the fact that Kant shows a greater respect for the integrity of the individual than did Calvin or Luther, he states that even under the most tyrannical government the individual has no right

⁴ I. Kant, 1907, in particular *Der Rechtslehre Zweiter Teil*, 1. Abschnitt, § 49. p. 124. I translate from the German text, since this part is omitted in the English translation of *The Metaphysics of Ethics* by I. W. Semple, Edinburgh 1871.



to rebel and must be punished no less than with death if he threatens the sovereign. (Cf. I. Kant, 1907, p. 126.) Kant emphasizes the native propensity for evil in the nature of man (cf. I. Kant, 1934, esp. Book I), for the suppression of which the moral law, the categorical imperative, is necessary unless man should become a beast and human society should end in wild anarchy.

In discussing Calvin's and Kant's systems, their emphasis on the nothingness of man has been stressed. Yet, as already suggested, they also emphasize the autonomy and dignity of the individual, and this contradiction runs through their writings. In the philosophy of the enlightenment period the individual's claims and happiness have been emphasized much more strongly by others than by Kant, for instance by Helvetius. This trend in modern philosophy has found an extreme expression by Stirner and Nietzsche. In the way that they often phrase the problem - though not necessarily in their real meaning - they share one basic premise of Calvin and Kant: that love for others and love for oneself are alternatives. But in contradiction to those authors, they denounce love for others as weakness and self-sacrifice and postulate egotism, selfishness, and self-love - they too confuse the issue by not clearly differentiating between these phenomena - as virtue. Thus Stirner says: „Here, egoism, selfishness must decide, not the principle of love, not love motives like mercy, gentleness, good-nature, or even justice and equity - for *iustitia* too is a phenomenon of love, a product of love: love knows only sacrifice and demands self-sacrifice.“ (M. Stirner, 1912, p. 339.)

The kind of love denounced by Stirner is the masochistic dependence which makes the individual a means for achieving the purposes of somebody or something outside himself. With this conception of love could he scarcely avoid a formulation which postulated ruthless egotism as a goal. The formulation is, therefore, highly polemical and overstates the point. The positive principle with which Stirner was concerned⁵ was directed against an attitude

which had run through Christian theology for many centuries - and which was vivid in the German idealism which was passing in his time; namely, to bend the individual to submit to and find his center in a power and a principle outside of himself. To be sure, Stirner was not a philosopher of the stature of Kant or Hegel, yet he had the courage to make a radical rebellion against that side of idealistic philosophy which negated the concrete individual and thus helped the absolute state to retain its oppressive power over the individual. Although there is no comparison between the depth and scope of the two philosophers, Nietzsche's attitude in many respects is similar to that of Stirner. Nietzsche also denounces love and altruism as the expressions of weakness and self-negation. For Nietzsche, the quest for love is typical of slaves who cannot fight for what they want and, therefore, try to get it through „love.“ Altruism and love for mankind is thus a sign of degeneration. (Cf. F. Nietzsche, 1910, in particular stanza 246, 362, 369, 373 and 728.) For him, it is the essence of a good and healthy aristocracy that is ready to sacrifice countless people for its interests without having a guilty conscience. Society should be a „foundation and scaffolding by means of which a select class of beings may be able to elevate themselves to their higher duties, and in general to their higher existence.“ (F. Nietzsche, 1907, stanza 258, p. 225.) Many quotations could be added to document this spirit of sadism, contempt and brutal egotism. This side of Nietzsche has often been understood as the philosophy of Nietzsche. Is this true; is this the „real“ Nietzsche?

To answer this question would require a detailed analysis of his work which cannot be attempted here. There are various reasons which made Nietzsche express himself in the sense men-

1912, p. 426.) Engels has clearly seen the onesidedness of Stirner's formulations and has attempted to overcome the false alternative between love for oneself and love for others. In a letter to Marx in which he discusses Stirner's book, Engels writes, „If, however, the concrete and real individual is the true basis for our 'human' man, it is self-evident that egotism - of course not only Stirner's egotism of reason, but also the egotism of the heart - is the basis for our love of man.“ (Letter dated 19. 11. 1844, in: MEGA III, 1, p. 7.)

