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ETHICAL EGOISM AND BIBLICAL SELF-INTEREST

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The Old and New Testaments contain a number of passages that in some way or another associate moral obligation with self-interest in the form of seeking rewards and avoiding punishment. Thus, Exod 20:12 says "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Jesus tells us to "seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt 6:33). On another occasion he warns his listeners that at the end of the age "the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 13:49-50). Paul states his ambition to be pleasing to the Lord "for we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds . . ." (II Cor 5:10).

The fact that rewards and punishments are associated with self-interest and moral or religious obligation is clear throughout the scriptures. What is not so clear is just how to understand these passages from the point of view of normative moral theory. More specifically, do texts of this sort imply that ethical egoism (to be defined below) is the correct normative ethical theory derived from the Bible? In over a decade of teaching ethics, I regularly have students, when first exposed to ethical egoism, draw the conclusion that this ethical system is, indeed, the best way to capture biblical ethics. And while popular works on the spiritual life are not sophisticated enough to be clear on the matter, a number of them, especially those that promote a "prosperity gospel," would seem to be expressions of ethical egoism.

The identification of ethical egoism with biblical ethics is not confined to popular venues. Secular philosopher John Hospers argues that when believers justify being moral on the basis of a doctrine of eternal rewards and punishments, this is "simply an appeal to self-interest. . . . [N]othing could be a clearer appeal to naked and unbridled power than this."<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of Christian philosophers and theologians have seen some combination of deontological and virtue ethics to be the best way to capture the letter and spirit of biblical ethics. Still, the problem of egoism has been noted by some and embraced by others. Years ago, Paul Ramsey raised the problem of ethical egoism when he queried,

<sup>1</sup> John Hospers, "Why Be Moral?" in *Readings in Ethical Theory*, ed. by Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2d ed., 1970) 739.

"But what of 'salvation'? Is not 'salvation' the end for which Christians quest? What of rewards in the kingdom of heaven? What of man's everlasting and supernatural good, the soul's life with God in the hereafter man's 'chief end,' glorifying God and enjoying him forever. Is not 'salvation' itself a supreme value which Christians seek with earnest passion, each first of all for himself?"<sup>2</sup>

Theologian Edward John Carnell (inaccurately in my view) has been understood as having promoted some form of ethical egoism.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, Christian philosopher and theologian Philip R. West has argued that deontological ethics do not capture biblical morality and that ethical egoism is the correct normative theory in this regard. Says West, "They [the OT writers] apparently believed not only that actual divine punishment is enough to establish the obligation to obey divine commands, but like Paul, that the *absence* of actual divine punishment erodes the obligatory status of these commands."<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, West defends the thesis that some agent A has a moral obligation to do P if and only if doing P will maximize A's own self-interest. He argues that since scripture grounds our obligations in self-interest (rewards/punishments), this amounts to ethical egoism.

What should we make of this claim? Is ethical egoism the correct normative theory from a biblical point of view? My purpose in what follows is to show why ethical egoism is a defective normative ethical theory and, given this conclusion, to offer ways to understand biblical self-interest that do not entail the truth of ethical egoism. In what follows, I will, first, clarify the precise nature of ethical egoism; second, summarize the main types of arguments for and against ethical egoism in the literature and conclude that ethical egoism is inadequate; third, offer a set of distinctions for understanding biblical self-interest while avoiding ethical egoism.

### I. Exposition of Ethical Egoism

The most plausible form of ethical egoism, embraced by philosophers such as Ayn Rand and John Hospers, is called universal or impersonal rule-egoism (hereafter, simply ethical egoism). Since Hospers is the most prominent philosopher to advocate ethical egoism, his definition is the most pertinent: each person has a moral duty to follow those moral rules that will

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950) 133. Ramsey himself rejected ethical egoism, but his preoccupation with the question cited here shows that he recognized those who did not agree with that rejection.

<sup>3</sup> Edward John Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948) 315-35.

