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Taking Egoism Seriously

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Abstract Though utilitarianism is far from being universally accepted in the philosophical community, it is taken seriously and treated respectfully. Its critics do not dismiss it out of hand; they do not misrepresent it; they do not belittle or disparage its proponents. They allow the theory to be articulated, developed, and defended from criticism, even if they go on to reject the modified versions. Ethical egoism, a longstanding rival of utilitarianism, is treated very differently. It is said to be "refuted" by arguments of a sort that apply equally well to utilitarianism. It is said to be "unprovable," when many of the greatest utilitarians themselves, such as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900), admitted that *no* normative ethical theory, including their own, is provable. Critics of ethical egoism seldom discuss the various theoretical moves that utilitarians are routinely allowed to make, such as (1) fighting the facts, (2) transforming the theory from "act utilitarianism" to "rule utilitarianism," and (3) biting the bullet. This essay argues that every defensive move made by utilitarians can be made, with equal vigor (if not also plausibility), by ethical egoists. The conclusion is that ethical egoism deserves to be taken more seriously than it is.

Keywords Ethical egoism · Utilitarianism · Normative ethical theory · Moral philosophy · Argumentation · Criticism

> Ethical Egoism haunts moral philosophy. It is not a popular doctrine; the most important philosophers have rejected it outright. But it has never been very far from their minds. Almost every ethicist has felt it necessary to explain what's wrong with the theory, as though the very possibility that it might be correct was hanging in the air, threatening to smother their other ideas. As the merits of the various "refutations" have

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been debated, philosophers have returned to it again and again (Rachels and Rachels 2007, 81).

1 Introduction

Utilitarianism has had many able and articulate defenders during its two centuries or so of existence. Among these are Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick, and R. M. Hare. But it has had just as many—if not more—able and articulate critics, such as Immanuel Kant, W. D. Ross, and John Rawls. The clash between defender and critic over such a long period of time has elevated the level of analysis and argumentation, from which all moral philosophers benefit. Even the most trenchant critics of utilitarianism (e.g., Williams 1973) show their respect for the theory—and, indirectly, for those who propound it—by taking it seriously. They do not belittle it, misrepresent it, dismiss it out of hand, or call it or its proponents names. They *engage* it, and they do so, for the most part, charitably.

The same cannot be said of one of utilitarianism's rivals, egoism, which has an even longer pedigree than utilitarianism. When egoism is discussed in philosophical textbooks at all, it is treated with condescension bordering on contempt. Its proponents, such as Ayn Rand, are portrayed as intellectual lightweights—or worse, as kooks.[1] Sometimes the theory appears to be included in textbooks for the sole purpose of showing impressionable readers how one disposes of, or refutes, a "false" or "incorrect" theory. James Rachels, the author of a widely used textbook on moral philosophy,[2] calls egoism "a wicked view."[3] Another philosopher, Holmes Rolston, says that, "If moral philosphers [*sic*] have nearly agreed to anything, they agree that ethical egoism (I ought *always* do what is in my enlightened self-interest) is both incoherent and immoral."[4] Sixty-eight years ago, A. C. Ewing described egoistic hedonism (a special case of egoism) as a "preposterous" ethical theory.[5]

2 Disrespect

Here is an example of the disparate treatment of egoism and utilitarianism. In his 1978 textbook *Introductory Ethics*, which is still in print and still widely used in ethics courses, Fred Feldman devotes four chapters (of the book's 16) to utilitarianism, but only one chapter to egoism. The disparity in length, in itself, is of no concern. It's how he *treats* the two theories that is troubling. In his chapter entitled "Problems for Act Utilitarianism," Feldman discusses a number of objections to

[1] One prominent philosopher who did *not* treat Rand dismissively is Robert Nozick (1971).
[2] According to its new coauthor, Stuart Rachels (the son of James), *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* is "the best-selling textbook in philosophy." Rachels 2011.
[3] Rachels 1974, 298. Rachels also calls it "a pernicious doctrine." Ibid., 297. Perhaps Rachels (a utilitarian) was projecting, for a recent empirical study discloses that "the endorsement of utilitarian solutions to a set of commonly-used moral dilemmas correlates with a set of psychological traits that can be characterized as emotionally callous and manipulative—traits that most would perceive as not only psychologically unhealthy, but also morally undesirable" (Bartels and Pizarro 2011, 154).
[4] Rolston 1988, 294 (emphasis in original).
[5] Ewing 1944, 130. "Preposterous" means "utterly absurd; outrageous" or "contrary to nature, reason, or common sense." *The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide* 1999, 785.

utilitarianism. Among these are (1) that it cannot account for supererogatory actions; (2) that it cannot account for trivial actions; (3) that it cannot account for the obligatoriness of promises; (4) that it authorizes punishment of innocent people; and (5) that it is insensitive to how benefits and burdens are distributed.

