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# Possibility of conjunction between altruism and egoism

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Both altruism and egoism are two types of motivations for action. An altruistic action is performed to benefit the other, whereas egoistic action is performed to benefit oneself. The strict definition of altruism states that an action ceases to be altruistic if the actor receives the benefit of his action as a consequence directly or indirectly. On the other hand, egoism particularly *psychological egoism* presupposes that all actions, whether performed for oneself or the other, are always self-interested in nature and hence, egoistic. Given the dichotomous existence between the two types of actions, which on many occasions create conceptual misapprehension, a different alternative will be explored. The new inquiry will throw light on the possibility that we commit some kind of motivational extremism on a conceptual level. It will further be argued that altruism and egoism may have one singular motivational source through which various actions emerge.

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## Introduction

It is apparent that altruism is not an easily identifiable phenomenon. However, these factors did not create hindrance in any manner for the opposing theory of egoism to make its way into the creation of the dichotomy between the two, implying that both may possibly have real differences and its own foundations. But what if that is not the case?

Hence, a clear understanding of motives can highly benefit us in understanding the factors that create the dichotomy between *altruism* and *egoism*. Moreover, there is a huge weight of super-erogation on one and a bleak stigmatization on the other. It follows that any meaningful learning would be a fruitful contribution to the discussion. For instance, Thomas Nagel (1970) withstood on the ground of altruism providing a forefront reason why it is a universal necessity that our action must be altruistic. On the other side, Ayn Rand (2000 [1964]) advocated that we ought to promote our own good, and that promotion of self-interest is a moral thing. While Nagel wrote:

Ethics is a struggle against a certain form of the egocentric predicament, just as prudential reasoning is a struggle against domination by the present (Nagel, 1970, p. 100).

Ayn Rand, on the other hand stated:

Life can be kept in existence only by a constant process of self-sustaining action (Rand, 2000 [1964], p. 17).

So, given the equal force between the two positions can it probably be that the whole distinction that exists between the two is overgeneralized (Badhwar, 1993; Churchill and Street, 2002; Schulz, 2016). We may ask a further question—Are the motives of all our actions apprehensible or only the motives of some actions are? And if it is the case that only some motives are apprehensible and others are not then it is necessary to provide an explanation. Hence, in the following essay, attempts will be made to argue against the predominant trend in the egoism-altruism debate where affirming one leads to the negation of the other. The resolution to this discrepancy can be brought, I will argue if we will recognize that altruism need not only take place in a self-denial mode, and egoism need not be understood only based on self-interest. A larger reality is that in most cases we are not able to differentiate between these two types of motivation.

**Altruism and egoism: the problem of motivation.** Other-regarding action or altruism can be of various kinds (Clavien and Chapuisat, 2013). From as mundane an act such as opening the door for a stranger to extraordinary actions like donating one's organ or giving away fortune from hard-earned savings. As far as these phenomena are concerned, such deeds are categorized as altruistic, although it may not be possible to determine the actual intention of the doer. We can perhaps bring to light that *pure altruism* can be differentiated from *mere altruism* (Nahra, 2021). Former is a type of altruistic behavior where self-interested motive is entirely absent. Such behavior includes donating blood to a stranger without any expectation for the return of favor or a case where a man jumps into a railroad track to save a random stranger from being run over by a speeding train etc. On the other hand, mere altruism can be referred to all other forms of actions where the apparent act is altruistic but the intention is irrelevant and hence unquestioned. Mere altruism is a kind whose structure perfectly fulfills the altruistic criteria i.e., X helping Y without Y ensuing any immediate return to X nor X expecting any. In short, the question of intention shrinks to an insignificant aspect in the entire process. Now, in the case of a mere altruistic action an intention can be many—self-interested, not interested, neutral, etc., and also it can actually be selfless, empathetic, based on

objective principles about charity, etc., or interestingly it can also be an accident or a matter of luck whose altruistic value was not preconceived but happen to become one, e.g. a rich man throwing five hundred rupees at a starving homeless person in anger. All these are mere altruistic actions where the status of the person's intention is non-defined and could be anything.

Consider another theory that stands in direct opposition to altruism. This theory is called egoism—an idea that states that all actions are based on self-interest. There are mainly three major types of Egoism. The first type, *Ethical egoism* states that we morally ought to perform those actions that maximize our self-interest. Second type, *Rational egoism* states—we rationally ought to perform those actions if and only if, and because, performing that action maximizes our self-interest. The third type, *Psychological egoism* states descriptively that we are always only interested in self-welfare.

