

## QUINN ON ETHICAL EGOISM

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Warren Quinn in his recent article, "Egoism as an Ethical System," presents yet another attempt at demonstrating that ethical egoism cannot possibly be a morality.<sup>1</sup> Ethical egoism (or simply egoism) is that normative view which claims that each and every person has a moral obligation to perform an act X, if and only if X is in that person's (the agent's) own best interest. Quinn himself uses the following equivalent definition of egoism: "Morally speaking, everyone ought always to act so as to maximize his or her self-interest; and any practical choice that does not affect one's self-interest is morally indifferent" (p. 458). While this is not the only way one might define egoism, it is the most reasonable way of defining egoism if it is to be a viable candidate for a moral code of action.

Quinn's argument as to why egoism cannot possibly be a morality can be stated as follows:

- 1) Morality contains impersonal approbatives and thus is subject to P3 and P4.
- 2) P3. If from the point of view of an impersonal System S it is good that p, then there is an S-consideration in favor of helping to bring p about which applies to everyone able to do so.
- 3) P4. It is good from the point of view of an impersonal system S that one do what, all things considered, one S-ought to do.
- 4) From P3 and P4 it follows: (3') that a person A ought, morally speaking, to perform a given action is a moral consideration in favor of any other person B who is able, helping to bring it about that A does so.
- 5) (3') is, however, incompatible with egoism as defined above. The fact that A is performing an act which A, morally speaking, ought to perform is not a moral consideration for

everyone else helping A to perform that obligation according to egoism. Indeed, egoism may even oblige another person B to prevent A from performing that obligation if such a prevention is in B's best interest. Consequently, egoism cannot possibly be a morality.

The only objection I have to the preceding argument concerns the claim that morality contains impersonal approbatives. If a moral action guide must contain impersonal approbatives, then I believe the remainder of Quinn's argument is sound, and he has indeed demonstrated that egoism cannot possibly be a morality. However, I will attempt to demonstrate in this paper that Quinn does not establish that morality must contain such impersonal approbatives.

According to Quinn, "Value judgments predicating 'good,' 'bad,' 'neutral,' 'better than,' 'worse than,' or 'equal in value to' of states of affairs (e.g., that it is good that Jones keep his promise) will be called approbatives" (p. 462). An impersonal approbative such as 'It is good that p' implies that p is good in and of itself regardless of its relation or possible benefit to some individual. On the other hand, a personal approbative such as 'It is good for X that p' implies that p is good because of its positive benefit in relation to X. In more traditional philosophical jargon, we could say that impersonal approbatives involve objective or intrinsic value judgments, while personal approbatives involve subjective or relativistic value judgments. The important question is, does morality necessarily involve impersonal approbatives as Quinn suggests?

Before considering Quinn's own defense as to why morality does presuppose impersonal approbatives, I would like to point out the similarity of Quinn's argument against egoism to one given by G. E. Moore.<sup>2</sup> Egoism, according to Moore, is the view that each person's happiness is the sole good, and that one's actions are good only in so far as they are a means to attaining one's own happiness. Moore regards this view as self-contradictory because it implies that there are a number of sole goods, or that there is a distinction between "my own good" as the sole good and the "good of others." However, according to Moore, if a thing is morally good it is good in an intrinsic or objective sense, and it simply does not make sense to say of this objective good that it is my good or his good. (To put this in another way, in Quinn's terminology, if something is a moral approbative it is an impersonal approbative, not a personal approbative.) The egoist, then, must state his

position as, "Each person's good is the sole good." This, however, as Moore correctly points out, is a contradiction since how, assuming there is more than one egoist in existence, can each egoist's good be the sole good. Since egoism is self-contradictory it can not possibly be a morality.

The only way for an egoist to avoid Moore's charge of contradiction is to reject his intrinsic or objective view of good. By so doing, the egoist could without contradiction state his position as, "Each person's good is his own good," and not the sole good as Moore's view of good would demand. Good, according to the egoist, would be relative to each individual, and there would be as many goods as there are egoists with no one thing being good in an intrinsic or objective sense--independent of its relation to some particular egoist. Just as the egoist can avoid Moore's refutation by adopting a relativistic view of good, in a similar way I think he can avoid Quinn's refutation by adopting only personal approbatives. Quinn, however, suggests that morality presupposes impersonal approbatives, not personal approbatives. As I mentioned earlier, if this claim can be demonstrated then egoism will be ruled out as a morality, just as it would be if egoism were forced to accept Moore's intrinsic or objective use of "good." I will now turn to Quinn's argument as to why morality must contain impersonal approbatives.

