

TWO BASIC MORAL PROBLEMS: OPPOSITION AND ALLIANCE IN SOCIAL LIFE. 1929
[EGOISM AND ALTRUISM]

There are two highly important basic issues in individual ethics and social ethics:

- (I) the egoistic or egocentric, and
- (II) the altruistic position, also called the sense for justice, compassion, pity, love (not in the sexual sense) etc.

Philosophical and theological academic ethics do not always use these parallel terms in similar ways. It may be allowed for reasons of simplicity to use “egoistic” respective “egocentric” as a psychological fact, the result of which is the struggle for life, and “altruism”, “love”, etc. representing the opposite attitude of feeling, willing, and reasoning, connected with appropriate practical consequences.

I.

First, to the egocentric attitude, i.e. the interest in me myself: We should not neglect that such an attitude originally is an intuitive, instinctive drive. Only secondarily, if at all, it becomes a conscientious reasoning form of thinking in regard to a potentially justified struggle-for-life attitude and the best methods in such a struggle. – We recognize already the struggle for life among plants, by means of abundant multiplication, unpleasant odor or taste, sting hair, thorns etc., used against predatory animals. – Animals, on the other hand, know how to neutralize plant’s self-defense properties. But then, they have to defend themselves against humans with a number of inherited tricks, often without a chance. – Humans, then, use plants and animals for their own personal goals, a fact which does not need to be demonstrated. And it is irrelevant that some

farm plants [Nutzpflanzen] (such as crops and potatoes) and farm animals [Nutztiere] (cattle, goats, swine etc.) owe their wide distribution to humans. The last motive, anyway, was and is the self-interest and the struggle for life of the individual and collective I [Ich].

Such egoism is so big, that it cannot be contained within an individual's own class. It is well known, that plants take away foods and light from each other and that animals use others as food. In principle, we see the same in humans. This is particularly true of economics [Wirtschaftsleben], as has recently been pointed out by Naumann. Is it not the drive of the business man to outdo his competition or at least to be equally successful; his dealings with customers serve the same purpose. He would be a poor business man, besides, if he did otherwise! Similarly, national economy and world economy cannot and will not do without making good use of the struggle between different professions and different states. – Even intellectual intentions, at least as far as they are primarily professional, are not an exception. How does a young person (respectively parents or guardians) act, when determining which intellectually satisfying job to choose for life? – He inquires about his main interests and his best opportunities to have a good career, also in consideration and regard to the family. Only rarely does one ask seriously: “How can I serve humanity [Allgemeinheit] best with my properties and gifts?” Not even Kant could keep a utilitarian aspect totally away from his “Categorical Imperative”, as Schopenhauer shows in detail in his “Über das Fundament der Moral”.

Again, it must be pointed out in this context, that repeating these facts is not intended to be a demeaning critique. The egocentric attitude and the struggle for survival are extremely important for the creation and development of civili-

zation, respectively culture. Under such an aspect, the consequences are a most blessed result for the community and the individual, even if not planned in the first place.

II.

Who, however, only values egoism, such as Stirner in his book “*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*” and Nietzsche with his “*Master-Human*” model [Herrenmenschentum], “beyond good and bad”, does not recognize that there is an altruism, also presenting a natural gift of normal human soul-life [Seelenleben]. Therefore, the empathy for right and fairness, compassion, sympathy, love – or what else we want to call it – first of all has to be recognized as a psychologically given fact and valued as such. If we don’t do that or even suppress it, then we suppress and dominate human nature. And if there is someone arguing, that everything is based on genetics and education, then the following question has to be answered: “How come, altruism is inherited similarly to other human character traits [Seeleneigenschaft]?” Respectively: “Why do we target the education of the youth and the entire humankind in this direction and not in any other?”, The most satisfying answer still is, that altruism is an empirically tested psychological fact of human soul, consequently we have to take this into account. “What, now, is altruism?” – It is the fact, that my own I [Ich] retracts totally behind something else, under certain conditions up to the point of self-destruction, and that egotistic motives do not come into force at all. An impressive example is animal protection out of sheer compassion, as understood by Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner and in the understanding of contemporary animal protection societies and animal protection legislation. – Those, who follow their altruistic inclinations, also have a personal satisfaction in do-

ing so; this is another demonstration, that it might as well be an egotistic inclination. On the contrary: he, who with Kant wants only to accept reason or with Eduard von Hartmann cool-logical justice as the single correct motive for ethos, is as close to egoism and additionally sacrifices this phenomenon of human soul life.