At no point in his discussion of utilitarianism does Feldman say, or imply, that any of these objections is decisive. He says of the supererogation objection, for example, that "the existence of supererogatory acts remains a problem for the act utilitarian" (page 50). He says of the utilitarian's reply to the triviality objection that the reader must determine for himself or herself whether it is satisfactory. Of the promising objection, he writes, "it appears that some facts about promising provide us with a major objection to act utilitarianism, as ordinarily understood" (page 55). Of the punishment objection, he says, "It is left to the reader to consider whether there is any way in which a utilitarian might rebut this objection" (page 59). Here is how Feldman summarizes the chapter:

> We have now considered several different objections to . . . utilitarianism. In each case, it was alleged that some action, or kind of action, receives an incorrect evaluation under [the theory]. Objections such as these must be weighed carefully. Each reader must reflect, in regard to each objection, whether the results of the application of [utilitarianism] are correct, or whether the intuitions of the objectors are correct. Aside from this appeal to the intuitions of impartial, reflective, and careful individuals, there seems to be no way to determine whether . . . utilitarianism has been refuted (page 60 [bracketed material and ellipses added]).

This, I hope the reader will agree, is respectful treatment. Indeed, one might consider it a *paradigm* of respectful treatment.

Skipping ahead two chapters to Feldman's discussion of egoism, we find a different tone. After clarifying the theory (which includes showing how it differs from utilitarianism) and after discussing several arguments for and against egoism—with inconclusive results—Feldman closes the chapter with a section entitled "The Refutation of Egoism." (There was, significantly, no section entitled "The Refutation of Utilitarianism.") The "refutation" concerns the following case:

> A man is the treasurer of a large pension fund. He is entrusted with the job of keeping track of and investing the money deposited by the workers. When a worker retires, the worker is entitled to draw a weekly sum from the fund. Suppose the treasurer discovers that it will be possible for him to use all the money for his own selfish pleasure without being caught. Perhaps he wants to buy a large yacht and sail to a South Sea island, there to live out his days in idleness, indulgence, procreation, and, in a word, enjoyment. Since there is no extradition treaty between the South Sea island and the United States, he can get away with it.
>
> Let us also suppose that if the treasurer does abscond with the funds, hundreds of old people will be deprived of their pensions. They will be heartbroken to discover that instead of living comfortably on the money they had put into the pension fund, they will have to suffer the pain and indignity of poverty (page 95).

According to Feldman, egoism implies that stealing the money is the right thing to do. But, he adds, stealing the money is *not* the right thing to do. Therefore, by *modus tollens*, egoism is false. "This argument," he says, "decisively refutes egoism, as do an enormous number of other arguments along the same lines. Our conclusion, then,

is that egoism can be formulated in such a way as to be a consistent moral doctrine. Nevertheless, when so formulated, it simply is not true" (page 96).[6]

Feldman is respectful to the point of obsequiousness when discussing utilitarianism, but claims to have "refuted" egoism. He leaves it to his readers to determine whether the objections to utilitarianism are decisive, but makes the decision *for* them when it comes to egoism. Utilitarians are allowed to reply to objections with all the ingenuity and vigor they can muster; egoists are ushered out of the room before they can speak.

With all due respect to my philosophical colleagues, such as Feldman, this disparagement of egoism and its proponents must stop. It is unfair and unseemly—and frankly, it gives philosophy and philosophers a bad name, for many students (readers of Rand, for example) are strongly attracted to egoism. If contemporary philosophers fail to engage it, openly and fairly, without disparagement or condescension, then perhaps it is *philosophy* and not *egoism* that must go—or so a student might conclude. The purpose of this essay is to persuade my fellow moral philosophers, and especially *teachers* of moral philosophy, that egoism deserves to be taken as seriously as utilitarianism, Kantianism, contractarianism, or any other normative ethical theory. Charity, to which we (as philosophers) profess to be committed, demands no less.

The specific aim of this essay, taken up in Sections 5, 6, and 7, is to show that every analytical and argumentative move made by a defender of utilitarianism can be made with equal vigor and sophistication—I myself would add "plausibility," but I realize that not everyone will agree with that further claim—by a defender of egoism. This strategy has its limitations, of course. Even if successful, it shows only that egoism and utilitarianism stand or fall together. One might conclude that both *fall*. But utilitarianism already has the respect (though not the endorsement[7]) of the philosophical community, so the argument, if successful, cannot but increase the respect accorded to egoism.