<sup>4</sup> Philip R. West, "Deontology and Consequentialism in Christian Ethics," unpublished paper delivered at the 31st annual meeting of the mid-West section of the Evangelical Theological Society, April, 1986, 4.

be in the agent's maximal self-interest over the long haul.<sup>5</sup> For the ethical egoist, one has a duty to follow "correct" moral rules. And the factor that makes a rule a "correct" one is that, if followed, it will be in the agent's own best interests in the long run. Each person ought to advance his own self-interests and that is the sole foundation of morality.

Ethical egoism is sometimes confused and identified with various distinct issues. First, there is individual or personal ethical egoism which says everyone has a duty to act so as to serve *my* self-interests. Here, everyone is morally obligated to serve the speaker's long term best interests. Second, there is psychological egoism, roughly, the idea that each person can only do that act which the person takes to maximize his or her own self-interest. Psychological egoism is a descriptive thesis about motivation to the effect that we can only act on motives that are in our own self-interests. As we shall see shortly, psychological egoism is sometimes used as part of an argument for ethical egoism, but the two are distinct theses.

Third, ethical egoism is not the same thing as egotism—an irritating character trait of always trying to be the center of attention. Nor is it the same as what is sometimes called being a wanton. A wanton has no sense of duty at all, but only acts to satisfy his or her own desires. The only conflict the wanton knows is that between two or more desires he cannot simultaneously satisfy (e.g. to eat more and lose weight). The wanton knows nothing about duty. Arguably, animals are wantons. Fifth, ethical egoism is not to be confused with being an egoist, i.e. being someone who believes that the sole worth of an act is its fairly immediate benefits to the individual himself. With this understanding of ethical egoism as a backdrop, let us look at the arguments for and against ethical egoism that have been preeminent in the literature. A detailed treatment of these arguments is not possible here, but by looking briefly at the main considerations usually brought to bear on ethical egoism, a feel for its strengths and weaknesses as a normative ethical theory emerges.

#### 1. Arguments for Ethical Egoism

Among the arguments for ethical egoism, two have distinguished themselves, at least in textbook treatments of the position.<sup>6</sup> First, it is argued that ethical egoism follows from psychological egoism in this way: psychological egoism is true and this implies that we always and cannot help but act

<sup>5</sup> See Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: New American Library, 1964); John Hospers, "Ethical Egoism," *The Personalist* 51 (Spring 1970) 190-95; idem, "Rule-Egoism," *The Personalist* 54 (Autumn 1973) 391-95.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Hospers himself rejected both arguments. Of equal interest is the fact that Hospers hardly ever gave arguments for ethical egoism, apart from analyzing our ordinary language about moral justification, clarifying his own version of the view, and responding to objections raised against him. See John Hospers, *Human Conduct* (2d. ed.; New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982) 70-133.

egoistically. This is a fact about human motivation and action. Further, ought implies can. If I ought to do x, if I have a duty to do x, then I must be able to do x. If I cannot do something, then I have no duty or responsibility to do it. Applied to egoism, this means that since I can act egoistically, then I have a duty to do so and since I cannot act non-egoistically, then I have no duty to do so. Thus, ethical egoism is the correct picture of moral obligation in keeping with what we know about human motivation.

Does this argument work? Most philosophers have not thought so. First, the principle of psychological egoism, viz. that we always act to maximize our own self-interest, is ambiguous. So stated, the principle fails to make a distinction between the *result* of an act vs. the *intent* of an act. If it is understood in the former way it is irrelevant and if taken in the latter way it is false. If the statement merely asserts that, as a matter of fact, the result of our actions is the maximization of self-interest, then this does not imply ethical egoism. Ethical egoism is the view that the thing which morally justifies an act is the agent's intent to maximize his own self-interests. So the mere psychological fact (if it is a fact) that people only do those acts that result in their own satisfaction proves nothing.