Quinn himself raises the question of whether an egoist can escape the force of his argument by simply omitting impersonal concepts from his theory. He answers this question in the negative for two reasons: (1) an egoist needs the concept of moral rightness, and (2) the concept of moral rightness presupposes that of impersonal moral goodness. While I am inclined to agree with (1), I do not agree that the concept of moral rightness necessarily presupposes an impersonal, objective, or non-relativistic concept of good.<sup>3</sup> Quinn's reason for saying that moral rightness cannot be defined in terms of a personal, subjective, or relativistic concept of good, is that there is no such thing as a personal moral approbative or a personal concept of moral goodness. However, the only argument he provides for this claim is based on the ordinary use of moral language. This argument might be pieced together as follows:

- 1) P5. Ordinary morality is an impersonal value system. The surface evidence for P5 consists in the fact that moral discourse contains the apparently nonrelational terms "good from the moral point of view that p," "bad from the moral point of view that p," etc.

- 2) If egoism were correct, and morality contained only personal approbatives, then statements like "good from the moral point of view that p" would all have to mean "it is good for me (the speaker) that p."
- 3) But surely "good from the moral point of view that p" as it is used in ordinary moral discourse does not mean "it is good for me (the speaker) that p."
- 4) But without the success of some such reduction, the claim that "good from the moral point of view" functions in ordinary thought as a personal approbative cannot be maintained. The term gives every appearance of being impersonal, and this impression is not dispelled by any of these efforts to explain its impersonality away. All things considered, therefore, there seems no good reason to regard the ordinary moral scheme as other than impersonal.

While it is certainly true that an egoist will have to employ a concept of good that is different from that reflected in the ordinary use of that concept, I fail to see why it follows that an egoist cannot make such a move. From the fact that ordinary moral language reflects the use of an impersonal concept of good, it does not follow that there can be no such thing as a personal concept of moral goodness as Quinn seems to imply. For example, the egoist might admit that his use of "moral goodness" is not the typical, ordinary use of that expression. Nonetheless, he might argue that his use represents a deeper and more correct analysis of that expression than that which is reflected in ordinary language. The egoist might claim that ordinary usage only reflects a common sensical understanding of morality, and common sense is simply not sophisticated enough to get at the foundations of morality or the "real" meaning of moral concepts. The egoist might point out further, that it is not only in the case of egoism and morality that philosophers have espoused views which were contrary to ordinary, common sensical beliefs. For the above reasons, merely pointing out that an egoist's use of "moral goodness" is inconsistent with the ordinary use of that expression, is not sufficient to demonstrate the impossibility of such a use.

Quinn correctly points out that even the most ardent egoist cannot claim that "It is good from the moral point of view that you keep your promise to the dead man even though you will not benefit from so doing" is self-contradictory given the ordinary moral usage of "good."

However, an egoist would be quick to add that Quinn has only demonstrated that "It is good from the moral point of view that p means that it is good for X that p" is inconsistent with ordinary usage, not that it is self-contradictory. And, so long as the egoist can make use of his personal concept of good, or personal approbatives, he can quite consistently define his other moral concepts such as moral rightness in conjunction with these personal approbatives. For example, according to egoism, the fact that it is good for A that p would not provide a reason for everyone helping A to bring about p, as an impersonal view of good would as stated in Quinn's P3. So too, the fact that a person A ought, morally speaking, to perform a given act would not, according to egoism, be a moral consideration in favor of any other person B who is able, helping to bring it about that A does so, as is suggested in Quinn's (3'). Such egoistic views are totally consistent given a personal, subjective, or relativistic view of good. Since Quinn has not demonstrated that the option of personal approbatives in morality is closed to the egoist, I think he has failed to demonstrate that egoism cannot possibly be a morality.

I would like to add one final comment concerning any argument against egoism based on the ordinary usage of such moral expressions as "good," "right," or "ought." I do not believe an appeal to ordinary moral language can ever be used to demonstrate the logical impossibility of egoism being a morality. The inherent weakness in these ordinary language arguments against egoism concerns the fact that the egoist does not use moral language in a totally unordinary way. The egoist, no less than the non-egoist, uses an expression like "morally good" in an evaluative sense, and an expression like "morally obliged" in a prescriptive sense. The only difference between the egoist and non-egoist in their use of moral language has to do with the content or reference of their evaluative and prescriptive expressions. These differences, however, reflect substantive moral disagreements between the egoist and the non-egoist, and they are not the type of questions which can be resolved by an investigation of ordinary language. If the egoist were using a word like "good" in a non-evaluative way, then perhaps an appeal to ordinary language would be decisive.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Warren Quinn, "Egoism as an Ethical System," Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 71, No. 14, Aug. 15, 1974, pp. 456-72.

<sup>2</sup>G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 96-9.

<sup>3</sup>I am leaving aside another possible objection to (2); namely, a deontological egoist might argue that his concept of moral rightness does not presuppose any concept of goodness--personal or impersonal. This type of objection could also be used against Moore's argument.