3 Egoism and Utilitarianism

My reason for discussing utilitarianism in particular rather than consequentialism in general is that egoism, no less than utilitarianism, *is* a consequentialist ethical theory.[8] The difference between egoism and utilitarianism is not that one is and one is not consequentialist, but that utilitarianism requires impartiality. There are many possible partialist ethical theories. One can hold that the right thing to do is to maximize the utility of one's compatriots, one's coreligionists, one's racial or ethnic group, one's community, one's tribe, or one's family. Egoism, for purposes of this essay, is the view that the right thing to do is to maximize *one's own* utility. Egoism and utilitarianism therefore lie at opposite ends of the partiality spectrum. It might be said, following Feldman (1978, 82), that egoism is *individualistic* consequentialism, whereas utilitarianism is *universalistic* consequentialism. Nationalism,

[6] A similar conclusion is drawn by James Cornman, Keith Lehrer, and George Pappas, who claim, in their textbook, that "ethical egoism ought to be rejected . . . because there is no sound argument to support it and because it prescribes certain morally repugnant actions." Cornman et al. 1982, 289–90 (ellipsis added). To be fair, these authors also claim that *utilitarianism* "is clearly wrong" and "should be rejected." Ibid., 305. In other words, there is no sound argument to support utilitarianism, either.

[7] William Shaw, a utilitarian, points out that "Although many philosophers reject utilitarianism, those working in normative ethics, legal theory, or social and political philosophy cannot avoid situating themselves with reference to it." Shaw 1999, ix.

[8] For an attempt to work out a deontological (i.e., a nonconsequentialist) version of egoism, see Burgess-Jackson 2003.

racialism, communalism, tribalism, and familialism (as they might be called) lie at different points between these poles.[9]

The statements of the two theories bring out their common structure. Here is how Feldman states utilitarianism:

> An act is right if and only if there is no other act the agent could have done instead that has higher utility than it has (page 26).

Here is Feldman's statement of egoism:

> An act is morally right if and only if no alternative to that act has higher agent utility than it has (page 82).

The only substantive difference between these formulations is the maximand (i.e., thing to be maximized). Utilitarianism requires the maximization of utility (which of course includes the agent's utility), while egoism requires the maximization of *agent* utility.[10] There is no need to dwell here on the concept of utility. However it is understood—as pleasure, as happiness, as the satisfaction of preferences, as the satisfaction of desires, or as well-being—it applies to both theories. For purposes of this essay, everything is to be held constant *except* the maximand.

4 How to Criticize a Theory

A theory, whether positive or normative, can be criticized in either (or both) of two ways. An *internal* criticism seeks to show that the theory is incoherent. A theory can be incoherent either because it has inconsistent implications (i.e., gives contradictory or contrary results, makes contradictory or contrary predictions) or because its components are not mutually supportive. A consensus has emerged among moral philosophers that every attempt to demonstrate the incoherence of egoism has failed, so there is no reason to say anything further on that score (see, e.g., Rachels and Rachels 2007, 83–5). An *external* criticism, by contrast, seeks to show that the theory has false or unacceptable implications. Just as anything that implies a falsehood is false, anything that implies an unacceptable proposition is unacceptable. This type of criticism has the form of a *modus tollens* argument:

1. Theory T implies proposition p.
2. p is false or unacceptable.

Therefore,

3. T is false or unacceptable.

For example, it might be argued that utilitarianism implies that it is sometimes morally permissible to punish the innocent. If one accepts the proposition that utilitarianism has this implication, but rejects the proposition that it is sometimes morally permissible to punish the innocent, then one is committed, logically, to rejecting utilitarianism.

Given the validity of the inference, there are only three moves available to a proponent of the theory. The first is to accept the conclusion but insist that it doesn't matter. This move will be addressed in Section 5. The second is to reject the first (or major) premise. This move

[9] For a more in-depth discussion of the similarities and differences between egoism and utilitarianism, see Burgess-Jackson (2012).

[10] See Sidgwick 1981, 84, for a discussion of the similarities between the theories.

will be addressed in Section 6. The third is to reject the second (or minor) premise. This move will be addressed in Section 7.

5 Accepting the Conclusion

One common move made by utilitarians in response to criticism of their theory is to question the relevance of the critic's example. Suppose the example that allegedly falsifies utilitarianism is fanciful or fantastic. Why should the utilitarian be concerned? Utilitarianism—it is said—is designed to provide moral guidance in the world as we know it (i.e., the real world), not in some world of our imagination (an ideal world). In effect, the utilitarian concedes that the example goes against the theory, but then adds, "So what?" T. L. S. Sprigge (1968) employs this strategy to defuse a criticism by H. J. McCloskey (1968). McCloskey had described a case in which the only way to prevent a devastating riot was to frame an innocent man. Since utilitarianism would endorse the framing, he said, and since it's wrong to frame an innocent person, utilitarianism must be rejected. Sprigge replied to McCloskey as follows:

> Situations instanced in which utilitarian judgements are alleged to be offensive to our common moral consciousness . . . may be of three kinds. First, they may be actual or relevantly akin to actual situations. Second, they may be situations not establishable as actual or akin to such, but not establishable either as such as will never have occurred. Thirdly, they may be logically possible situations, but ones which there is good reason to suppose will never have occurred (Sprigge 1968, 274).