On the other hand, if the statement claims that we always act solely with the intent to satisfy our own desires, then this claim is simply false. Every day we are aware of doing acts with the sole intent of helping someone else, of doing something just because we think it is the right thing to do, and of expressing virtuous, other-centered behavior. As Christian philosopher Joseph Butler (1692-1752) argued:

Mankind has various instincts and principles of action as brute creatures have; some leading most directly and immediately to the good of the community, and some most directly to private good . . . [I]t is not a true representation of mankind, to affirm that they are wholly governed by self-love, the love of power and sensual appetites. . . it is manifest fact, that the same persons, the generality, are frequently influenced by friendship, compassion, gratitude; . . . and liking of what is fair and just, takes its turn amongst the other motives of action.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, it is not even true that we always *try* to do what we want or what we think is in our self-interests. We sometimes experience *akrasia* (weakness of will) when we fail to do or even try to do what we want (see Rom 7:15-25). And we sometimes do (or try to do) our duty even when we don't want to do it. These points appear to be facts about human action.

Second, this argument for ethical egoism suffers from what has been called the paradox of hedonism. Often, the best way maximize self-interest, say, to get happiness and the satisfaction of desire is not to aim at it. Happiness is not usually achieved as an intended goal, but rather, it is a bi-product of a life well lived and of doing what is right. If people always

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Butler, "Fifteen Sermons," in *British Moralists: 1650-1800*, vol. 1, ed. D. D. Raphael ([1726] Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 328-29.

act in order to gain happiness, then it will remain forever elusive. Thus, psychological egoism contains a paradox when viewed as a model of human intention and action.

Finally, as a model of human action, psychological egoism rules out the possibility of libertarian freedom of the will. Briefly put, it should be noted that if libertarian freedom of the will is the correct view of human action, then the following implications follow: 1) no amount of internal states (e.g. desires, beliefs, emotions) are sufficient to produce behavior, and 2) the agent himself must spontaneously exercise his causal powers and act for the sake of reasons which function as teleological goals. For libertarians, a free act is never determined by any particular reason, including desire. Thus, on this view, psychological egoism is false if taken as a total account of human action because it implies that a person must always act for a self-interested reason. Libertarian freedom is controversial and not everyone accepts this model of human action. But the point is that for those who do, it counts as a counter-argument to psychological egoism.

A second argument for ethical egoism is called the closet utilitarian position. Some point out that if everyone acted in keeping with ethical egoism, the result would be the maximization of happiness for the greatest number of people. If acted upon, ethical egoism, as a matter of fact, leads to the betterment of humanity. There are two main problems with this argument. First, it amounts to a utilitarian justification of ethical egoism. Utilitarianism is a normative ethical theory to the effect that a moral action or rule is correct if and only if performing that act or following that rule maximizes the greatest amount of non-moral good vs. bad for the greatest number compared to alternative acts or rules open to the agent. While both are consequentialist in orientation, nevertheless, utilitarianism and ethical egoism are rival normative theories. It is inconsistent, therefore, for someone to use a rival theory, in this case, utilitarianism, as the moral justification for ethical egoism. If one is an ethical egoist, why should he or she care about the greatest good for the greatest number for its own sake, and not merely because such "caring" would itself lead to greater satisfaction of one's individual desires? Second, the claim seems to be factually false. Is it really the case that if everyone acted according to ethical egoism, it would maximize everyone's happiness? Surely not. Sometimes self-sacrifice is needed to maximize happiness for the greatest number, and this argument for ethical egoism cannot allow for personal denial.

There are other arguments for ethical egoism, but these two have been the most central for those who advocate this normative theory. As we have seen, both arguments fail. By contrast, the main arguments against ethical egoism seem to be strong enough to justify rejecting the system as an adequate normative theory.

## 2. Arguments against ethical egoism

Among the arguments against ethical egoism, three are most prominent. First, is the publicity objection. Moral principles must serve as action

guides that inform moral situations. Most moral situations involve more than one person and, in this sense, are public situations. Thus, moral action guides must be teachable to others so they can be publically used principles that help us in our interpersonal moral interactions. However, according to ethical egoism itself, there is a possible world where it is immoral for me to teach others to embrace ethical egoism because that could easily turn out not to be in my own self-interest. It may be better for me if others always acted altruistically. Thus, it could be immoral for one to go public and teach ethical egoism to others and, if so, this would violate one of the necessary conditions for a moral theory, namely, that it be teachable to others.

