

## EGOISM AND SELF-LOVE

§1. In the preceding chapters I have used the term "Egoism", as it is most commonly used, to denote a system which prescribes actions as means to the end of the individual's happiness or pleasure. The ruling motive in such a system is commonly said to be "self-love". But both terms admit of other interpretations, which it will be well to distinguish and set aside before proceeding further.

For example, the term "egoistic" is ordinarily and not improperly applied to the basis on which Hobbes attempted to construct morality; and on which alone, as he held, the social order could firmly rest, and escape the storms and convulsions with which it seemed to be menaced from the vagaries of the unenlightened conscience. But it is not strictly the end of Egoism as I have defined it---greatest attainable pleasure for the individual---but rather "self-preservation", which determines the first of those precepts of rational egoism which Hobbes calls "Laws of Nature", viz., "Seek peace and ensue it". And in the development of his system we often find that [it is Preservation](#) rather than Pleasure, or perhaps a compromise between the two, that is taken as the ultimate end and standard of right conduct.

Again, in Spinoza's view the principle of rational action is necessarily egoistic, and is (as with Hobbes) the impulse of self-preservation. The individual mind, says Spinoza, like everything else, strives so far as it is able to continue in its state of being: indeed this effort is its very essence. It is true that the object of this impulse cannot be separated from pleasure or joy; because pleasure or joy is "a passion in which the soul passes to higher perfection". Still it is not at Pleasure that the impulse primarily aims, but at the mind's Perfection or Reality: as we should now say, at Self-realisation or Self-development. Of this, according to Spinoza, the highest form consists in a clear comprehension of all things in their necessary order as modifications of the one Divine Being, and that willing acceptance of all which springs from this comprehension. In this state the mind is purely active, without any admixture of passion or passivity: and thus its essential nature is realised or actualised to the greatest possible degree.

We perceive that this is the notion of Self-realisation as defined not only *by* but *for* a philosopher: and that it would mean something quite different in the case of a man of action---such, for example, as the reflective dramatist of Germany introduces exclaiming

Ich kann mich nicht    Wie so ein Wortheld, so ein Tugend-Schwätzer    An meinem Willen  
warmen, und Gedanken ...    Wenn ich nicht wirke mehr, bin ich vernichtet. [\[2\]](#)

The artist, again, often contemplates his production of the beautiful as a realisation of self: and moralists of a certain turn of mind, in all ages, have similarly regarded the sacrifice of inclination to duty as the highest form of Self-development and held that true self-love prompts us always to obey the commands issued by the governing principle---Reason or Conscience---within us, as in such obedience, however painful, we shall be realising our truest self.

We see, in short, that the term Egoism, so far as it merely implies that reference is made to self in laying down first principles of conduct, does not really indicate in any way the substance of such principles. For all our impulses, high and low, sensual and moral alike, are so far similarly related to self, that---except when two or more impulses come into conscious conflict---we tend to identify ourselves with each as it arises. Thus self-consciousness may be prominent in yielding to any impulse: and egoism, in so far as it merely implies such prominence, is a common form applicable to all principles of action.

It may be said, however, that we do not, properly speaking, 'develop' or 'realise' self by yielding to the impulse which happens to be predominant in us; but by exercising, each in its due place and proper degree, all the different faculties, capacities, and propensities, of which our nature is made up. But here there is an important ambiguity. What do we mean by 'due proportion and proper degree'? These terms may imply an ideal, into conformity with which the individual mind has to be trained, by restraining some of its natural impulses and strengthening others, and developing its higher faculties rather than its lower: or they may merely refer to the original combination and proportion of tendencies in the character with which each is born; to this, it may be meant, we ought to adapt as far as possible the circumstances in which we place ourselves and the functions which we choose to exercise, in order that we may "be ourselves", "live our own life", etc. According to the former interpretation rational Self-development is merely another term for the pursuit of Perfection for oneself: while in the latter sense it hardly appears that Self-development (when clearly distinguished) is really put forward as an absolute end, but rather as a means to happiness; for supposing a man to have inherited propensities clearly tending to his own unhappiness, no one would recommend him to develop these as fully as possible, instead of modifying or subduing them in some way. Whether actually the best way of seeking happiness is to give free play to one's nature, we will hereafter consider in the course of our examination of Hedonism.

On the whole, then, I conclude that the notion of Self realisation is to be avoided in a treatise on ethical method, on account of its indefiniteness: and for a similar reason we must discard a common account of Egoism which describes its ultimate end as the 'good' of the individual; for the term 'good' may cover all possible views of the ultimate end of rational conduct. Indeed it may be said that Egoism in this sense was assumed in the whole ethical controversy of ancient Greece; that is, it was assumed on all sides that [a rational individual](#) would make the pursuit of his own good his supreme aim: the controverted question was whether this Good was rightly conceived as Pleasure or Virtue, or any *tertium quid*. Nor is the ambiguity removed if we follow Aristotle in confining our attention to the Good attainable in human life, and call this Well-being (*Eudaimonia*). For we may still argue with the Stoics, that virtuous or excellent activities and not pleasures are the elements of which true human Well-being is composed. Indeed Aristotle himself adopts this view, so far as to determine the details of Well-being accordingly: though he does not, with the Stoics, regard the pursuit of Virtue and that of Pleasure as competing alternatives, holding rather that the "best pleasure" is an inseparable concomitant of the most excellent action. Even the English term Happiness is not free from [a similar ambiguity](#). It seems, indeed, to be commonly used in Bentham's way as convertible with Pleasure,---or rather as denoting that of which the constituents are pleasures---and it is in this sense that I think it most convenient to use it. Sometimes, however, in ordinary discourse, the term is rather employed to denote a particular kind of agreeable consciousness, which is distinguished from and even contrasted with definite specific pleasures---such as the gratifications of sensual appetite or other