While he is not as clear as one might hope, Sprigge appears to be saying that (1) every example is either real or hypothetical and (2) every hypothetical example is either realistic or fanciful. In other words, every example is either real, realistic, or fanciful. The utilitarian, in his view, should pay no heed to fanciful examples, since, by definition, they are not likely to arise in the real world. But he admits that if they *did* arise, they would count against utilitarianism.

An egoist can make the same move. Many of the examples cited by critics of egoism are fanciful in Sprigge's sense. Take Feldman's pension case, in which stealing the pensioners' money would—he supposes—maximize the thief's utility. Feldman stipulates that there is no extradition treaty between the South Sea island and the United States. But even if this is so, there is a temporal gap *of some duration* between the time the treasurer takes the money and the time he reaches the island. During this time, he runs the risk of being apprehended by authorities and returned for trial and punishment. Surely *that* is not in his long-term interest! In the real world, thieves tend to get their comeuppance, either through legal punishment or through informal measures such as ostracism and vengeance. The point is not that this defense against criticism always *works*. The point, rather, is that it is as likely to work in the case of egoism as it is in the case of utilitarianism. If fanciful examples are irrelevant to the truth or acceptability of a theory, as Sprigge suggests, then they are irrelevant whether the theory is utilitarianism, egoism, or something else.

6 Rejecting the Major Premise

6.1 Fighting the Facts

The first premise of the critic's *modus tollens* argument asserts that the theory in question has a particular implication—one that the second premise goes on to deny. A proponent of the

theory may reject the first (or major) premise by showing that the theory, properly understood and properly applied to the facts of the case, does not have the stated implication.[11] In effect, the theorist claims that the theory has been misunderstood or misapplied (or both) by the critic. Let us return to McCloskey's example:

> Suppose a utilitarian were visiting an area in which there was racial strife, and that, during his visit, a negro rapes a white woman, and that race riots occur as a result of the crime, white mobs, with the connivance of the police, bashing and killing negroes, etc. Suppose too that our utilitarian is in the area of the crime when it is committed such that his testimony could bring about the conviction of a particular negro. If he knows that a quick arrest will stop the riots and lynchings, surely, as a utilitarian, he must conclude that he has a duty to bear false witness in order to bring about the punishment of an innocent person. In such a situation, he has, on utilitarian theory, an evident duty to bring about the punishment of an innocent man (McCloskey 1968, 249).

Sprigge (1968, 278) fights the facts. "Does it really seem on the cards," he asks, "that in a situation where race riots are going on as a result of a rape, you will find no more effective way of forwarding your aim in this area than to bear false witness against some unfortunate Negro, thus ensuring that at least one human being is thoroughly miserable?" Specifically, how does the imagined utilitarian *know* that a quick arrest will stop the riots and lynchings? All such judgments are fallible. While it is foreseeable that the framed man and his family and friends will be miserable as a result of the frame-up, it is little more than a "hunch" that the frame-up will stop the riots and lynchings. "In that case," Sprigge says, "the sensible utilitarian will attach a predominating weight to the former prediction, and refrain from framing the man" (1968, 280).

Notice Sprigge's strategy. It does not consist in accepting the permissibility of the frame-up. That would be to reject the *second* premise of the critical argument. Rather, it consists in denying that utilitarianism *authorizes* a frame-up. "It seems to me . . . highly unlikely," he writes (1968, 282 [ellipsis added]), "that in a situation at all like the one described by McCloskey a man guided by a cool assessment of probabilities rather than by wild surmises will see such bearing of false witness as the most felicific act." Many defenses of utilitarianism pursue precisely this strategy. They involve showing that certain foreseeable consequences of the proposed act have been disregarded or discounted, with the result that what *appeared* to be the utility-maximizing act is not *really* the utility-maximizing act. Sprigge is saying, in other words, that McCloskey either (1) does not understand utilitarianism or (2) is misapplying it. As for *why* McCloskey misunderstands or misapplies the theory, it might have to do with his lack of sympathy for it. Of course, McCloskey could reply by saying that Sprigge has *too much* sympathy for utilitarianism (his "pet" theory), and thus fails to see its (obvious) shortcomings.

An egoist can reply to criticism in the same way utilitarians do. Here is an example from a recent essay by Tara Smith:

> Suppose that Alex receives a job offer on the other side of the country and he asks his friend Bill for advice as to whether he should accept it. Bill recognizes the offer as an excellent opportunity for Alex, the net effect of which will significantly enhance Alex's overall well-being. Bill also realizes, however, that Alex's relocation would

[11] The colorful name for this move, which is said to occur while criticizing a constructive dilemma, is "grabbing (or grasping) the bull by the horn."

> result in the loss of many features of their friendship that Bill enjoys. Should Bill advise Alex to accept the offer or to remain near at hand so that he (Bill) can enjoy the benefits of their living in close proximity? If Bill is an egoist, doesn't he have to advise Alex to decline the job and to stay put? And, in doing so, doesn't Bill reveal the incompatibility of egoism with true friendship? (Smith 2005, 270).

