

Bundeswettbewerb Philosophischer Essay

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Thema: Ist all unser Handeln egoistisch? (Thema I)

Are all our actions motivated by egoism? Is truly any act, may it be out of kindness, may it be out of obligation, in some way just a method of achieving an ulterior motive that not even we ourselves might be aware of? Is man truly but a wolf to others¹ wanting nothing else than his own good? This philosophical question has been discussed for a long time now, even before Hobbes, whom I just cited. This essay shall be – true to its original meaning – my attempt at doing so as well.

Firstly, an argument for our thesis: Almost everything we do has an effect on us as well, our actions are, so to speak, reflexive. There are many mundane things that reflect back on us. We are thirsty, we drink something. By drinking something we quench our thirst. That is a very short and simple chain of causalities and it is evident that drinking something to quench that thirst is egoistic in nature as no one else is directly affected by our own thirst. It's egoistic, it helps us.

Let's change that example just a little bit now: Someone else, e.g. a friend, is thirsty. They ask you to bring them a drink. You fetch them one and they can quench their thirst now. That seems not very egoistic, now does it? It actually seems to be quite the opposite, yes, altruistic in nature. That is something we humans are apparently capable of, altruism, the act of doing something for others without expecting anything in return.

But my argument is that even these seemingly altruistic actions have some sort of effect on us. That person's gratitude for example or even just the knowledge of having done something good. One could say that that isn't egoistical as we did this to help the aforementioned person, but let's look at it this way: We could have denied the person's request which would have brought us their disappointment. And avoiding that is, in the end, something for our own good. I'm not trying to say that this behavior is something bad. No, it's just the logical consequence of doing something good. We avoid something unpleasant in our own social proximities and by that, we help ourselves. That is egoism without any negative connotation.

Now, before I bring up a counter-argument, we shall take this example of everyday life to a less practical and more theoretical level, the meta-level: The two examples I've just presented, egoism and altruism, are connected to two possible concepts of how humans are motivated. One is the so-

¹ Hobbes, Thomas: "Elementa philosophica de cive", [1642], Amsterdam, 1657, p.10.

called “homo oeconomicus“ and one is the “homo reciprocans“. The economical and the reciprocating human. These two concepts are supposed to correspond to each other as polar opposites. “Homo oeconomicus“ on the one hand means that one always tries to maximize one’s own gainings over everyone else.² “Homo reciprocans“ on the other hand refers to a concept where humans reward positive behavior from others and punish negative behavior despite that not always being in their interest or even being counterproductive, acting on the maxim of “a Roland for an Oliver“ as they desire a sort of basic fairness within human interaction³.

Well, what are we now? Are we “homines oeconomici“ or are we “homines reciprocantes“. To answer that I would like to start with a critique of the “homo reciprocans“ concept. According to this concept, humans try to enforce positive and punish negative behavior for a better way of human interaction. This may come with initial hindrances or disadvantage but in the end, if they achieve their goal (that is the important word here) they have essentially done it for themselves which leads us back to egoism. I think that the “homo reciprocans“ is just an extension of the “homo oeconomicus“ as both try to achieve their own goals, with the difference being that one doesn’t put the maximization of profit into the foreground.

Now, going away from “homines“: I’ve said that helping a person close to you is – even though often involuntarily – egoistic. That leads us to a factor that influences the inherent egoism of an action: Distance. The further a deed – whether that is metaphorical or geographical – is away from the actor, the less egoistic and the more altruistic potential there is. Let me explain that with the help of another example.

Imagine you walk along a street in the city you live in. Generally rather a place very close to you, a place you have a connection with. But while walking you encounter a homeless man, a complete stranger. He asks you for money, just some change so that he may buy himself something to eat and a cup of coffee. This is where the difference between this scenario and the scenario with the thirsty friend is situated. The friend is someone from your direct social circumference, so to speak. This is indicated by their status as a friend. The stranger isn’t, though. That person has little to no connection to nor impact on your life. That means helping them becomes less egoistic and more altruistic. That is because you wouldn’t – other than with your friend – have to deal with any discomfort directly in your social life. If you were to deny them help there wouldn’t be as great of an impact as denying your friend help would have. That is what I mean with egoism growing smaller by distance.

2 cf. Spranger, Eduard: “ Lebensformen. Geisteswissenschaftliche Psychologie und Ethik der Persönlichkeit. 8. Auflage.“, [1921] Tübingen, 1950, p. 148

3Falk, Armin: „Homo Oeconomicus versus Homo Reciprocans: Ansätze für ein neues Wirtschaftspolitisches Leitbild? Perspektiven der Wirtschaftspolitik“, 2003, p.1

Now, returning to the original question: Are these deeds still egoistic in nature? Yes. And no. Or rather: It depends. Up until now, all of my examples have so egoism in their core. To paraphrase Ernest Becker: We can't do anything against our own egoism, it's just who we are⁴. But that is actually something I must speak against. And the argument I use is a mathematical one, be it very simple. All things are in a way egoistic unless there's a certain criterium met: The loss you suffer from your deed is greater than the reward you gain. If that is the case I dare to call this deed an act of unadulterated altruism.

Before I come to my conclusion there is one last case that I would like to talk about. A continuation of my aforementioned way to achieve pure altruism: Sacrifice. The act of sacrificing oneself entirely for the sake of someone else is the most extreme act of altruism⁵ and also my argument that - even though I have been on the side of omnipresent egoism during the entirety of this essay - there actually do exist actions free of egoism. These actions, as sacrificing one's life clearly isn't part of everyday life, are extremely rare. But as the thesis was formulated rather vaguely to begin with, I see this as a valid argument on whether all our deeds are egoistic in nature or not,

To conclude: Most of our actions carry some sort of egoism within them as this is simply logical and a part of our human nature. Only extreme cases bring forth deeds of pure altruism, but looking at human history and also current events, especially in war zones, I can confidently assert that actions without egoism do exist.

⁴ Becker, Ernest: "The Denial of Death", [1973], Free Press, 1997, p.2

⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/altruism/#PureAltrSelfSacr>, Abruf 17.11.19