Philosopher Fred Feldman has offered a rejoinder to this argument.<sup>8</sup> He claims that we have no good reason to believe that a moral doctrine needs to be consistently promulgatable. Why, he asks, should we have to be able to teach a moral doctrine to others? Someone could consistently hold to the following moral notion P as a part of his overall moral system: it is never right to promulgate anything. Unfortunately, this response fails because it does not capture the public nature of moral principles (or normative ethical theories) in so far as they serve as action guides to adjudicate interpersonal moral conflict. How could the principle "it is never right to promulgate anything" serve as an action guide sufficient to deal with the various aspects of duty, virtue, and rights that constitute much of the point of action guides in the first place?

Moreover, this response fails to take into account the universalizability of moral rules. If I should never promulgate anything, then this implies that I should not teach something to someone else. But there does not seem to be a clear moral difference in this case between others and myself. To be consistent, then, I should not proclaim this moral principle to myself. Perhaps I should try to hide from myself the fact that I accept this role. This implies, among other things, that if I hold to P as a moral principle that should be universalized, then, applying P to myself, I would no longer have moral grounds for continuing to embrace P on the basis of reasons known to me or for making P known to myself. I should do my best to forget P or talk myself out of believing P. On the other hand, if I do not think P should be universalized, then in what sense is P a moral principle (since universalizability is most likely a necessary condition for a principle counting as moral)?

A second argument against ethical egoism is called the paradox of egoism. Some things, e.g. altruism, deep love, genuine friendship, are inconsistent with ethical egoism. Why? Because these features of a virtuous, moral life require us not to seek our own interests but, rather, those of others. Moreover, ethical egoism would seem to imply that helping others at one's own expense (and other acts of self sacrifice) is wrong if it is not in my long term self-interest to do so. Thus, egoism would seem to rule out important, central features of the moral life. The main point of a normative moral

<sup>8</sup> Fred Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 93-95.

theory is to explain and not to eliminate what we already know to be central facets of morality prior to ethical theorizing. Furthermore, in order to reach the goal of egoism (e.g., personal happiness), one must give up egoism and be altruistic in love, friendship, and other ways. Thus, egoism is paradoxical in its own right and it eliminates key aspects of the moral life.

Some respond by claiming that altruism is fully consistent with ethical egoism. Hospers argues that, according to ethical egoism, we ought to do acts that benefit others because that is in our own self-interests.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Fred Feldman asserts that "egoism allows us to perform altruistic actions—provided that such actions are ultimately in our own self-interests."<sup>10</sup> But this response fails to distinguish pseudo-altruism from genuine altruism. Genuine altruism requires that an altruistic act have, as its sole, or at least main intent, the benefit of the other. An act whose sole or ultimate intent is self-interest but which, nevertheless, does result in the benefit of others is not genuine altruism. If you found out that someone "loved" you or acted "altruistically" toward you solely or ultimately with the intent of benefiting himself, then you would not count that as genuine love or altruism even if the act happened to benefit you in some way. Thus, "egoistic altruism" is a contradiction in terms. Ethical egoism is consistent with pseudo-altruism but not with genuine altruism.

Finally, a third objection claims that ethical egoism leads to inconsistent outcomes. A moral theory must allow for moral rules that are public and universalizable. But ethical egoism could lead to situations where this is not the case. How? Consider two persons A and B in a situation where they have a conflict of interest. For example, suppose there was only one kidney available for transplant, that A and B both need it, and that A or B will die without the transplant. According to universal ethical egoism, A ought to act in his own self-interests and prescribe that his desires come out on top. A had a duty to secure the kidney and thwart B's attempts to do the same. This would seem to imply that A should prescribe that B has a duty to act in A's self-interest. Of course B, according to universal ethical egoism, has from his perspective a duty to act in his own self-interest. But now a contradiction arises because ethical egoism implies that B both has a duty to give the kidney to A and obtain it himself.

Jesse Kalin has responded to this argument by claiming that, as an ethical egoist, A should not hold that B should act in A's self-interest, but in B's own self-interest.<sup>11</sup> This would seem to solve the problem of contradictory duty above by rejecting individual ethical egoism (everyone should act in my self-interest) in favor of the universal version (everyone should act

<sup>9</sup> Hospers, "Rule-Egoism," 392-94.

