

Moral Thinking: An Introduction To Values And Ethics

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Week - 01

Lecture -05

Ethical Egoism

Hello everyone. Let us recapitulate, what we mean by Egoism. Egoism, as you would remember, is the second obstruction to Moral Theorising. Egoism here, is frequently regarded as a catch-all theory. What is a catch-all theory? A catch-all theory is one, which apparently explains all the phenomena, in a very simplistic solution, which inevitably is inaccurate. So, what is Egoism? And now, here one should distinguish it, from what we mean by Egotism, which is understood by an excessive usage of I, in the sentences that we use.

When we have all come across people, who use a lot of I, in their sentences. What is also frequently known as the I problem. Egotism and Egoism are two different claims. And, we are looking at Egoism.

What is Egoism talking about? Egoism claims that, all actions are motivated only by desire, seems fairly normal. But therefore, we do what we wish to do. Now, look at this. Now, this is typically what I have found a very young thinkers fixation, that well, there is no such thing as the moral domain. And we all do, what we wish to do.

And therefore, we are all Egoists in that sense, that all actions are motivated only by desire. And the catch here, as we discussed is, what do we mean by desire. Desire has a broader term as something that doesn't happen to us, that we can also mediate and decide. But, let's go through the argument of Egoism. For Egoists, there is little or no distinction between, self-interested desire, and other interested desire.

So, my desire to go out and watch a movie for my entertainment, vis-a-vis my desire to take my sick roommate, or sick neighbour to hospital, are both seen as desires, and I am quenching my desire. So, in that sense, every desire that we quench, we become an Egoist. So, Mother Teresa is also an Egoist, because she is quenching her desire to serve the needy, serve the poor, serve the unwell. So, of course, we act out of our desires. But,

desire itself is a very broad domain, that what do we wish for.

And, that is the catch, that the Egoists tend to miss. I act in only what gives me satisfaction, or happiness. But then, what is it to act otherwise, random acts. So, this is crucial to understand that well, if the Egoist is arguing that, I do only what gives me satisfaction. But then, what is it to act otherwise, random acts.

Because, we all act, or we all choose to act, or to choose actions, that give us satisfaction. It is only the crazy person, or the irrational person, who acts without looking at satisfaction. So, this satisfaction is a broad term. Sometimes, the satisfaction is a self-interested satisfaction, or sometimes it is an other interested satisfaction. And, that is very crucial in making sense of Egoism.

So, as per the Egoist, we all work for satisfaction. But that satisfaction, is an unthought through domain. So, I do what I wish to do, that is what a Egoist would claim. But then, if I do what I wish to do, what can I do to be an un-egoist. Do I have to act contrary to my wishes.

If you take a moment to reflect on this particular condition, it shows that well, what the Egoist says is trivially true. The claim of the Egoist is trivially true. Because, we all act towards our own satisfaction, towards the satisfaction of our own wishes. But, what are the wishes, is a quite a broad domain. Some wishes are self-interested, some wishes are other interested.

Now, to put this formally, the structure of the Egoist, as depicted in the text also, is that one, all I do is motivated exclusively by my desires. One, so whatever I do is motivated exclusively by my desires, seems obvious. Okay, agreed. All my desires are for the satisfaction of my interests. Now, these are the two premises that they hinge on, and concluding thereof, that my actions are exclusively self-interested.

Right. Now, the first premise is well, talks about, can be understood in terms of Hume and Kant, two particular philosophers from opposing traditions in the Western tradition. Hume, who regarded reason as rather inert, and Kant, who regarded reason as freedom. Right. That, the desire that we have, how do we reason out our desires. For Hume, our desires are primary, and there is no reason to arrive at the desires.

And reason is inert, therefore. And for Kant, of course, reason is freedom, that when we can reason through, and arrive at our desires. So, the second premise talks about, I act in only what gives me satisfaction, or happiness. But, then what is it to act otherwise. And that is the crucial factor, which makes the difference.

That, what is it to be a non-egoist, what is it to act otherwise. Is it random acts. So, I do what I wish to do. And most of us would agree to be that. But, to be the un-egoist, do I have to act contrary to my wishes.

And this is where, that punctures the boat of the egoist. That for the egoist is trivially true. That it is trivial. It is repeating, what we function at. So, we all function for our own desires.

We all function towards, the satisfaction of our own desires. But, these desires are formed differently, in different people. Some people narrowly work for hedonistic satisfaction of their own desires. Whereas, some people are altruistic, and look for satisfaction of others. So, we look at this self-satisfaction, can be both hedonistic.

You start with an edge, and altruistic. We will talk about these two philosophies, moral philosophies later. But hedonistic and altruistic. Hedonistic is looking at one's own bodily pleasures. And altruistic is looking at the happiness of others, as giving happiness to one.

