§1. The challenge 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.’


*Ethical Egoism*

We have a moral obligation to $\varphi$ if and only if it is in our interest to $\varphi$.

*Rational Egoism*

We have a reason to $\varphi$ if and only if it is in our interest to $\varphi$.

*Psychological Egoism*

We can $\varphi$ if and only if it is in our interest to $\varphi$.

The first challenge...

P1 There are cases where we have a moral obligation to $\varphi$, but it is not in our interest to $\varphi$.

P2 We have a reason to $\varphi$ if and only if it is in our interest to $\varphi$.

P3 If we have a moral obligation to $\varphi$, then we have a reason to $\varphi$.

C There are cases where we have a reason to $\varphi$, but we don’t have a reason to $\varphi$.

The second challenge...

P1 There are cases where we have a moral obligation to $\varphi$, but it is not in our interest to $\varphi$.

P2 We can $\varphi$ if and only if it is in our interest to $\varphi$.

P3 We have a moral obligation to $\varphi$ only if we can $\varphi$.

C There are cases where we have a moral obligation to $\varphi$, but we don’t have a moral obligation to $\varphi$. 
§2. Hobbes and Shaftesbury

T2  ‘...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, p.68)

T3  ‘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 conduced 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)

The Foole's argument...

P1  We have a reason to $\varphi$ if and only if it is in our interest to $\varphi$.
P2  We have a moral obligation to keep our covenants.
P3  Unless there is a God, there are cases where it is in our interest to break our covenants.
P4  There is no God.
C  There are cases when we have a reason not to do what we have a moral obligation to do.

T4  ‘This specious reasoning is nevertheless false... either where one of the parties has performed already; or where there is a Power to make him performe; there is the question whether it be against reason, that is, against the benefit to the other to performe, or not. And I say it is not against reason... 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)

P1  Either we are in the state of nature or we are in civil society.
P2  If we are in civil society and we break our covenants, we will be punished by the sovereign.
P3  If we are in the state of nature and we break our covenants, we will not be able to leave the state of nature.
P4  It is in our interest not to be punished by the sovereign, and it is in our interest to be able to leave the state of nature.
C  It is not in our interest to break our covenants.
‘...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)

‘...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)

§3. Mandeville and Balguy

‘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)

‘...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)

We believe in the authority of morality. Why? Because we have been persuaded of it by politicians (and philosophers). Why have politicians (and philosophers) persuaded us of the authority of morality? Because it is in their interest to persuade us of this. Cf. ‘...justice is nothing other than what is advantage for the stronger...’ (Thrasymachus in Book 1 of Plato’s Republic)

‘The internal reasons of things are the supreme law, inducing the strongest obligation, and affecting all intelligent beings... To suppose reasonable beings unconcerned with the reasons of things, is to suppose them reasonable and unreasonable at the same time. The reasons of things are to men, in respect of practice, what evidence is in speculation.’

(John Balguy, Foundation of Moral Goodness, p.450)

’[Hutcheson] wants to be informed what are the motives, inducements, or exciting reasons for the choice of virtue, and what the justifying reasons of our approbation of it... What is the reason exciting a man to the choice of a
virtuous action? I answer, his very approbation of it is itself a sufficient reason, wherever it is not overruled by another more powerful... But why then do we approve? Or what justifies our approval of it? I answer in one word, necessity. The same necessity which compels men to assent to what is true, forces them to approve what is right and fit.

(John Balguy, Foundation of Moral Goodness, p.453)

§4. Psychological egoism

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. To the most careless observer there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity; such affections as love, friendship, compassion, gratitude.’

(David Hume, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals)

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)

Bibliography