<sup>10</sup> Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Kalin, "In Defense of Ethical Egoism," in *Ethical Theory*, ed. Louis Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989) 85-98.

in *his own* self-interest). But this way of stating ethical egoism does not seem to capture the *egoistic* spirit of the ethical egoism because it leaves open the question as to *why* egoist A would need to hold that B should act in B's interests and not in A's. In other words, it may not be in A's own self-interests to hold to universal, as opposed to individual ethical egoism.

Moreover, there is still a problem for this formulation of ethical egoism which can be brought out as follows: A holds that B has a duty to obtain the kidney for himself, have his interests come out on top, and, thus, harm A. But in this case, ethical egoism still seems to imply an inconsistent posture on A's (and B's) part, namely, that A thinks that B has a duty to get the kidney and harm A but that A has a duty to thwart B. Any moral theory that implies that someone has a moral duty to keep others from doing their moral duty is surely in trouble, so the objection goes. And it is hard to see how an ethical egoist A could claim that someone else had a duty to harm A himself.

Not everyone accepts this argument. Following Kalin, Louis Pojman claims that we often find it to be the case that we have a duty to thwart what is the duty of others, e.g., in a war one soldier has a duty to thwart another's efforts to do his duty to win. In a case like this, soldiers on different sides do not believe that the other side has adequate moral grounds for being at war.<sup>12</sup> If we separate beliefs about ethical situations from desires, so the response goes, then one person can believe the other had a duty to win the war or get the kidney, but the person can also desire to these objectives for himself and act on those desires. In general, the belief that B ought to do x does not imply that A wants B to do x.

What should we make of this response? First, the soldier example fails because it does not distinguish between subjective and objective duty. Subjective duty is one someone has when he has done his best to discover what is and is not the right thing to do. If someone sincerely and conscientiously tries to ascertain what is right, and acts on this, then he has fulfilled his subjective duty and, in a sense, is praiseworthy. But people can be sincerely wrong and fail to live up to their objective duty—the truly correct thing to do from God's perspective, the overriding moral obligation when all things, including *prima facie* duties, have been taken into account—even if they have tried to do their best. Admittedly, it is not always easy to determine what the correct objective duty is in a given case. But this is merely an epistemological point and, while valid, it does not negate the legitimacy of the distinction between subjective and objective duty.

Applied to the question at hand, soldier A could only claim that soldier B has both a *prima facie* duty and a subjective duty to obey his country. But A could also believe that B has an objective duty to do so only if B's country is, in fact, conducting a morally justified war. Now either A or B is on the right side of the war even though it may be hard to tell which side is correct.

<sup>12</sup> Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990) 50-51.

Thus, A and B could believe that only one of them actually has an objective duty to fight and thwart the other. So the war example does not give a genuine case where A believes B has a (objective) duty to fight and that he has to thwart B.

Second, what should we make of the claim that we should separate our beliefs about another's duty from the desire to see that duty done? For one thing, a main point of a moral theory is to describe what a virtuous person is and how we can become such persons. Now, one aspect of a virtuous person is that there is a harmony and unity between desire and duty. A virtuous person desires that the objective moral right be done. Such a person is committed to the good and the right. With this in mind, it becomes clear that ethical egoism, if consistently practiced, could produce fragmented, non-virtuous individuals who believe one thing about duty (e.g., A believes B ought to do x) but who desire something else altogether (e.g., A does not *desire* B to do x).

However, if we grant that the ethical egoist's distinction between beliefs and desires is legitimate from a moral point of view, then this distinction does resolve the claim that ethical egoism leads to a conflict of desire, e.g., A desires the kidney and that B obtain the kidney, since it implies that A believes that B has a duty to receive the kidney but only desires that he himself have it. Nevertheless, this misses the real point of the objection to ethical egoism, namely, that ethical egoism straightforwardly leads to a conflict of desire. Rather, the objection shows that ethical egoism leads to an unresolvable conflict of moral beliefs and moral duty. If A and B are ethical egoists, then A believes that it is wrong for B to have the kidney but also that it is B's duty to try to obtain it. But how can A consistently believe that B has a duty to do something wrong? And how can A have an *objective* duty to thwart B's *objective* duty?