keen and vehement desires---as being at once calmer and more indefinite: we may characterise it as the feeling which accompanies the normal activity of a ``healthy mind in a healthy body'', and of which specific pleasures seem to be rather stimulants than elements. Sometimes, again---though, I think, with a more manifest divergence from common usage---``happiness'' or ``true happiness'' is understood in a [definitely non-hedonistic sense](#), as denoting results other than agreeable feelings of any kind.

§2. To be clear, then, we must particularise as the object of Self-love, and End of the method which I have distinguished as Egoistic Hedonism, Pleasure, taken in its widest sense, as including every species of ``delight'', ``enjoyment'', or ``satisfaction''; except so far as any particular species may be excluded by its incompatibility with some greater pleasures, or as necessarily involving concomitant or subsequent pains. It is thus that Self-love [seems to be understood by Butler](#) and other English moralists after him; as a desire of one's own pleasure generally, and of the greatest amount of it obtainable, from whatever source it may be obtained. In fact, it is upon this generality and comprehensiveness that the `authority' and `reasonableness' attributed to Self-love in Butler's system are founded. For satisfaction or pleasure of some kind results from gratifying any impulse; thus when antagonistic impulses compete for the determination of the Will, we are prompted by the desire for pleasure in general to compare the pleasures which we foresee will respectively attend the gratification of either impulse, and when we have ascertained which set of pleasures is the greatest, Self-love or the desire for pleasure in general reinforces the corresponding impulse. It is thus called into play whenever impulses conflict, and is therefore naturally regulative and directive (as Butler argues) of other springs of action. On this view, so far as Self-love operates, we merely consider the amount of pleasure or satisfaction: to use Bentham's illustration, ``quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry''.

This position, however, seems to many offensively paradoxical; and [J. S. Mill in his development of Bentham's doctrine thought](#) it desirable to abandon it and to take into account differences in quality among pleasures as well as differences in degree. Now here we may observe, first, that it is quite consistent with the view quoted as Bentham's to describe some kinds of pleasure as inferior in quality to others, if by `a pleasure' we mean (as is often meant) a whole state of consciousness which is only partly pleasurable; and still more if we take into view subsequent states. For many pleasures are not free from pain even while enjoyed; and many more have painful consequences. Such pleasures are, in Bentham's phrase, ``impure': and as the pain has to be set off as a drawback in valuing the pleasure, it is in accordance with strictly quantitative measurement of pleasure to call them inferior in kind. And again, we must be careful not to confound intensity of *pleasure* with intensity of *sensation*: as a pleasant feeling may be strong and absorbing, and yet not so pleasant as another that is more subtle and delicate. With these explanations, it seems to me that in order to work out consistently the method that takes pleasure as the sole ultimate end of rational conduct, Bentham's proposition must be accepted, and all *qualitative* comparison of pleasures must really resolve itself into quantitative. For all pleasures are understood to be so called because they have a common property of pleasantness, and may therefore be compared in respect of this common property. If, then, what we are seeking is pleasure as such, and pleasure alone, we must evidently always prefer the more pleasant pleasure to the less pleasant: no other choice seems reasonable, unless we are aiming at

something besides pleasure. And often when we say that one kind of pleasure is better than another---as (*e.g.*) that the pleasures of reciprocated affection are superior in quality to the pleasures of gratified appetite---we mean that they are more pleasant. No doubt we may mean something else: we may mean, for instance, that they are nobler and more elevated, although less pleasant. But then we are clearly introducing a non-hedonistic ground of preference: and if this is done, the method adopted is a perplexing mixture of Intuitionism and Hedonism.

To sum up: Egoism, if we merely understand by it a method that aims at Self-realisation, seems to be a form into which almost any ethical system may be thrown, without modifying its essential characteristics. And even when further defined as Egoistic Hedonism, it is still imperfectly distinguishable from Intuitionism if quality of pleasures is admitted as a consideration distinct from and overruling quantity. There remains then Pure or Quantitative Egoistic Hedonism, which, as a method essentially distinct from all others and widely maintained to be rational, seems to deserve a detailed examination. According to this the rational agent regards quantity of consequent pleasure and pain to himself as alone important in choosing between alternatives of action; and seeks always the greatest attainable surplus of pleasure over pain---which, without violation of usage, we may designate as his 'greatest happiness'. It seems to be this view and attitude of mind which is most commonly intended by the vaguer terms 'egoism', 'egoistic': and therefore I shall allow myself to use these terms in this more precise signification.