

Egoism, Altruism, and the Challenge to Morality

Chapter 3.1 & 3.2

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Mondaville's Critique of Morality

Chapter 2 Recap

- Morality must be freely chosen, not just obeyed like law — it needs to be worth choosing.
- **Mandeville's Satire:** *The Fable of the Bees* (1723) – “Private Vices, Public Benefits”
- Society flourished when individuals pursued personal gain, not moral virtue.
- When people turned “honest,” society collapsed into stagnation.
- **Spontaneous Order:**
 - Personal ambition and vice can unintentionally produce beneficial social outcomes.
 - Example: A market economy – driven by self-interest, not altruism, yet benefits everyone.
- **Mandeville's Provocation:**
 - Those who promote morality often depend on immorality (e.g., doctors need disease, priests need sin).
 - Challenges the assumption that moral altruism improves society.

Why be moral?

- Mandeville raises a **deeper egoistic challenge**: *Even if we agree on moral rules, why should I follow them?*
- If morality serves mostly the interests of hypocrites, is it even worth practicing?
- **Egoist's Perspective:**
 - Life should be about pursuing personal enjoyment and fulfillment.
 - Why prioritize others' needs over our own?
- These questions aren't just selfish—they introduce philosophical egoism.
- Sets the stage for a debate between egoism and altruism.

Egoism Vs Altruism

Egoism:

- Latin “Ego” meaning I
- Need reason to do things that aren’t in own self interest
 - Reasons are grounded in personal needs and desires
- Does not necessarily mean you don’t care about others, just that you caring about others is grounded in your own self interest

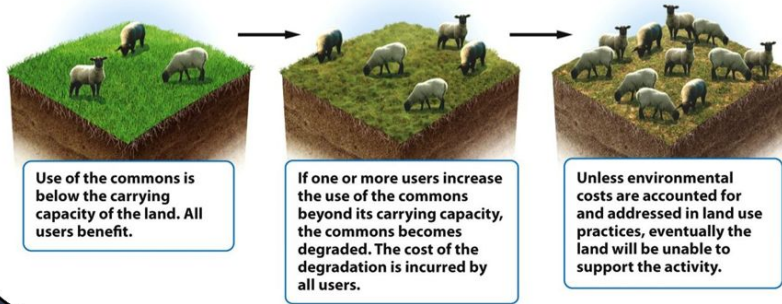
Altruism:

- Latin “Alter” meaning other
- Says people’s needs and desires should matter to everyone
- Impersonal
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Tragedy of the Commons

- One possible argument against unrestrained egoism could be the *Tragedy of the Commons*, a situation where individuals all acting in their self interest deplete and eventually ruin a shared resource
- For example, in the original proposition by WF Lloyd, he talks about a situation in which cattle herders are allotted a patch of grass for their cows to graze on. It's in each herder's self interest to have as many cows as possible to maximize the benefit of the patch, but if there are too many cows overgrazing can occur and ruin the patch.

The Tragedy of the Commons



Source: <https://www.sustainable-environment.org.uk/Earth/Commons.php>

Source: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1972412>

Philosophical Egoism vs. Selfishness

Selfishness:

- character trait where individuals seek comfort and satisfaction for one's self before others
- ex. taking the last remaining strawberry, largest glass of wine, the best seat

Philosophical Egoism:

- reason-based doctrine - motivation must be tied to personal interest
- With personal interests and desires, you can care and help others if they matter to you personally
- It can look like altruism although the personal motivation is egoistic

The Difference:

- selfishness focuses on prioritizing one's own self, while philosophical egoism allows one to care for others if they personally matter to them

Key Insights of Egoism

- Egoism is about motivation, not selfishness
- You can care for others if they personally matter to us
- It may appear altruistic but is influenced by self-interest
- People don't need moral reasons to pursue their desires and self-interest
- Egoism prioritizes self-interest, conflicting with morality

What is Psychological Egoism?

- Psychological Egoism says people only ever do what they want to do. People are always acting for their own interests and nobody is truly selfless.
- Helping someone could be considered a selfless act. However from the psychological egoist perspective, if helping that person conflicted with your own desires, you would never help that person to begin with.
- When confronted with counter examples like rebels staying loyal in torture, egoists argue that the rebel “wants” to remain loyal even if it means death and is not acting selflessly.

Applications

- Textbook Example: On your way to the theatre you come across a road side accident and there are people in need of help. The moralist would say stop and help, but the egoist would say leave or you won't make it to the movie.
- Low stake example
- My Example: Suppose you are a doctor with a steady career but you see a certain area become war torn with no regard for civilian casualty. The region is in dire need and you happen to be a trauma surgeon who works in the ER. Do you go to help the war torn civilians even if you risk death?
- Moralist and Egoist?

Possible Rebuttals to Psychological Egoism

- Imagine you are a rebel being tortured
- You decide to confess to your tormentors, because it is in your self-interest to minimise pain

Possible Rebuttals to Psychological Egoism

- Imagine you are a rebel being tortured
- You decide **not** to confess to your tormentors, because it is in your self-interest to die a martyr

Possible Rebuttals to Psychological Egoism

- Imagine you are a rebel being tortured
- Stop the pain or die a martyr?
- Both are in your self-interest???

Summary & Conclusion

- Mandeville challenges the assumption that morality is inherently beneficial.
- Egoism offers a serious challenge: Why prioritize others over self-interest?
- Psychological egoism attempts to explain all actions as self-motivated—but faces strong counterarguments.
- The debate reveals the complex motivations behind human behavior.
- Raises an ongoing philosophical question:

Is morality about doing what's right—or just what works?