The critical argument goes like this: If egoism is true, then Bill should advise Alex to decline the job offer (since, by hypothesis, that would maximize Bill's utility); but Bill should *not* advise Alex to decline the job offer (since, by hypothesis, the net effect of Alex's accepting the offer would be to significantly enhance Alex's overall well-being); therefore, egoism is not true.

Smith, an egoist, rejects the major premise, just as Sprigge, a utilitarian, rejected the major premise of McCloskey's critical argument. She does so by showing that egoism, properly understood and properly applied, does not have the stated implication. "To suppose that Bill should advise Alex to decline the job reveals an extremely superficial understanding of the nature of self-interest and of the nature of love" (2005, 270). It is in Bill's self-interest for Alex, his friend, to be happy, healthy, and whole. How can Alex be happy, healthy, and whole if he does not accept a position that is so obviously in his long-term best interests? If Alex declines the job in reliance on Bill's advice, he is likely to experience regret, self-doubt, and frustration, all of which will adversely affect his relationship with Bill. Also, it is unlikely that Bill's deception will escape Alex's notice, and once Alex learns of it, or even suspects it, it will generate tension between them, perhaps to the point of destroying their friendship. "The artifice, suspicion, and mutual misgivings (if only subterranean) that have been introduced into the relationship are bound to exact some toll on the bonds of trust between the two men and on the quality of their time together—the very thing that Bill meant to be protecting, through his deliberately harmful advice."[12]

The suggestion here is not that Smith gets the better of her imagined critic. Nor, earlier, was the suggestion that Sprigge got the better of McCloskey. The point is that an egoist can make the same type of reply to criticism as a utilitarian. If a utilitarian can fight the facts, why can't an egoist fight the facts? If it's open to a utilitarian to show that certain consequences of an act are being disregarded or discounted, why is it not open to an egoist to show that certain consequences of an act are being disregarded or discounted? Either both moves are respectable or neither move is respectable.

6.2 Modifying the Theory

As was shown in Section 4, there is more than one way to reject the first premise of a critical argument. The first involved fighting the facts. The second consists in modifying the theory so that it makes reference to rules as well as to concrete acts. Here is how Feldman states rule utilitarianism:

> An act is morally right if and only if it is prescribed by a correct moral rule for its situation (1978, 64).

[12] Smith 2005, 271. As this example shows, egoism is every bit as austere and demanding as utilitarianism. However, instead of requiring strict impartiality between *individuals*, where the temptation is to favor *certain* individuals (including oneself), it requires strict impartiality between *temporal stages of one's self*, where the temptation is to favor one's *current* self. As C. I. Lewis put it, "There is no automatic inclination always on the side of prudence. Instead we natively incline to choose the immediate or nearer goods, to the prejudice of more remote ones and of the rational interest in the greatest or highest good in a whole lifetime. Meeting the requirements of prudence calls for self-government" (Lewis 1969, 108).

A moral rule is "correct" when it has higher conformance utility than any alternative. "Conformance utility" is the utility that would accrue if everyone in the situation governed by the rule conformed to it. The idea behind rule utilitarianism is that acts should be evaluated indirectly rather than directly. First, one formulates rules such that conformance with them would maximize utility. Having done this, one evaluates acts in accordance with the rules.

To see the advantage of rule utilitarianism over act utilitarianism, consider McCloskey's case of the framed man. Act utilitarianism seemed to imply that it would be right to conduct the frame-up, since that act, of all those available to the agent, would maximize overall utility. Needless to say, this is not a happy result for the utilitarian. Rule utilitarianism shifts the focus from (1) the concrete act to (2) the rule under which the act falls. A rule that prohibits the framing of innocent persons arguably has greater utility than any alternative rule, including one that allows frame-ups in particular cases, so complying with the rule on *every* occasion, rather than making a case-by-case determination, will maximize overall utility. According to rule utilitarianism, therefore, it would be wrong to frame the innocent man in McCloskey's case. By thus modifying utilitarianism, one gets the intuitively correct (or satisfying) result.

It has been argued that rule utilitarianism collapses into, or is extensionally equivalent to, act utilitarianism, in which case it constitutes no improvement over act utilitarianism. Some utilitarians (e.g., Smart 1956, 349) refer to rule utilitarianism, disparagingly, as "rule-worship,"[13] the thought being that rules should be dispensed with when it is known that a particular act that goes against the rule maximizes utility. There is no need to enter these debates here. All that needs to be observed is that the same move can be made in the case of egoism. Recall the pension case. The facts were such that the theft of the pensioners' money was in the long-term interest of the thief, and therefore, according to egoism, the right thing to do. But surely there are many other cases of theft—probably the vast majority of them—that are *not* in the agent's long-term interest. Many thieves, after all, are apprehended and punished by authorities. Many are blacklisted by employers, scorned by prospective business partners, and shunned by friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and neighbors. Conformity to a rule that *forbids* stealing is likely to be in the long-term interest of individuals. This theory, which has affinities to rule utilitarianism, may be called "rule egoism." Gregory Kavka argues (persuasively, in my opinion) that Thomas Hobbes was a rule egoist.[14] Here is how Kavka states the theory:

> Each agent should attempt always to follow that set of general rules of conduct whose acceptance (and sincere attempt to follow) by him on all occasions would produce the best (expected) outcomes for him.[15]

Unfortunately, authors of textbooks rarely, if ever, consider the possibility that egoism can be modified in this way.[16] This is another instance of asymmetry in the treatment of

[13] Two decades after coining the term "rule worship," Smart apologized to rule utilitarians for his use of it. See Smart 1977, 135. By 1991, however, he was back to his old ways, describing rule utilitarianism as "absurd rule worship." See Smart 1991, 371.

[14] Kavka 1986, chap. 9. Stephen Darwall concurs, though without characterizing Hobbes as a rule egoist. What Hobbes denies, Darwall writes, "is that it is ever *wise* to break a covenant, even in a state of nature, unless the contract has been voided by reasonable suspicion of the other's defaulting. Hobbes's reason was that even if there are cases where breaking a covenant might be beneficial, one can never *know* for sure that one is in such a situation, and the risks and costs are such that the wisest *policy* is always to keep a covenant rather than taking a chance." Darwall 1998, 105 (emphasis in original).

[15] Kavka 1986, 358–9. Kavka calls this principle "REP," for rule-egoistic principle.

[16] An exception is Kagan 1998, 194–204, esp. 199.

utilitarianism and egoism. Utilitarians are allowed to develop their theories in response to criticism. Egoists are not. Only the simplest, most primitive, and least plausible version of egoism is considered.[17]

7 Rejecting the Minor Premise

The final defensive move made by the utilitarian involves bullet-biting. The term "bullet-biting" is a technical philosophical term, probably deriving from battlefield or wilderness surgery.[18] If Stillmon has to amputate Lewis's leg, without anesthesia, Lewis is going to feel terrible pain. About all Stillmon can do, since he cannot alleviate the pain itself, is give Lewis a bullet to bite down on in order to help him *cope* with the pain. Philosophically, the move consists in rejecting the minor premise of a critical argument. The minor premise of McCloskey's argument is that it is wrong to frame the innocent man. A utilitarian can deny this, claiming that, *in the circumstances*, framing the innocent man would be the *right* thing to do. A bullet-biter sticks with his or her theory even when it is painful to do so. One of the more famous statements of this strategy is by the philosopher J. J. C. Smart:

> Admittedly utilitarianism does have consequences which are incompatible with the common moral consciousness, but I tended to take the view "so much the worse for the common moral consciousness". That is, I was inclined to reject the common methodology of testing general ethical principles by seeing how they square with our feelings in particular instances (Smart 1973, 68).

Smart, like Bentham before him, views utilitarianism as a revisionary moral theory. Its aim, as he sees it, is not to reconstruct, elucidate, systematize, or undergird commonsense morality, but to revise, reform, or reconfigure it. When the theory generates results that go against either commonsense morality or his own pretheoretical intuitions, Smart is troubled, but not enough to induce him to abandon or modify his theory. In effect, he has more faith in the correctness of his theory—act utilitarianism—than in any intuition with which it clashes.

[17] Feldman, for example, devotes three chapters to act utilitarianism and one to rule utilitarianism, for a total of four chapters on utilitarianism. He devotes one chapter to egoism. He does not consider rule egoism. It might be said that the reason rule egoism is not discussed by critics is that it has had no proponents (other than Hobbes). This is false. John Hospers (1973) described (and named) such a theory in 1973. In that essay, Hospers suggested that Ayn Rand is best interpreted as a rule egoist. See ibid., 393–4. More recently, Stephen Buckle has interpreted Peter Singer (!) as a rule egoist (though without using that label). See Buckle 2005, 187 ("It seems . . . that, for Singer, ethics must rest on a foundation of carefully-calculated (or as he calls it, 'prudent') egoism" [ellipsis added]).

Another attempt to modify utilitarianism so as to avoid its many unsavory implications is R. M. Hare's two-level approach. See Hare 1981, chap. 2. Hare writes:

> The two kinds of utilitarianism . . . can coexist at their respective levels; the critical thinker considers cases in an act-utilitarian or specific rule-utilitarian way, and on the basis of these he selects . . . general prima facie principles for use, in a general rule-utilitarian way, at the intuitive level" (Hare 1981, 43 [ellipses added]).

The words "utilitarianism" and "utilitarian" can be replaced, respectively, by "egoism" and "egoistic." I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for recommending that I consider Hare's approach as falling under this heading (viz., "Modifying the Theory").