The rest of the essay will view egoism from a psychological egoistic perspective which states that irrespective of the kind of action we are performing the underlying motive is always driven by the operation of our ego and in the vicinity of our ego, hence all actions are egoistic in nature. The peculiar nature of this idea is—even if we consider an action that is absolutely altruistic, it could still be interpreted as a phenomenon that is borne out of egoistic intention (Irwin, 2017). For instance, consider Jack who helps his friend Jill in moving her things from her old place to a new one without expecting any monetary or other benefit as compensation for his action. Although this seems prima facie like a straight case of altruism performed by one person to another egoism would state otherwise—it might be that Jack is expecting a selfish advantage from Jill, maybe not urgently but somewhere down the near future. Or it could also be that Jack is only doing it to feel good about himself since turning down his opportunity to help his friend might result in him feeling guilty later. It can also be that Jack is only helping Jill out of obligation since Jill has been his friend for a long time now and not helping might result in damage to their friendship. Possibilities can be many but it so far remains a psychological notion in egoism that all actions are driven by egoistic propulsion to navigate self-interest.

The distinction seems valid as far as categorizing the different forms of altruism and egoism goes but it becomes problematic when we dive into the domain of actual motivation. In explicating the problem that subsists when trying to distinguish altruistic motivation from egoistic motivation Sober and Wilson writes:

We infer people's motives from their behavior; aside from this, we have little or no access to what their motives really are. This does not mean that the question of altruism versus egoism is insoluble; it does mean that we must tread carefully, since the inference problem is a difficult one (Sober and Wilson, 1998, p. 250).

If altruism and egoism can protrude over each other to this extent that it becomes almost puzzling to separate one from the other, then perhaps the point of diversion between the two is not too far away. Here in lies the first caveat which is that it is not possible to meaningfully comprehend the actual intention behind any action. In this regard, it can be claimed that a statement such as 'his action was truly devoid of self-interest' or 'his action was purely based on self-interest' can make no genuine sense, but only be frowned upon in a skeptical gaze. This brings us to the second caveat which is that since a person's actual motive can never be known, concomitantly, there cannot be any sense generated out of the idea of pure altruism or pure self-interest. Altruism and egoism, firstly, could only be made sense of if we can capture the motivation of a person with clarity which, as we have seen is, muddled in serious philosophical problems. Secondly, it is inconceivable that a person will entirely lose

her sense of *self-situatedness* when performing her action regardless of how altruistic the action is.

Many a time, the nature of our action is delineated neither towards selflessness nor towards self-interest, and many other times it coexists as if each one is dependent on the other (Badhwar, 1993; Churchill and Street, 2002; Schulz, 2016). In view of these suppositions, it could only be said that the motivational status of our actions is undetermined at best. Neera Kapur Badhwar argued that self-affirmation of one's interest is a significant property to make the nature of our altruistic action truly virtuous:

My main argument for the thesis that self-interest can be moral is that there is a kind of moral excellence, an intuitively recognizable excellence of character and action, which is at once a form of deep altruism and a form of self-interest. Such moral excellence may be exhibited over a lifetime, or over a brief span of a person's life; it may take the form of moral heroism or saintliness, or the more ordinary everyday form of an easy, cheerful, reliable goodness. An adequate description of this kind of moral excellence, I argue, is also a description of the person as someone motivated by self-interest, and of (the relevant portion of) her life as one that is well-lived or deeply satisfying. If the self-interested motivation were absent, something of moral worth would be lost (Badhwar, 1993, p. 93).

Her argument substantiates our hypothesis by exhibiting the vague lines between egoism and altruism. Similarly, Van Der Steen (1995) argued that egoism and altruism debate has relied excessively on the overgeneralized proposition to position itself which in the process downplays the plurality that surrounds the discussion. Indeed, it is not strange that most of our everyday actions, even seemingly altruistic ones, will eventually reveal some egoistic intentions which may or may not be valid. Similarly, the actions which might singularly seem egoistic and selfish may result in an exceptional altruistic outcome. It is just that the apprehension of the independent existence of either of the maneuvers comes across as a bit too constricted.

