Egoism and Moral Scepticism – James Rachels

Review Questions:

1. Explain the legend of Gyges. What questions about morality are raised by the story?

The legend of Gyges is all about a shepherd who found a ring. The great thing about the ring is that when you wear it, you cannot be seen by anyone else. One day, the shepherd went to the Royal Palace wearing the ring. Being invisible to everyone, he killed the king and seduced the queen to be able to get the throne.

The questions about morality that were raised by story are how will the so-called virtuous man behave, why shoudn’t a man simply do what he pleases, and what reason is there for him to continue being “moral” when it is clearly not to his own advantage to do so.

1. Distinguish between psychological and ethical egoism.

Psychological egoism is a view where all men are seen as selfish in everything that they do. They are only motivated to do something because they think that what they do will benefit them. Otherwise, they will not do it. On the other hand, ethical egoism believes that whatever men does, they don’t have any obligations to do anything except their own interest. They also don’t care about the effect to others, what they are doing is making them happy.

1. Rachels discusses two arguements for psychological egoism. What are these arguments, and how does he reply to them?

These two arguments are describing one person’s action as selfish and another person’s action as unselfish and so-called unselfish actions always produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the agent. In the first argument, Rachels replied to it saying that people never voluntarily do something except what they want to do. He also said that we have a set of actions that we want don’t want to do but we are forced to do it because we want to achieve it. In the second argument, he said that if we have a positive attitude towards the attainment of the goal, then we conclude that we have derive satisfaction from attaining that goal.

1. What three commonplace confusions does Rachels detect in the thesis of psychological egoism?

The three commonplace confucsions that Rachels detect in the thesis of psychological egoism are the confusion of selfishness with self-interest, the assumption that every action is done either from self-interest or from other regarding motives and the assumption that a concern for one’s own welfare is incompatible with any genuine concern for the welfare of others.

1. State the argument for saying that ethical egoism is inconsistent. Why doesn’t Rachels accept this argument?

The argument for saying that ethical egoism is inconsistent is “To say that any action or policy of action is right (or that it ought to be adopted) entails that it is right for anyone in the same sort of circumstances. Rachels doesn’t accept this argument because he believes that there is no way to maintain the doctrine of ethical egoism as a consistent view about how we ought to act. We will fall into inconsistency whenever we try.

1. According to Rachels, why shoudn’t we hurt others, and why should we help others? How can egoist reply?

We shoudn’t hurt others so that other people would not be hurt and we should help others so that other people would be benefited. The egoist can reply by answering it indirectly.

Discussion Questions:

1. Has Rachels answered the question raised by Glaucon, namely, “Why be moral?” If so, what exactly is his answer?

Assumptions underlying our moral practice should not be confused with particular judgements made within the practice.

1. Are genuine egoists rare, as Rachels claims? Is it a fact that most people care about others, even people they don’t know?

Not really and I don’t think most people care bout others even people they don’t know.

1. Suppose we define ethical altruism as the view that one should always act for the benefit of others and never in one’s own self-interest. Is such a view immoral or not?

It is an immoral act, you should atleast have your own self-interest.