[18] According to philosopher and lexicographer Robert M. Martin, "The phrase [viz., "biting the bullet"] comes from old movies, in which wounded cowboys bit down on a bullet to help them stand the pain of surgery without anaesthetic" (Martin 2002, 44).

Peter Singer is another notable bullet-biter. In his view, moral theorizing should be done from the top down, not from the bottom up. First, one selects "a theory that is based on a fundamental axiom that seems . . . clear and undeniable" (Singer 1974, 516 [ellipsis added]); then one applies the theory to particular fact situations, accepting whatever conclusions it generates. Singer also rejects the familiar Rawlsian strategy of seeking a "reflective equilibrium" between one's theory and one's judgments in particular cases. Singer believes that "all the particular moral judgments we intuitively make are likely to derive from discarded religious systems, from warped views of sex and bodily functions, or from customs necessary for the survival of the group in social and economic circumstances that now lie in the distant past."[19] If this is so, then allowing intuitions to serve as the test of a moral theory (or even as *a* test of a moral theory) would rob the theory of its critical capacity. Moral theory would become a conservative rather than a progressive force, contrary to the intentions of its proponents.

If utilitarians such as Smart and Singer can bite the bullet, why can't egoists? If a utilitarian can deny that it's wrong to punish the innocent man in McCloskey's example, why can't an egoist deny that it's wrong for the treasurer to steal the pension money in Feldman's example? One can ask these questions without *defending* either of the judgments. The point is that if *one* theorist is allowed to make a certain type of move, so should the other. If intuitions may be discounted or disregarded in one case, then they may be discounted or disregarded in the other case. Critics of egoism should stop employing a double standard.[20] Either condemn bullet-biting wherever it occurs or respect it wherever it occurs.[21]

8 Objections and Replies

By this point in the essay, at least three objections will have occurred to the discerning reader. The first is that there is an important difference between utilitarianism and egoism, namely, that utilitarianism, but not egoism, can be proved to be correct. If this is so, then, even if egoism can be defended from criticism in the ways described, it cannot be *established*, for presumably only one moral theory can be established as correct. In reply to this objection, one can simply point out that neither Bentham, Mill, nor Sidgwick—three of the

[19] Singer 1974, 516. Shelly Kagan, another revisionary utilitarian, replies to the objection that consequentialism (a superset of utilitarianism) is too demanding by suggesting that "Perhaps our moral intuitions should be given little or no weight in general." Kagan 1998, 159.

[20] Here is a flagrant example of the double standard. In 1974, James Rachels argued that egoism is "not correct" because it has what he considers to be a false implication. Rachels 1974, 309. In 1979, he *rejected* a similar argument against utilitarianism, claiming that "The most famous objections to act-utilitarianism . . . are little more than descriptions of the theory, with the question-begging addendum, 'Because it says *that*, it can't be right'" (Rachels 1979, 169 n. 12 [italics in original; ellipsis added]). That is to say, Rachels allows utilitarians, but not egoists, to bite the bullet. Another example comes from William Shaw, who writes: "[E]goism is an implausible theory of right and wrong. By reducing everything to individual self-interest, egoism permits any action whatsoever—theft, extortion, arson, or murder—as long as it advances the interests of the agent" (Shaw 1999, 17). One could just as easily have written the following: "*Utilitarianism* is an implausible theory of right and wrong. By reducing everything to *the maximization of utility*, *utilitarianism* permits any action whatsoever—theft, extortion, arson, or murder—as long as it advances *utility*." The problem Shaw identifies inheres in *consequentialism*, of which utilitarianism and egoism are but two species. It does not inhere in egoism *per se*.

[21] According to Alan Donagan, "Every moral system gives rise to hard cases, in which those who accept it must, contrary to their desire, cause harm or permit it" (Donagan 1977, 180). Put differently, every normative ethical theorist must bite at least one bullet.

greatest utilitarians—believed that utilitarianism is provable. Mill wrote that first or ultimate principles cannot be proved (Mill 1957, chap. IV)—though he went on to attempt it anyway, without success. Sidgwick admitted that his acceptance of utilitarianism was a mere "intuition," and that other people, including egoists, might have different intuitions. So there is no difference between the two theories with respect to provability or demonstrability.[22]

The second objection is that utilitarianism, but not egoism, is universalizable, the implication being that universalizability is a necessary condition for a theory to be a normative ethical theory. If egoism is *not* a normative ethical theory, then it need not be accorded the respect due to such theories. So the question must be asked: Is universalizability a necessary condition for a theory to be a normative ethical theory? There is no need to make a case for an affirmative answer to that question here, for many critics of egoism are prepared to *admit* that it is universalizable. C. I. Lewis, for example, writes:

> The egoist too, if he be a philosophical egoist, and not merely an unreflective and impulsive one, promulgates his doctrine of the exclusive rule of first-person prudence with eyes wide open. He is prepared to admit that the rule of right which he proposes is equally justified in the case of any other as in his own. He merely disagrees as to the maxim he declares himself prepared to see universalized and become the unexceptionable directive of everybody's conduct.[23]