**Duality of justification and negation of the other.** The faculty of *reason* has long been the ultimatum in philosophers' quest for justifications. In the egoism-altruism spectrum reason has been present on both sides as a substantiating dictum with a consequence that the interlocutor's position is always negated as an invalid principle. This is because the same faculty is incorporated in these two contradictory theories as the bedrock of their ideas to an extent where each one nullifies the other:

When a defender of the altruism hypothesis cites a behavior as evidence for altruism, advocates of egoism reply by trying to show that the behavior can be explained within their favored framework. If they succeed, the conclusion that egoists usually draw is that egoism is the preferable hypothesis. But why should this be so? If both theories can explain what we observe, why say that egoism is true and motivational pluralism is false? Why not conclude, instead, that the observation fails to discriminate between the two theories? (Sober and Wilson, 1998, p. 291).

This duality requires disentanglement to reach an intelligible conclusion. It could either be that one of them is valid and the other is invalid, or they could both be valid at the same time. Given the way these possibilities exist the whole distinction may require a reappraisal. Although it could be argued from the Humean perspective that *reason* does not have a say for oneself

and only gets subordinated to a justificatory mechanism for whatever things we choose to value. Hume writes: "The ancient philosophers, though they often affirm, that virtue is nothing but conformity to reason, yet, in general, seem to consider morals as deriving their existence from taste and sentiment" (Hume, 2019 [1751], p. 2). This could potentially destroy the argument against the duality of reason and convert the whole story to a game of relativism. This is because, given the totality of reason if it is nothing more than a justificatory mechanism then neither of the interpretations could be understood as valid or invalid. It would become a matter of persuasion as in who can state one's argument more convincingly or in the more peculiar sense it could also be—who can acquire more support for one's argument. In both cases, the advocates will only be motivated by a prior 'taste or sentiment' as Hume would suggest. This paper will not analyze who argued more correctly but will take the third route and let reason intervene on both altruism and egoism, in a way that adds another layer of rationale into an interweaved phenomenon that previously existed into two contrary parts.

I would like to suggest that the conflict between altruism and egoism can be untangled in two ways. The first way will view the dichotomy as the consequence of *abstraction*. Since we have enough weighty impetus that points to the inseparability of egoism and altruism let us call it the *congruence principle*. The congruence principle, I would suggest, states that egoism and altruism are interweaved phenomenon which functions in a plural manner catering to both egoistic and altruistic motivations. It is contingently separate but not necessarily distinct implying that by being able to be abstracted the distinction is contingently made potent to exist separately. Although it does not mean that the separation is configured out of two independent grounds. The dichotomy between egoism and altruism must be recognized as subsumed under a singular motivational ontology. Supposing that the autonomy of both egoism and altruism is equally real in its most robust form, what we will encounter, and apparently, have been encountering is the inexhaustible tussle between these two types of motivation. This leads to infinite regress and deems the matter inconclusive.

For instance, we see Nagel putting forward his argument in support of altruism: "I maintain that the failure to regard all reasons as timeless involves one in a peculiar sort of dissociation from one's practical concerns" (Nagel, 1970, p. 56). If our moral reason does not capture the objective necessity of timelessness, then the internal structure of the theory lacks the element of *practical concerns*. This view concomitantly removes egoism from morality and declares it incompetent to serve the need of practical concerns. To consider all reasons as timeless goes beyond just seeing if the act benefits oneself or for any other self in general and rather points to what we have an absolute reason to do or act upon. But how far the timelessness of reason is properly supported by absolute grounds remains inexplicable. We may encounter numerous cases where the situatedness of reason and self-interest can provide us with much higher-order reason than the selfless act. As we see in Rand's explication of the requirement for an ideal society—"It is only on the basis of rational selfishness—on the basis of justice—that men can be fit to live together in a free, peaceful, prosperous, benevolent, rational society" (Rand, 2000 [1964], p. 35). For Rand reasons for self-interest appeared more timeless than reasons for altruistic concerns. Since the heuristics of egoism states that all our actions and choices need to be based on the realization of self-interest altruism is inevitably relegated to a secondary status. In our everyday moral affairs, we perform numerous actions and choices. Sometimes our actions are completely tilted towards the egoistic side and other times the action is completely motivated by the altruistic drive. However, many a time the whole motive behind the action is unknown.

“The observed behavior—person X helps person Y—is thoroughly uninformative about whether the egoism or the altruism hypothesis is true” (Sober and Wilson, 1998, p. 247).