⁵ One of his positive formulations, for example, is: „But how does one use life? In using it up like the candle one burns... Enjoyment of life is using life up.“ (M. Stirner,



tioned above. First of all, as in the case of Stirner, his philosophy is a reaction - a rebellion - against the philosophical tradition of subordinating the empirical individual to a power and a principle outside of himself. His tendency to overstatements shows this reactive quality. Second, there were traits in Nietzsche's personality, a tremendous insecurity and anxiety, which explain that, and why he had sadistic impulses which led him to those formulations. Yet, these trends in Nietzsche do not seem to me to be the „essence“ of his personality nor the corresponding views the essence of his philosophy. Finally Nietzsche shared some of the naturalistic ideas of his time as they were expressed in the materialistic-biologistic philosophy, for which the concepts of the physiological roots of psychic phenomena and the „survival of the fittest“ were characteristic. This interpretation does not do away with the fact that Nietzsche shared the view that there is a contradiction between love for others and love for oneself. Yet, it is important to notice that Nietzsche's views contain the nucleus from development of which this wrong dichotomy can be overcome. The „love“ which he attacks is one which is rooted not in one's own strength, but in one's own weakness. „Your neighbor love is your bad love for yourselves. You flee into your neighbor from yourselves and would fain make a virtue thereof. But I fathom your 'unselfishness'.“ He states explicitly, „You cannot stand yourselves and you do not love yourselves sufficiently.“ (F. Nietzsche, s.a., p. 75.) The individual has for Nietzsche „an enormously great significance“ (F. Nietzsche, 1910, stanza 785). The „strong“ individual is the one who has „true kindness, nobility, greatness of soul, which does not give in order to take, which does not want to excell by being kind; - 'waste' as type of true kindness, wealth of the person as a premise.“ (L. c., stanza 935.)

He expresses the same thought also in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: „The one goeth to his neighbor because he seeketh himself, the other one because would he fain lose himself.“ (F. Nietzsche, s. a., p. 76.)

The essence of these views is: love is a phenomenon of abundance, its premise is the strength of the individual who can give. Love is affirm-

tion, „it seeketh to create what is loved!“ (L. c., p. 102.) To love another person is only a virtue if it springs from this inner strength, but it is detestable if it is the expression of the basic inability to be oneself. (Cf. F. Nietzsche, 1910, stanza 820; F. Nietzsche, 1911, stanza 35; F. Nietzsche, 1991a, stanza 2; F. Nietzsche, Nachlaß, pp. 63-64.)

However, the fact remains that Nietzsche left the problem of the relationship between self-love and love for others as unsolved antinomy, even if by interpreting him one may surmise in what direction his solution would have been found. (Compare the important paper by Max Horkheimer, 1936, which deals with the problem of egotism in modern history.)

The doctrine that selfishness is the arch-evil that one has to avoid and that to love oneself excludes loving others is by no means restricted to theology and philosophy. It is one of the stock patterns used currently in home, school, church, movies, literature, and all the other instruments of social suggestion. „Don't be selfish“ is a sentence which has been impressed upon millions of children, generation after generation. It is hard to define what exactly it means. Consciously, most parents connect with it the meaning not to be egotistical, inconsiderate, without concern for others. Factually, they generally mean more than that. „Not to be selfish“ implies not to do what one wishes, to give up one's own wishes for the sake of those in authority; i.e., the parents, and later the authorities of society. „Don't be selfish,“ in the last analysis, has the same ambiguity that we have seen in Calvinism. Aside from its obvious implication, it means, „don't love yourself,“ „don't be yourself,“ but submit your life to something more important than yourself, be it an outside power or the internalization of that power as „duty.“ „Don't be selfish“ becomes one of the most powerful ideological weapons in suppressing spontaneity and the free development of personality. Under the pressure of this slogan one is asked for every sacrifice and for complete submission: only those aims are „unselfish“ which do not serve the individual for his own sake but for the sake of somebody or something outside of him.

This picture, we must repeat, is in a certain sense one-sided. Beside the doctrine that one