As even critics of egoism are prepared to admit, there is no difference between egoism and utilitarianism with respect to universalizability.[24]

The third objection is that far fewer people find egoism attractive than find utilitarianism attractive. First, it is not clear that this is the case. Many prominent philosophers, including Kant, Anscombe, Rawls, Nozick, Donagan, Finnis, and Ronald Dworkin, find utilitarianism distinctly *un*attractive, even repulsive.[25] Some philosophers—including Hobbes, John Hospers, Jesse Kalin, Edward Regis, and the present author—find *egoism* attractive.[26] The fact is that

[22] According to Cornman, Lehrer, and Pappas (1982, 297), "Bentham was right: There is no direct proof of the principle of utility or of any other ultimate ethical principle." R. M. Hare believes that utilitarianism follows logically from two formal features of moral judgments, viz., their universalizability and their prescriptivity. See Hare 1981, 111: "[T]he requirement to universalize our prescriptions generates utilitarianism." Not everyone agrees that this constitutes a proof, however, for (1) not everyone shares Hare's view of the formal features of moral judgments (in other words, not everyone is a universal prescriptivist) and (2) even some of those who *share* Hare's view of the formal features of moral judgments (or accept it for the sake of argument) reject the inference. See, e.g., Mackie 1977, chap. 4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of Hare's putative proof and for recommending that I discuss it, however briefly.

[23] Lewis 1969, 195. See also ibid., 142–3, 199.

[24] See also Broad 1930, 243 ("The first point to notice is that the Egoist's doctrine, when thus stated, cannot be accused of any arbitrariness or partiality. He does not claim anything for *his* Ego which he is not prepared to allow to any other Ego" [italics in original]).

[25] Smart, a utilitarian, admits forthrightly that "many people find utilitarianism repugnant." Smart 1981, 461. An anonymous reviewer of this essay conjectures that many of those who find utilitarianism repugnant find egoism even more so. They may believe, for example, that while utilitarianism sometimes disrespects persons, it at least endorses *impartialism*. Egoism not only fails to endorse impartialism; it endorses the most extreme form of *partialism*. I concede the force of this objection, but note that it fails to show that egoism should not be taken seriously as a normative ethical theory. The most it shows is that the seriousness with which a theory should be taken varies inversely with the degree to which people find it repugnant. I suspect (though I cannot prove) that a sophisticated version of egoism would differ little in its results from a sophisticated version of utilitarianism, in which case the degree of repugnance felt toward the two theories may be similar. To put the point differently, if egoism were taken more seriously than it is (i.e., if it were given the *benefit* rather than the *detriment* of the doubt by its critics), there might not be the same degree of aversion to it.

[26] As Sidgwick noted, the attraction is not limited to philosophers. "[I]t seems sufficient to point to the wide acceptance of the principle that it is reasonable for a man to act in the manner most conducive to his own happiness" (Sidgwick 1981, 119).

different people are attracted to different theories. One person's wicked moral theory (recall Rachels) is another's prized possession.[27] Second, theory acceptance is not a democratic process in which majority sentiment, majority judgment, majority belief, or consensus prevails. Even if *no* contemporary philosophers were attracted to egoism, which is emphatically not the case, it would deserve to be taken seriously as a normative ethical theory, given its long history, its undoubted coherence, and the fact that many nonphilosophers (including some of the best philosophy students!) are attracted to it. That many contemporary philosophers find egoism unattractive may say more about them—or the times in which we live—than about the theory itself.

9 Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been twofold: first, to show, by way of example, that egoism is not taken seriously as a normative ethical theory; and second, to show, by way of argument, that egoism *deserves* to be taken seriously as a normative ethical theory. Many contemporary philosophers believe that utilitarianism is to be rejected, but they take it seriously and treat it respectfully. Why is egoism not accorded the same degree of respect? Why is Sidgwick almost alone among philosophers in holding that "the aim of furthering one's own interest stands on just as rational a basis as the aim of furthering the universal interest" (quoted in Singer 1974, 504)? I have shown that every theoretical defense made by a utilitarian can be made, with equal vigor and sophistication (if not also plausibility), by an egoist. Consistency therefore requires either (1) that utilitarianism be taken *less* seriously than it is or (2) that egoism be taken *more* seriously than it is. Since no philosopher, including the present author, wishes to take utilitarianism less seriously, every philosopher should take egoism more seriously.

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[27] "Almost any normative theory is likely to have its counterintuitive aspects, and people can sincerely disagree as to which theory is, on balance, the most attractive. That is why there are few or no 'knockdown' arguments in ethics (or anywhere, for that matter). All you can do is point out the attractive features of your own favored theory, explain why you are prepared to live with its various unattractive features, and try to show that the alternatives are even worse" (Kagan 1998, 16). This seems to me exactly right.

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