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ITETHIC

Book: Contemporary Moral Problems

Title: Chapter 1: Ethical Theories (James Rachels: Egoism and Moral Scepticism)

Internet Reference:

<http://www.amazon.com/Contemporary-Moral-Problems-James-White/dp/0534517242>

Learning Expectations:

To know what is Egoism

Give the most basic definitions for Psychological and Ethical Egoism

Quote:

"It is important that the assumptions underlying our moral practice should not be confused with particular judgments made within that practice. To defend one is not to defend the other. We may assume quite properly, if my analysis has been correct that the virtue of beneficence does, and indeed should, occupy an important place in the 'the moral institution of life'; and yet we may make constant and miserable errors when it comes to judging when and in what ways this virtue is to be exercised. Even worse, we may often be able to make accurate moral judgments and know what we ought to do, but not to do it. For these Ills, philosophy alone is not the cure."

Book Review:

This part focuses on two popular views used to attack conventional morality, namely **Psychological and Ethical Egoism**. A story by Glaucon in Book II of Plato's *Republic* called the Legend of Gyges. It is about a shepherd who found a magical ring that turns the wearer invisible. He used this power to infiltrate the Royal Palace to seduce the Queen, murder the king and take over the throne. The issue on morality here is on how the wearer of the ring behaves with this special ability. What actions will he take to be satisfied? Another story is told, it is about Mr. Smith, who gave up a vacation, which he would have enjoyed, to aid a friend in his studies, which is less fun than being on a trip. *"The agent is merely doing what he most wants to do."* This statement requires us to think if Mr. Smith was acting selfishly or the other way around. **Psychological Egoism** states that all men's motives in doing things are only of self-interest. Even if what they are doing are for the benefit of others, they still believe that that action is for personal gain. **Ethical Egoism** on the other hand, states that all men's actions, regardless if it is for others to benefit or not, are justified in his own interests. What I really think and feel about this reading is, people are always held responsible of his and his neighbor's actions. We live in a network

called the society. We may or may not live independently to each other but ethical considerations are social tools we all must be responsible for.

What I have learned:

This reading taught me to determine actions that may or may not be ethical to different perspectives.

Integrity Questions:

1. What is morality?
2. Is morality important?
3. What acts define selfishness?
4. What acts define unselfishness?

Review Questions:

1. Explain the legend of Gyges. What questions about morality are raised by the story?

- Gyges found himself a magical ring that would turn its wearer invisible. He then used the ring to infiltrate the royal palace where he seduced the queen, killed the king and took over the throne. The issue covered by morality in this story, is on how the wearer of the ring behaves with this special ability.

2. Distinguish between psychological and ethical egoism.

- Psychological egoism states that all men's motives in doing things are only of self-interest. Even if what they are doing are for the benefit of others, they still believe that that action is only for personal gain. Ethical Egoism on the other hand, states that all men's actions, regardless if it is for others to benefit or the other way around, are justified in his own interests.

3. Rachels discusses two arguments for psychological egoism. What are these arguments, and how does he reply to them?

- The first argument is: "If we describe one person's action as selfish, and another person's action as unselfish, we are overlooking the crucial fact that in both cases, assuming that the action is done voluntarily, *the agent is merely doing what he most wants to do*". Rachels replied: "The mere fact that I am acting on *my* wants does not mean that I am acting selfishly; that depends on *what it is* that I want. If I want only my own good, and care nothing for others, then I am selfish; but if I also want other people to be well-off and happy, and if I act on *that* desire, then my action is not selfish."

- The second argument is: "Since so-called unselfish actions always produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the agent, and since this sense of satisfaction is a pleasant state of consciousness, it follows that the point of the action is really to achieve a pleasant state of consciousness, rather than to bring about any good for others. Therefore, the action is 'unselfish' only at a superficial level of analysis." Rachels replied: "If someone desires the welfare and happiness of another person, he will derive satisfaction from that; but this does not mean that this satisfaction is the object of his desire, or that he is in any way selfish on account of it."

4. What three commonplace confusions does Rachels detect in the thesis of psychological egoism?

- The confusion of selfishness with self interest.
- The assumption that every action is done *either* from self-interest or from other-regarding motives.
- The common but false assumption that a concern for one's own welfare is incompatible with any genuine concern for the welfare of others.

5. State the argument for saying that ethical egoism is inconsistent. Why doesn't Rachels accept this argument?

- "To say that any action or any policy of action is *right* (or that it *ought* to be adopted) entails that it is right for *anyone* in the same sort of circumstances." Rachels said that: "Now it is said that ethical egoism cannot meet this requirement because, as we have already seen, the egoist would not want others to act in the same way that he acts."

6. According to Rachels, why shouldn't we hurt others, and why should we help others? How can the egoist reply?

- "The fact that a certain action would help the agent is a reason for doing the action only if the agent cares about his own welfare, and the fact that an action would help others is a reason for doing it if only the agent cares about others." The egoist would suggest: "the agent *care* about himself, or about other people, before they can get started."

Discussion Questions:

1. Has Rachels answered the question raised by Glaucon, namely, "Why be moral?" If so, what exactly is his answer?

- Yes, he said that: "It is important that the assumptions underlying our moral practice should not be confused with particular judgments made within that practice."

2. Are genuine egoists rare, as Rachels claims? Is it a fact that most people care about others, even people they don't know?

- Yes, more and more people have been courteous and sensitive to their environment.

3. Suppose we define ethical altruism as the view that one should always act for the benefit of others and never in one's own self-interest. Is such a view immoral or not?

- For me, it is not immoral because selflessness promotes good will and therefore imposes on charity and generosity.