Secondly, the congruity between egoism and altruism can perhaps be extricated meaningfully by looking at the dichotomy from an applied perspective. The plurality of real-world moral scenarios is such that no matter how extensive the theories are they can always fall short to encircle the aspects of the entirety. Bernard Williams (1993) enunciated that philosophical exercise fails to reach the *Archimedean point* of objective knowledge when it comes to dealing with real-world ethical issues. Just as unsettling is the controversy between categorical imperative and utilitarianism for instance, so is the potentiality of each of the theories to encompass the various real-world moral simulations limited and more often than not unintelligible. The same holds for the endless argument that exists between the means and ends. Given the breaking point of even the apex moral theories, how then shall the same distinction between egoism and altruism be viewed from an applied aspect.

Plainly, it can be said that from an applied point of view, our concern of morality is less inclined towards the motivation than the outcome based on the pragmatism that is required of the situation. For instance, Jack helping Jill move things from one place to another will be considered an act of altruism, regardless of the intention that Jack may or may not be holding. Moreover, in this context, both genuinely receive their share, even though not symmetrically. Still if in some near future, Jill decides to do the same for Jack then we might even reconsider our observation of the relationship as being asymmetrical. The point here is that given the above scenario, the only thing that would have made Jack’s action undesirable is if he had completely said no to Jill’s plea as this would be a violation of the minimum criteria of any friendship between two individuals. Since Jack did not take the route otherwise, the friendship still holds. If in an exceptional situation Jack completely denies to lend a helping hand then it would still not mean the victory of egoism over altruism. All it would show is the fragility of their friendship and the lack of character on Jack’s end. What it will not show is that Jack is being overpowered by some metaphysical egoist spirit and that this is what he lives for. In other times Jack might have been the most selfless person not just towards Jill but everyone that he met. Perhaps it can be said that context and situation play a more major role than the individual’s position on the trajectory of egoism and altruism (Doris, 1998; Miller, 2017). The former moulds itself with the situation, the latter tries to project the personality as a trademark overestimating its contingent nature.

Hence, in the above case, neither egoism nor altruism is seen as overpowering the other to endure as the absolute. In the daily conduct of our affairs we nudge and try to get along with each other not based on the separation that we create between altruism and egoism. Our subconscious perception is rather busy involved in a community where more weight is being given to practical ideas like equity and justice; agreeableness and blamableness. In this respect, it would be appropriate to quote Hume again:

The only object of reasoning is to discover the circumstances on both sides, which are common to these qualities; to observe that particular in which the estimable qualities agree on the one hand, and the blamable on the other; and thence to reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived (Hume, 2019 [1751], p. 4).

**Are we committing motivational extremism?** Both other-regarding actions and selfish actions can be diverse. Given the dynamics, instead of asking the question: does other-regarding

action at the mercy of one’s loss exist, a more significant question must be—should other-regarding action come at one’s loss? Provided it is the case that other-regarding action at one’s loss does exist a further question then arises: does it prompt individuals to execute this action? For some philosophers the answer for the first question is affirmative (Singer, 1972; Heyd, 1982). They opined that we do have a space for other-regarding actions at one’s loss. David Heyd argued that given our status as free moral agents who are not confined by external forces, we have the full capacity and unrestricted options to perform supererogatory actions. These are those actions which goes beyond what duty requires. Peter Singer also argued that we have the responsibility to contribute as much resources to the poor until we “reduce ourselves to the level of marginal utility” of the beneficiaries (Singer, 1972). For the second question, this paper would like to argue that, given the diverse repository of empirical evidence (D’Souza and Adams, 2014; Sun, 2018; Kawamura and Kusumi, 2020) we can say that it does not prompt individuals to take this action. In a study conducted in Japan with a handful number of participants recruited through an online research system, researchers explored the relationship between altruism and the basic giving norm set by the society. They found that offering more than the established norm did not have any positive impact on the giver no matter how large the amount. They further elaborated that norm-deviant altruism rather led to negative evaluations (Kawamura and Kusumi, 2020). Sun (2018) analyzed altruism from a psychoanalytical perspective and described it as an ego-defensive strategy rather than a phenomenon of a pure motive. This subconscious defensive strategy can suppress the underlying egoistic intention resulting in the actor losing awareness of the true motive of his own action which more often than not is self-serving. He argued that this could lead to the manifestation of altruism in pathological ways. Furthermore, D’Souza and Adams (2014) argued that altruistic action should not be performed unconditionally without having a clear understanding of the situation at hand. They concluded, “A truly enlightened altruist would act with objectivity, with knowledge of the inevitable consequences of any response after carefully considering the problems at hand and after deliberating on a global scale” (D’Souza and Adams, 2014, p. 190).

