

'There is no essential conflict between morality and self-interest because a good life is one that involves attention to the interests of others.' Discuss.

Although the good life might well involve attention to the interests of others, this is not necessarily the case, and even if it were, there would very likely still be deep tensions between morality and self-interest. Outside of theistic frameworks which anticipate an eventual day of divine judgement, it seems implausible to claim that the actions recommended by morality and those recommended by self-interest are perfectly aligned, meaning that there is indeed an essential conflict between the two. In this essay I first challenge the plausibility of the claim that a good life must involve attention to the interests of others. Then, I demonstrate that even if this attention to others were required, it would not imply a lack of conflict between morality and self-interest without that morality being excessively undemanding. Finally, I set out a compelling argument that only theism is able to remove this tension, concluding that to the extent one has prior reasons to reject theism, there is an essential conflict between morality and self-interest.

There are many *prima facie* plausible accounts of the good life which do not require concern for others' interests, suggesting that a purely egoistic approach to decisions need not be prudentially harmful. One might attempt to argue against the most common form of rational egoism – stating that each agent only has reasons to do whatever maximises her own happiness – by claiming that this hedonic account of self-interest is false. Yet as Hills (2010) shows, both virtue ethics and Kantianism also have egoistic sister theories. Simply appealing to, for example, an Aristotelian view that flourishing consists of being virtuous is insufficient to show that a good life must involve attention to the interests of others, because it fails to explain why the relevant virtues should include beneficence and fidelity as opposed to, say, cunning and manipulateness. More generally, it is not clear why we should think that an individual's life cannot be good without them paying attention to others' interests. Consider, for instance, the following example:

Cecil's only desire in life is to produce an accurate count the number of blades of grass in his small garden. He spends all day outside on the lawn, and every evening tallying up figures. He is perfectly content, and with each week that passes he produces a still-more accurate count.

Clearly Cecil's life involves no attention whatsoever to the interests of others, but it would be strange for us to say that he is not living a good life. One might respond that the pursuit he is engaged in is objectively valueless and this means his life is going poorly, but this objection is addressed by the case of Pablo:

Pablo's only desire in life is to produce beautiful works of art. He spends all day outside painting nature, and every evening mixing colours on his palette. He is perfectly content, and with each week that passes he produces still-more stunning landscapes.

Unless one adopts an unattractively distorted conception of the good life, according to which following one's passion for creating great art is not good for oneself but making painful sacrifices (to maximise utility, or be virtuously courageous, or fulfil a perfect duty) is, it is difficult to maintain that the good life must involve attention to the interests of others.

Of course, this does not imply that an egoist will never pay attention to the interests of others. There are instances where doing so would be instrumentally beneficial, such as by providing relatively uncostly assistance to others with the goal of noisily boasting about their "generosity" in order to boost their social standing and have others help them back. But there are several reasons why the possibility that attending to others' interests is sometimes selfishly prudent is not enough to soothe the conflict between the demands of morality and self-interest.

First, many ethical theories place moral importance on an agent's intentions: they state that for an action to be right, it must have been chosen for the right reason. So even though the egoist might instrumentally

Commented [HW1]: This sounds like a category error (even though I don't think that's what you mean). I take it that you mean theism itself rather than, say, a theistic framework of morality or of the good life.

Commented [HW2]: I don't think you show that *only* theism can do this. You show that it's sufficient, not that it's necessary. (And, even then, I'm not sure that theism in just any form is sufficient. More on this below.)

Commented [HW3]: To get a conflict, you don't need the good life to not at all require concern for others' interests. You can make do with the weaker claim that it's not the *only* concern you're required to have—that *at least sometimes* you should do something not in your self-interest.

Commented [HW4]: I found it hard to follow the argument here. How does this connect to the previous sentence? It sounds like you're treating the previous sentence as being about rational egoism, and now you're pushing back against it. But the previous sentence isn't really about rational egoism—an "account of the good life", hedonistic or not, doesn't commit you to accepting rational egoism.

Commented [HW5]: I'm not sure why this is a response to the claim that the hedonic account of self-interest is false. Do you just mean to say that there are other possible accounts of the good life and that, pairing these with rational egoism, they can tell you to do things that morality does not? If so, it could be made clearer.

Commented [RS6R5]: Yes, that was what I was trying to say. The emphasis was on a claim that the *hedonic account* of self interest being false, because all hedonic accounts are false

Commented [HW7]: The triple negative makes this harder to parse.

Commented [RS8]: These are drawn from Crisp and/or Williams, but can't remember where I first read them.

Commented [HW9R8]: I've heard this example many times as well. I think it's one of those examples that's so often repeated that there's no need to give a source.

Commented [HW10]: Is this just an appeal to intuition? I'm not sure it's a compelling one. It doesn't sound like a very good life to me!

Commented [HW11]: Is the case of Pablo supposed to avoid this because beautiful works of art are objectively valuable? That seems a bit controversial.

Commented [HW12]: But it can be pro tanto good for yourself, and making painful sacrifices can be pro tanto bad (both for yourself and morally), without you ever being required to produce art instead of helping people.