## II. Christianity and ethical egoism

It would seem, then, that ethical egoism should be rejected as a normative ethical theory and that legitimate self-interest is part of Biblical teaching, e.g. in the passages relating moral obligation to rewards and punishments. If we should not understand these texts as implicitly affirming ethical egoism, how should we understand the self-interest they apparently advocate? I do not think that exegesis alone can solve this problem because the context and grammar of the passages are usually not precise enough to settle the philosophical issue before us. However, if we assume with the majority of thinkers that deontological and virtue ethics, and not ethical egoism, are the correct normative theories implied by Scripture, then we have a set of distinctions that provide a number of legitimate ways of understanding biblical self-interest.

To begin with, we need to distinguish between self-benefit as a bi-product of an act vs. self-interest as the sole intent of an act. Scriptural passages that



use self-interest may simply be pointing out that if you intentionally do the right thing, then a good bi-product of this will be rewards of various kinds. It could be argued against philosopher Philip R. West (mentioned earlier) that these passages do not clearly use self-interest as the sole legitimate intent of a moral action.

This observation relates to a second distinction between a motive and a reason. Put roughly, a motive is some state within a person that influences and moves him to action. By contrast, a reason is something that serves to justify rationally some belief that one has or some action one does; a reason for believing or doing *x* is an attempt to cite something that makes it likely that *x* be true or that *x* should be done. In this context, just because something, say self-interest, serves as a motive for an action, it does not follow that it also serves as the reason which justifies the action in the first place. Self-interest may be a legitimate motive for moral action, but, it could be argued, God's commands, the objective moral law, etc. could be rationally cited as the things that make an act our duty in the first place. The Bible may be citing self-interest as a motive for action and not as the reason for what makes the act our duty.

Moreover, even if Scripture is teaching that self-interest is a reason for doing some duty, it may be offering self-interest as a prudential and not a moral reason for doing the duty. In other words, the Bible may be saying that it is wise, reasonable, and a matter of good judgment to avoid hell and seek rewards without claiming that these considerations are *moral* reasons for acting according to self-interest.<sup>13</sup> In sum, it could be argued that Scripture can be understood as advocating self-interest as a bi-product and not an intent for action, as a motive and not a reason, or as a prudential and not a moral reason. If this is so, then these scriptural ideas do not entail ethical egoism.

Second, even if scripture teaches that self-interest contributes to making something my moral duty, ethical egoism still does not follow. For one thing, ethical egoism teaches that an act is moral if and only if it maximizes my own self-interests. Ethical egoism teaches that self-interest is both necessary and sufficient for something to be my duty. However, it could be argued that egoistic factors, while not alone morally relevant to an act (other things like self-sacrifice or obeying God for its own sake are relevant as well),

<sup>13</sup> As a further point here, if we focus on the question "Why should I be moral?", and distinguish between moral reasoning and "ought" within the moral point of view vs. non-moral reasoning and "ought" outside and about the moral point of view, then it may be that scriptural uses of self-interest are part of reasoning outside the moral point of view altogether. If so, this would leave open the question of what type of normative theory best captures the structure of reasoning within the moral point of view. I cannot pursue this idea further here, but two things should be kept in mind in regard to it. First, I would not wish to make self-interest the only justification for adopting the moral point of view, though it may well be one of several factors of relevance. Second, if self-interest is, in fact, a reason for adopting the moral point of view, then I still would not spell out the precise nature of that self-interest in strictly egoistic terms, but rather, in ways that I suggest below.

nevertheless, are at least one feature often important for assessing the moral worth of an act. Moral duty is not exhausted by self-interest as ethical egoism implies, but self-interest can be a legitimate factor in moral deliberation and scripture may be expressing this point.

Additionally, it is likely that the precise nature of self-interest contained in scripture is different in two ways from that which forms part of ethical egoism. For one thing, according to ethical egoism, the thing that makes an act right is that it is in *my* self-interest. The important value-making property here is the fact that something promotes the first person interests of the actor. Here, the moral agent attends to himself precisely as being identical to himself and to no one else.