Schulz (2016) makes an evolutionary case that egoism and altruism cannot be the only rigid forms of organism’s behavior, since environment where these organisms interact has the potential to bring out many levels of action, which at times will be reflexive in nature resembling neither the former nor the latter. He instead argues for “cognitive-efficient” mechanism which has the potential to explain various behavioral outcomes, for instance, paternal love and reciprocation does not always take place via calculations regarding costs and benefits. Many a time it can be observed that our action towards others is impulsive in nature depending on the necessity of the situation. Such actions do not require any sophisticated mental models (similarly neither altruistic nor egoistic) hence saving time and cognitive energy, and this will be selected for in the nature because of its adaptable nature. He concludes:

“When it comes to evolutionary biological accounts of the psychology of helping behavior, it is useful to consider the situation from the point of view of what is most cognitively efficient, and not just of what is most reliable. When doing this, it becomes clear that there is adaptive pressure on at least some organisms to move away from being purely egoistically motivated, and also that this pressure can push in different directions: towards altruism, reciprocation-focused “behaviorist helping”, or reflex-driven helping” (Schulz, 2016, p. 22).

Acknowledging some of the empirical evidence and evolutionary argument pointing to the discrepancies that is conjured when both altruism and egoism is stressed to an extreme level, we can say that selfless regard at one's loss becomes one form of motivational extremism, so does selfish regard at someone else's loss suffers from the same defect. Having said that we can assess the case of Jack and Jill again. If Jack happens to help Jill with a robust attitude that his action has to be purely altruistic at the cost of one's loss, and also if it is the prime concern that he has, more so than to see Jill getting the help, then we can consider that a form of motivational extremism. Here Jack has failed to see the singularity between the two motives. If on the other hand, Jack helps Jill with the primary attitude of wanting to see Jill getting the help, with a contingent possibility of either one's loss or no loss then it can be called a case of genuine altruism. In the first case, too much stress is given to the refinement of the intention of the action to a point that the chief moral aim is overshadowed i.e. to see the other person getting the required help. This defeats the condition of other-regard and commits motivational extremism. In the second case, primary regard is given to the objective that person gets the required help irrespective of one's gain or loss. This is theoretically more defensible than the former. The plural nature of disinterestedness towards what one may gain or may not gain also adds to the action being more defensible than the one where the concern of one's intention is given most of the importance (Sober and Wilson, 1998). It is clear from the discussion regarding the association between altruism and egoism that plurality seems to be the most efficient path given the indeterminate nature of our motivation. Churchill and Street (2002) after exploring some traits of altruistic personality posed possible paradoxes that might underlie in altruism. These paradoxes include the distinction between selflessness and self-interest, relationship between extensivity and autonomy, and the confusion regarding soft and hard ego boundaries. In all these possible threats to altruism they discern the idea that existence of one does not negate the other. Hence, being selfless and extensive towards others do not take away our capacity to be an individual and autonomous being. These factors are rather a "coherent construct" of our personality. Talking about an egoist failing to draw a separate line from an altruist Bernard Williams writes:

He operates in society, fulfilling his desires and projects involves society, and we can add that the very existence of his desires and projects is the product of society, not just causally but conceptually. And society implies a degree of minimal altruism in order to operate (Williams, 1973, p. 252).

## Conclusion

The paper tried to argue that altruism and egoism both come in different forms, with each form incorporating in itself motivations based on contingent conditions. This is because conditions play a pivotal role in maneuvering the exchange between individuals. The following sections argued that the plurality that surrounds the dichotomy does not point to the independent existence of egoism and altruism. Both types of action may have their grounding in a singular motivational ontology with the supervening idea that neither of the actions negates the other. Further, if selfless action comes at the cost of one's loss then it is in a way a fallacy of motivational extremism since these actions are theoretically indefensible and practically hardly possible. Hence, if the gap that exists between altruism and egoism is duly recognized as not as wide as we make it to be, or rather viewed as non-existent, then perhaps we may see the dichotomy in a new light.

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