Of course, similarly egoism is not without altruistic aspects, so is altruism not thinkable without any egoism. One example for many: Even though Christianity very correctly may be called the religion of love – a love disinterested in loving oneself as any religion of redemption, which can be defined best with the word: “Work out your own salvation” (Phil. 2:12). Important are also the words of Jesus: “So, whatever you wish that men would do to you, do to them” (Mt 7:12; Luke 6:31), also: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27, following Lev 19:18). So, egoism is accepted as existing, and it is presupposed to be self-evident that everyone wants only good things from his neighbor and that everyone cares for himself. Do we want to regret this? – Surely, not easily. How would it be possible to provide for another being, i.e. to care for it in its struggle for survival, i.e. in his egotistic attitude, to protect it and to support it?! In particular, the interrelationship between altruism and egoism shows in the relationship of the individual as part of a community [Gesamtheit], may it be a professional organization, a political party, a village or an urban community, a national organization etc. Without doubt, there are people who submit their entire existence unto such a community, even sacrifice for it and in this way behave purely altruistic. As far as this community is concerned, it normally is resolute in struggling with other organizations or persons, i.e. it represents a collective egoism. Such a collective egoism, however, works well

for the individual members of such a community in question and is in relation to it altruism as well. If such a positive effect of a specific organization is understood and used (and it has to be this way, otherwise such an organization under question would be useless), then the support of the community will play an important role for the individual as well. (F. Paulsen in his *Ethics* has expressed this and related issues in more detail).

As far as the evaluation of these two psychological, respectively ethical facts, as discussed above, is concerned, we have to mention the following: Only ethical skepticism seriously supports egocentric attitudes; but these are relatively few exemptions. Much larger is the number of those, who unconsciously make their own self the center of their interest. That this attitude is unavoidable and not necessarily to be criticized has been shown above. However, an exaggeration of egoism associated with endangering the ethos is obvious. These circumstances make it understandable that altruism carries a much higher recognition in public. Even those, who call love “sentimentality”, routinely refrain from admitting their psychological shortcomings (and, indeed, these they are). Most people, however, possess, depending on their predisposition [Veranlagung], a serious will and confidence to be “just”, “good”, “altruistic”. The emotional, more or less unconscious higher esteem for altruism over egoism can be recognized by referring to witnesses in the history of ideas [Zeit- und Geistperioden], the first being the ideal, hoped to be realized finally in spite of the latter. Already the old Jewish prophet Isaiah refers to a future kingdom of peace, where the struggle for survival among animals and between animals and humans will have come to an end (Isa 11:6-9). Jesus similarly preaches about the coming of the kingdom of God, this means

also the kingdom of love. It is easily understood when Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, ascribes love a higher standing than faith and hope (verse 13) and attributes eternal existence to it (verse 8). In recent times, Kant, in postulating a moral demonstration of God's existence [Gottesbeweis], shows that he as well has the ideal of an exclusive rule of the good in the future. It should be mentioned that the favored idea in socialism about a "State of the Future", is an idea which without doubt bears a witness to ethical idealism and optimism.

What are now the most important consequences for social ethics?

1. Egoism and altruism are not necessarily incompatible ethical adversaries.
2. Egoistic mentality as a natural phenomenon is also a basic human right. If such a right is used reasonably (natural and healthy lifestyle, especially in regard nutrition, dressing, living and working conditions, also in a regulated and sufficient pay, not to forget also in the struggle for survival which can be regulated largely in justice and fairness), then it will be effective in wide circles and is – at least in its consequences – altruistic.
3. The psychological fact of egoistic attitude may also not be overlooked; and should not be without recognition. This requirement is easier to fulfill since its observation does not always result in personal harm. For example, what is spent in social welfare and in support and improvement of national strength [Volkskraft], returns with interest income, since the state and the

economy have a greatest interest to have trustworthy public servants, good workers, financially well off consumers, good development of the youth, and in general the wellbeing of the entire nation.

4. Now, egoism unfortunately quite often is overdone, a fact which is not the case with altruism. Therefore we have to care as much as possible for the belief in and the ideal of love, and to look optimistically at its future realization, e.g. with the faithful words of Goethe's "Faust": "Whoever strives hard enough, we will be allowed to redeem him", to redeem also from an exaggerated egoism. Caring for this ideal, of course, will never be without practical consequences. We may mention all activities in social care, in particular the support of the economically weak, not taking into account whether or not it will pay back (i.e. the care for the old and fragile; again also animal protection). The Christian churches, by the way, give enough references to work in the service of love.

Zwei ethische Grundprobleme in ihrem Gegensatz und in ihrer Vereinigung im sozialen Leben. *Ethik. Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik* 1929, 5(5): 341-346