So, this is basically the egoist argument, which we can see is only trivial. Because the egoist is simply saying that, we all act according to our desires. Or, we act as to what gives us satisfaction. Of course, we all act for what gives us satisfaction. Mother Teresa acted because, healing or serving the sick, gave her satisfaction.

And many hedonist, who is a serial murderer, acts because, killing unknown people, or killing people, gives her or him satisfaction. So, both of them are working towards their satisfaction. And in that, the egoist is very much right, that we work for the satisfaction of our desires. So, what kind of desires are to be satisfied, or what kind of desires one has, or thought through desires that one has, is a very broad domain. So, for Mother Teresa, it is other interested.

For the Hedonist, it is self-interested. So, we see that, the egoist fails here. Because egoist makes a trivial assumption, that we all work for our own satisfaction, that does not go deep into analysing, that satisfaction can also be self-directed, or other directed. Right. Looking after one's own entertainment, we survey, looking after others wellness.

Because, no matter, even you ask the person, the altruist, that why does she or he do, what she or he does, as we started with an example, that why does one give to a beggar, if one gives to a beggar. So, there can be many reasons, and the altruist's reason would be that, just to alleviate the suffering of the beggar, or why does one give charity, why does

one make donations. So, these are all things, that give one satisfaction. But this satisfaction, cannot be the same satisfaction, as one does for one's own hedonistic pleasures.

Right. So, it is essential for us to know, a little more vocabulary around Egoism. Psychological Egoism holds that, all our motivations are exclusively self-interested, whether or not we acknowledge the fact. And Ethical Egoism states that, one ought to work only in self-interest. Yes, we need to look out for our own interests. But is it all, that an individual should be connected with.

Right. So, the moment of transcendence, or the point of transcendence lies here, that we all look out for our own interest. But is it at all, that an individual should only be concerned with. So, connection that holds here is that, if Psychological Egoism is true, then Ethical Egoism loses force. Or there is little point in recommending, that we be self-interested, if we have no other choice.

Right. So, if we see that, Psychological Egoism says that, we are made in this way, that all our motivations are exclusively self-interested, whether we acknowledge it or not. So, if this is a fact of our natural existence as human persons, then Ethical Egoism becomes redundant. So, if this is true, if one is true, then two becomes redundant. And, I mean, these are trivial simplifications, but that one should be aware of the theatre of functioning.

Right. So, now we come to the end of our discussion of the two obstructions to moral thinking. Namely, first was Ethical Relativism. And then, we talked about Ethical Egoism. That when we tend to morally theorise, we need to have two options clear.

That first, moral theorisation is possible. And what are the two general obstructions that come to it. One is relative, that every person has their own opinion, and there is no way, that we can have a universal moral claim. And second is that, we only do what satisfies us. So, what is there to think about it. So, if you remember the whole, we discussed the possibilities of the laws, human laws, the law codes that human societies are governed with, those are essentially moral claims.

They are only possible, because there is moral theorisation possible. So, the plurality and the fallibility of moral claims, may prompt us to think that, well, there is no way to morally theorise. So, because if there were no way to morally theorise, how would a judiciary be making judgments. How would parliaments be making laws. The whole point of parliaments and judiciaries at the collective level, is to morally debate and arrive at the most agreeable path, that we want to go ahead with.

So, moral theorisation is possible. And, Ethical Egoism or Ethical Relativism, do not hold an obstruction to it. And this is not a normative claim only, because this is also quite a factual claim. The very fact that, we have codes of conduct, moral laws formulated, constitutions formulated. These are all examples of where, we have been able to theorise, universalise, and form moral codes. These may be revisable, and thereby not be eternal.

But they are nevertheless constructed as a moral claim, a moral philosophy, that we come forward. Countries differ in their constitutions, because of the different laws that they follow, the different moral philosophies that they follow. Some countries may be championing individual liberty. Some countries may be championing community. So, the difference in laws in different countries also means that, different countries have different laws.

But does that mean that, therefore no laws can be made. No. Laws are like the human world laws that we inhabit. An analogy that would perhaps help you make sense of this.

Look at the human language. Now, all speakers of a particular language, say English. All English speakers understand each other. So, when all Indians or all Sudanese follow their country's constitution, they are vouching for a particular philosophy, moral philosophy of governance. Right. When one looks at an English speaker, who cannot speak say, German, or Japanese, will not be able to follow German or Japanese conversations.

Similarly, we have segments of moral laws, can be loosely seen as language communities, one makes sense of moral laws in a particular community. And when one switches community, learns new laws, and makes sense of it. So, these are valid in the groups, in which they operate. So, moral laws are not eternal, absolute, unquestionable, but nor are any knowledge claims.

All knowledge claims are bound to revisions. All knowledge claims also function in their frame of reference. In the terms of moral theorisation, the frame of reference comes out to be a community, a moral community, a society, that is a single moral frame of reference. Right. So, with this, we end our conversation, on the usual two obstructions of moral relativism. Thank you. Thank you.