

The Poverty of Egoism - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

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The essay *Egoism*, by John Beverly Robinson, although very admirable in its individualist proposals of liberty and anti-idealism, remains erroneous in its understanding of the individual and how he comes into being. These false views are sometimes shared by others who write of egoism as well, so it is important to critique them now.

Robinson's understanding of the individual is of a "unique" of which "no other can enter into". To Robinson, "Your thoughts and emotions are yours alone. There is no other who experiences your thoughts or your feelings."

However, Robinson is gravely mistaken. A callable part of one's own emotions are invariably influenced by one's environment, which is greatly shaped by the other individuals who occupy it. The same applies to one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. There does exist a large part of the cognizant human whose consciousness is theirs alone, but there too exists a large part which is not.

This is not just in the obvious sense that one's experiences can only be derived from an environment, which is not completely in one's control, but also that *how* an individual is able to utilize his tools of consciousness, and what tools he has at his disposal, to observe reality, are things not completely in his control. By "tools of consciousness" I mean language, empathy, the ability to recognize the self, the ability to respond to stimuli, both positive and negative, in different ways, and so on.

I am reminded of the story of the feral child Genie who, being the victim of abuse, was forcibly isolated from all human contact until age 13, when police intervened. Genie's tools of consciousness were essentially non-existent. In that sense, her entire being was shaped by other individuals and environments completely out of her control. More to the point, it would be futile to attempt to explain to her that she is a "unique" in full possession of herself. I believe this would be not just because of her near inability to communicate, but that her ability to conceptualize herself as a unique being was too near nonexistent.

In short, one cannot fully conceptualize oneself as a "unique" until he is related to other individuals, and from the individuals, also derive his tools of consciousness to rationalize these concepts.

When Robinson says, regarding one's consciousness, that "*no one can enter into it*," he is again mistaken. This is not just incorrect in spite of the possibility of mind control some time in the future (on a whimsical note), but also that to an extent there remains parts of us, shaped by other individuals, which cannot truly be altered. These parts of us are largely shaped by our upbringing, and while it is possible, as a cognizant human, to attempt to free oneself of all undesirable traits acquired from the conditions of one's upbringing, there likely will still remain certain traits too ingrained in us to be able to be freed from.

Take the example of someone who suffered abuse as a child, but in their adult years reclaimed their individual and attempted to rectify themselves. It could be argued that despite the conditions of the abuse being wholly out of his control, how he chooses to respond to it is not. Whether he lets this dark past torment him, or he frees himself of it, is his choice of response and is therefore within his control.

However, this is not true either. As stated before, which tools of consciousness one possesses (one of them being how one is able to respond to stimuli both positive and negative), is too not something completely in his control. One can attempt to re-claim these tools in his adult years, sometimes even with success, but it is not a guarantee. If one's upbringing was

such that he, even in his adult years, finds himself unable to respond to his past abuse (negative stimuli) in a non-destructive manner, this too may remain beyond his control.

It should also be said that the individual is not a free-flying spirit; he is bound by the laws of his person and humans on the whole. These restrictions, too, can be said to not fully belong to the self.

The final thing to be said is of the conditions of one's egoism. Like any egoist, Robinson recognizes his egoism is motivated by what he enjoys: *"The most profound egoist may be the most complete altruist; but he knows that her altruism is, at the bottom, nothing but self-indulgence."* This corresponds to the egoist notions of Max Stirner, of which Robinson was largely influenced by:

"I love men too — not merely individuals, but every one. But I love them with the consciousness of egoism; I love them because love makes me happy, I love because loving is natural to me, because it pleases me. I know no 'commandment of love.' I have a fellow-feeling with every feeling being, and their torment torments, their refreshment refreshes me too; I can kill them, not torture them." [1]

What is interesting is that what the individual may deem as pleasing to himself or not also does not fully belong to himself. His personal morality, which shapes his egoistic will, is hugely shaped by his culture, environment, upbringing, and ultimately other individuals. To use an extreme example, a child raised as a pious catholic who later in life realizes egoism would likely change his mannerisms little because he would still find an instinctual aversion to catholic transgressions, an obvious one being murder, for example. Contrast this with a child raised in a tribe of cannibals who realizes egoism. He too would likely find his mannerisms unchanged, but in this case they include routine murder. In this sense, the ego and which wills it desires or is averse to, do not fully belong to the self either.

Psychological egoism (the belief that all human action is ultimately motivated by selfishness alone) is a rather difficult prospect to assert, not just for the reason that human action does not fully belong to the self — the only thing capable of being egoistic — but also that it is an unfalsifiable theory. To believe in psychological egoism is merely, in every human action, to dig until you find “proof” that an act is somehow egoist. Any human action could be asserted to be egoist; it’s not a difficult thing to assert. But is it *necessary* to do so? Does it reveal anything about the actions being analyzed? Or does it merely waste time as you work backwards from the assumption that something must be true and therefore there must exist a proof for it (no matter how dodgy)?

Psychological egoism is not a profound assertion about the “true nature” of human motivation, it is merely the stripping away of all the unique qualities that constitute human motivation in favor of one unfalsifiable quality.

I wish to close this section with a quote from Einstein, the famous physicist:

“The individual is able to think, feel, strive, and work by himself; but he depends so much upon society — in his physical, intellectual, and emotional existence — that it is impossible to think of him, or to understand him, outside the framework of society. It is ‘society’ which provides man with food, clothing, a home, the tools of work, language, the forms of thought, and most of the content of thought; his life is made possible through the labor and the accomplishments of the many millions past and present who are all hidden behind the small word ‘society.’” [2]

As a postscript, it should briefly be noted that egoism, as advanced by Max Stirner, is based upon descriptivism and not prescriptivism. Egoism is merely the conscious realization of Stirner’s discoveries regarding the self, and changes in behavior mean only what they might to the individual who

becomes the conscious egoist. The major conjecture for which Stirner's egoism stands is that humans are, at the heart of it, motivated by selfish wills.

Anthropologist David Graeber contests this thusly:

"I should make clear that I do not believe that either egoism or altruism are somehow inherent to human nature. Human motives are rarely that simple. Rather egoism or altruism are ideas we have about human nature. [...]

Even today, [...] very few of our actions could be said to be motivated by anything so simple as untrammelled greed or utterly selfless generosity. When we are dealing not with strangers but with friends, relatives, or enemies, a much more complicated set of motivations will generally come into play: envy, solidarity, pride, self-destructive grief, loyalty, romantic obsession, resentment, spite, shame, conviviality, the anticipation of shared enjoyment, the desire to show up a rival, and so on." [3]

Read the original essay here:

[1] Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, "My Intercourse"

[2] Albert Einstein, *Why Socialism?*

[3] David Graeber, *Army of Altruists*, Ch. 1