Commented [HW13R12]: I think I see what you're getting at here, but it seems to be two different points that are worth making separately: intuitively, it is good for Pablo to produce works of art, but it is not morally good (which is maybe controversial); and, second, intuitively it doesn't seem good for you to make a severe painful sacrifice, even though any ...

Commented [RS14R12]: i.e. you should cite that this is based on intuitions, and intuitively it seems like things are going well for Pablo but that doesn't seem good morally. ...

Commented [RS15]: (Both SEP and Hills make these points about virtue ethics, which seems best placed as a ...

need to pay attention to the interests of others to secure a good life, this would not satisfy the demands of deontological theories if done with selfish motivations in mind. Second, even for consequentialists who care only about outcomes, it is unlikely that this instrumental other-regardingness would reliably conform with even the relatively weak demands of common-sense morality. Take the following example:

Alfred is lying on his deathbed being cared for by his loyal wife, to whom he had always promised his modest inheritance. On a sudden whim (but while still of sound mind), he has the desire to alter his will, stipulating that everything he owns is to be burned on a bonfire, leaving his family penniless. Alfred decides to make this change and dies immediately afterwards, a contented man.

Unless you defend actions like Alfred's as permissible, there will exist cases where self-interest is in conflict with morality. A proponent of the titular claim might assert that egoism is self-effacing, meaning that egoists would always take the morally right actions with the proper non-egoistic moral motivations, and therefore both these arguments fail. But for similar reasons to those already outlined, we should not expect egoism to be fully self-effacing: an egoist can presumably get what is required for a good life by merely pretending to care about others, rather than fully converting to another ethical theory and running the risk of being required to make sacrifices that make their life go less well. So, without the demands generated by our ethical theory being diluted to the point of triviality, there is a conflict between morality and self-interest.

There is no such tension here for theists who believe in divine retribution, because if God determines the content of morality and also ensures that all humans get what they justly deserve during the afterlife, it is always prudent to do what is right. In the absence of a supernatural deity to balance the scales of desert, though, we should be suspicious of the rather surprising and convenient convergence between morality and prudence. The conclusion that acting morally doesn't require any real sacrifice on our part (because the good life involves just the right amount of attention to others) is a comforting one, and this is good grounds to think that we would engage in motivated reasoning to arrive at it. Indeed, both Mill's flawed attempt to prove utilitarianism starting from principles of self-interest and Kant's claim that to be rational is to be bound by moral obligations are arguably instances of this kind of wishful thinking. To put it another way, believing that the titular statement is correct should cause us to update positively on the probability that theism is true, since it is more likely that we would have a convenient alignment between what is morally right and what is prudent in worlds where a god exists to determine those two things, than it is in worlds without one.

To conclude, a good life does not necessarily involve any attention to the interests of others, and even to the extent that it does, tensions with morality remain. Unless one accepts theism, there is therefore a fundamental conflict between morality and self-interest, under any reasonable conception of the two.

Bibliography

Hills (2010): [The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism | Oxford Academic](#)

Commented [RS16]: (There was an intriguing exam question a while ago that asked whether your wellbeing could be affected by things that happen after you die - noting this as something to discuss in the tutorial if we have time.)

Commented [HW17R16]: See section 4: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>

Commented [HW18]: This also requires that it's in his self-interest to follow that sudden desire. Might be worth modifying the case to make it such that the bonfire would also bring him pleasure, happiness, etc. But, even then, some theories of well-being could say it's not good for him. (e.g., objective list theories, or the virtue-ethical notion of well-being as flourishing)

Commented [HW19]: Which claim? Could be clearer.

Commented [HW20R19]: Is the claim that his actions are permissible? If so, why would that be supported by egoism being self-effacing?

Commented [RS21]: Hills discusses this in chp 2, also SEP (under the label of "conversion"). One thing about self-effacingness I'd like to talk about is the coherence of a statement like "it is not enough that I act as if others have weight; I must really give them weight. I could still count as an egoist, in the sense that I have adopted the non-egoist theory on egoist grounds." Surely you can make the case that it is additionally not enough to "really" give them weight on egoist grounds, and so there's no point being self-effacing about it?

Commented [RS22]: Stylistic point: better to say "if theism is true"

Commented [HW23]: This part isn't necessary for what you want to say. As long as acting immorally is punished sufficiently harshly, it's prudent to act morally. It doesn't matter whether God determines the content of morality or whether it originates elsewhere.

Commented [HW24]: But why? The conditional that theism implies such convergences doesn't give you the reverse: that atheism implies non-convergences. Or is this supposed to be just asserting your position, not arguing for it?

Commented [RS25R24]: (Argument is just meant to be that intuitively it doesn't seem plausible for morality and self interest to be aligned, as argued above)

Commented [RS26R24]: Point about subjective (morality & self interest) vs objective, e.g. in case of theism some people might not believe in God and so from their decision-making perspective, self interest could still conflict with morality as they don't expect to be punished by God for misdeeds

Commented [HW27]: Again, not necessary