Early Modern
Moral Philosophy

Lecture 2: Egoism

§1. The challenges of egoism

T1 ‘Why should one tell the truth if it’s to one’s advantage to tell a lie? …Aged about eight or nine, [Wittgenstein] paused in a doorway to consider the question. Finding no satisfactory answer, he concluded that there was, after all, nothing wrong with lying under the circumstances.’


Am I morally required to tell the truth if it’s in my interest to lie…?

Am I rationally required to tell the truth if it’s in my interest to lie…?

*Ethical Egoism*

We are *morally* required to do whatever is in our own interest.

*Rational Egoism*

We are *rationally* required to do whatever is in our own interest.

*Psychological Egoism*

People always do whatever they believe is in their own interest.

*The Rationality of Morality*

We are rationally required to do whatever we are morally required to do.

*The Dualism of Practical Reason*

We are sometimes morally required to do what is not in our own interest.

If Rational Egoism is true then we have to give up either *The Rationality of Morality* or *The Dualism of Practical Reason*. 
People always do whatever they believe is in their own interest.

Somebody is virtuous only if they sometimes do what they do not believe is in their own interest.

Nobody is virtuous.

§2. Hobbes

‘…no man giveth, but with the intention of good to himself; because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good.’

(Leviathan, Chapter 15, p.105)

‘The Foole hath sayd in his heart, there is no such thing as Justice… seriously alleaging, that every mans conservation, and contentment, being committed to his own care, there could be no reason, why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore also to make, or not to make; keep, or not keep Covenants, was not against Reason, when it conducd to ones benefit. He does not therein deny, that there be Covenants… and that such breach of them may be called Injustice, and the observance of them Justice: but he questioneth, whether Injustice, taking away the feare of God (for the same Foole hath said in his heart there is no God,) may not sometimes stand with that Reason, which dictateth to every man his own good…’

(Leviathan, Chapter 15, p.101)

The Foole’s argument…

There is no God.

Unless there is a God, it is sometimes in our interest not to do what we are morally required to do.

We are rationally required to do whatever is in our own interest.

We are sometimes rationally required not to do what we are morally required to do.

‘He…that breaketh his Covenant, and consequently declareth that he thinks he may with reason do so cannot be received into any Society, that unites themselves for Peace and Defence, but by the errour of them that receive him.’

(Leviathan, Chapter 15, p.102)

§3. Shaftesbury

‘…according to a known way of reasoning on self-interest, that which is of a social kind in us, should of right be abolished… Thus kindness of every sort… and, in short, all natural affection should be industriously suppressed… that, by this means, there might be nothing remaining in us… which might stand in
opposition to a steady and deliberate pursuit of the most narrowly confined self-interest.’

(*Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit, p.206*)

T6 ‘…to have the natural affections (such as are founded in love, complacency, good-will…) is to have the chief means and power of self-enjoyment: and… to want them is certain misery and ill.’

(*Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit, p.215*)

P1 It is in our interest to cultivate our moral sentiments.
P2 We are rationally required to do whatever is in our own interest.
C We are rationally required to cultivate our moral sentiments.

Why accept P1…?

P1 If I am enjoying mild psychological pleasure, I can endure extreme psychical pain.
P2 If I am enduring mild psychological pain, I cannot enjoy extreme physical pleasure.
C1 Psychological pain/pleasure is much more intense than physical pain/pleasure.
P3 Our moral sentiments are either identical to or the causes of psychological pleasures.
P4 It is in our interest to cultivate the most intense pleasures and their causes.
C2 It is in our interest to cultivate our moral sentiments.

T7 ‘To assure one’s own happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one’s condition… could easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty.’ (Kant, *Groundwork*, p.54).

§4. Psychological egoism and Butler’s stone

T11 ‘An honest farmer will tell you, that he studies the preservation and happiness of his children, and loves them without any design of good to himself.’

(Frances Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning Moral Good and Evil*, p.279)

T12 ‘The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis is, that, as it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions, there is required the highest stretch of philosophy to establish so extraordinary a paradox…’

(David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p.298)

Both Hutcheson and Hume argue that *Psychological Egoism* conflicts with common sense…
Psychological Hedonism

People only desire their own pleasure.

T13 ‘That all particular appetites and passions are towards external things themselves, distinct from the pleasure arising from them, is manifested from hence; that there could not be this pleasure, were it not for that prior suitableness between the object and the passion: there could be no enjoyment or delight from one thing more than another, from eating food more from swallowing a stone, if there were not an affection or appetite to one thing more than another.’

(Joseph Butler, Fifteen Sermons, p.415)

Eating food gives me more pleasure than swallowing a stone. My desire to eat food is stronger than my desire to swallow a stone. Which fact explains the other…?

P1 Eating food gives me more pleasure than swallowing a stone because my desire to eat food is stronger than my desire to swallow a stone.

P2 If Psychological Hedonism is true, my desire to eat food is stronger than my desire to swallow a stone because eating food gives me more pleasure than swallowing a stone.

C Psychological Hedonism is false.

§5. Mandeville

T7 ‘All untaught animals are only solicitous of pleasing themselves, and naturally follow the bent of their own inclinations, without considering the good or harm that from their being pleased will accrue to others.’

(Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue, p.263)

T8 ‘…the first rudiments of morality… were chiefly contrived that the ambitious might reap the more benefit from, and govern vast numbers of them with the greatest ease and security…[what] first put man upon crossing his appetites and subduing his dearest inclinations [was] the skilful management of wary politicians.’

(Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue, p.267-269)

Politicians (and philosophers) have used the ‘bewitching engine of flattery’ to persuade us that we are rationally required to do what we are morally required to do even when this is not in our own interest. So we are in the grip of false consciousness and they are guilty of hypocrisy.
Bibliography