By contrast, the scriptural emphasis on self-interest most likely grounds the appropriateness of such interest, not in the mere fact that these interests are *mine*, but in the fact that I am a creature of intrinsic value made in God's image and, as such, ought to care about what happens to me. Here I seek my own welfare not because it is my own, but because of what I am, viz. a creature with high intrinsic value. Consider a possible world where human persons have no value whatever (or where human counter-parts with no intrinsic value exist). In that world, ethical egoism would still legislate self-interest, but the second view under consideration (that self-interest follows from the fact that I am a creature of value) would not because the necessary condition for self-interest (being a creature of intrinsic value) does not obtain in that world.

There is a second way that the nature of self-interest in Scripture and in ethical egoism differ. As C. S. Lewis and C. Stephen Evans have argued, there are different kinds of rewards, and some are proper because they have a natural, intrinsic connection with the things we do to earn them and because they are expressions of what God made us to be by nature.<sup>14</sup> In such cases, these rewards provide a reason to do an activity which does not despoil the character of the activity itself. Money is not a natural reward for love (one is mercenary to marry for money) because money is foreign to the desires that ought to accompany love. By contrast, victory is a natural reward for battle. It is a proper reward because it is not tacked onto the activity for which the reward is given, but rather victory is the consummation of and intrinsically related to the activity itself.

According to Lewis, the desire for heaven and rewards is a natural desire expressing what we, by nature, are. We were made to desire honor before God, to be in his presence, and to hunger to enjoy the rewards he will offer us and these things are the natural consummations of our activity on earth. Thus, the appropriateness of seeking heaven and rewards derives from the

<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949) 1-15; *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 144-54; C. Stephen Evans, "Could Divine Rewards Provide a Reason to Be Moral?" in *The Reality of Christian Learning*, ed. Harold Heie and David L. Wolfe (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 292-302.

fact that these results are genuine expressions of our natures and are the natural consummation of our activities for God. By contrast, according to ethical egoism, the value of results has nothing to do with our natures or with natural consummations of activities. Rather, the worth of those outcomes is solely a function of the fact that they benefit the agent himself.

In sum, self-interest is part of biblical teaching, especially in association with rewards and punishments. But ethical egoism neither captures adequately the nature of biblical self-interest nor is it the best normative ethical theory in its own right. As Christians, we should include self-interest as an important part of our moral and religious lives but without advocating ethical egoism in the process.

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## FORUM

### IN DEFENSE OF SOMETHING CLOSE TO BIBLICISM: REFLECTIONS ON *SOLA SCRIPTURA* AND HISTORY IN THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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Over the years I have sometimes engaged in playful banter with colleagues concerning the relative importance of church history and systematic theology. In these arguments, I was, of course, on the side of systematics, mocking the tendency of many of us academics to magnify the importance of our own fields of specialization. That was, of course, all in the spirit of good fun. I think that fair readers of my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*<sup>1</sup> will grant that I have a high regard for church historians and the contributions they can make toward our understanding of God's Word. Indeed, I tend rather to stand in awe of scholars in that field. My impression, which I have, of course, never tried to verify, is that writers in that discipline have typically mastered far more data and organized it more impressively than most of those (including myself) in the fields of systematics and apologetics.

Nevertheless, I do believe that the present situation in Evangelical and Reformed theology demands a more careful look at the relationships between the disciplines of history and systematic theology. The need is such that the playful banter will now have to give way, for a moment, to a more serious consideration of the issues.

I am here writing primarily to the orthodox Reformed community of theological scholarship that I inhabit. For that reason I will give little attention to some options that are important to the general theological community but not specifically to those addressed here. I recognize, of course, the importance for Reformed scholars to address the broader society, and I hope this essay will, among other things, enable us to do that better. But sometimes we must huddle together to think about what we should be saying to the larger world, before we actually say it.

My overall purpose here is to reiterate the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the doctrine that Scripture alone gives us ultimate norms for doctrine and life, and to apply that doctrine to the work of theology itself,

<sup>1</sup> (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). Hereafter cited as DKG.