

ANTAGONISTIC FOUNDATIONS: NIETZSCHE'S EGOISM



Another important difference is apparent in the nature of the egoism of Stirner and Nietzsche. Like Stirner, Nietzsche clearly advocates for egoism and offers an organized criticism of altruistic morality in several of his books. At times, he describes himself as an "immoralist," perhaps ironically, and applauds the contemporary value of independence, self interest, feeling "responsible for what one intends," and having "pride in ourselves."

Both Stirner and Nietzsche are extremely critical of altruism, self-denial, and self-renunciation, but Nietzsche's egoism was not based on a notion of ownership. Instead, it emerged out his inversion of the traditional ethical framework that includes notions of good and evil, and external measures of virtue. His egoism includes a consideration of the inherently selfish or self-interested nature of human action, and the logical and psychological problems associated with altruism .

Nietzsche's egoism and critique of morality is certainly a radical

departure from not only altruists, but also those egoists who found morality on hedonic or utilitarian grounds. In opposition to Stirner and his progeny, Nietzsche does not advocate for the abolition of morality in favor of any form of ownership, self-ownership, or individual subjectivity. Furthermore, Nietzsche argues in favor of the use of external standards to assign value to the choices and actions of individuals. Nietzsche challenges traditional conceptions of morality, particularly the antagonism between self-interest and self sacrifice.

He argues that the self-interested actions of noble souls also serve greater purposes. Nietzsche intends to reinvent or reconstruct morality based on more heroic values.²⁴ Unlike Stirner, he does not counterpose morality with egoism, nor does he see morality as inherently inimical to the individual.

Nietzsche's egoism is defined by three important points. First, morality poses a significant philosophic problem, but it is a cultural necessity. The nature of morality and its uses can only be understood through its inversion; that is, by upending how people traditionally understand its concepts and purposes. Morality is necessary not because the "evil wild beast" inside humans needs to be constrained by cultural prescriptions of good and evil, but because, as tame animals, the people who populate modernity "are an ignominious spectacle and require moral disguising."

The "European disguises himself in morality because he has become sick, sickly crippled animal, who has good reasons for being 'tame,' because he is almost an abortion, an imperfect, weak and clumsy." Amoral fierce beasts do not need any moral disguise, they simply act and recognize that it is their power, not their right that matters. It is the tame, the gregarious animal, the timid, mediocre modern human being that must "dress up" its mediocrity, anxiety, and ennui with morality.

The mass of humanity, what Nietzsche calls "the herd," legitimates and

dramatizes its weakness and mediocrity through morality. Ultimately, morality has little to do with universal notions of right and wrong. It does not constrain human aggression or the passions. Instead, it is a marker that separates the herd from exceptional individuals, the overhumans; it differentiates the masters from the slaves. Each social category is marked by its own morality. The most important function of egoism in Nietzsche's philosophy is to legitimate the sense of the overhumans that they are special, not bound by the "prejudices" and rules that govern ordinary human behavior.

Second, Nietzsche's rejection of altruism is no less adamant than Stirner's but it has a different goal. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche says, "the feelings of devotion, self-sacrifice for one's neighbor, the whole morality of self-denial must be questioned mercilessly and taken to court."

In *The Gay Science*, he unequivocally states that selflessness "has no value either in heaven or on earth; the great problems all demand great love, and it is only the strong, well-rounded, secure spirits, those who have a solid basis, that are qualified for them."

He makes clear that self-renunciation characterizes particular types of individuals and that it is a fact of life that some will dominate and others submit.

I see in many men an excessive impulse and delight in wanting to be a function; they strive after it, and have the keenest scent for all those positions in which precisely they themselves can be functions . . . Such beings maintain themselves best when they insert themselves in an alien organism; if they do not succeed they become vexed, irritated, and eat themselves up.

It is not necessarily a matter of virtue or ethics that some persons

transform themselves into dominant creatures and subordinate others. It is simply a matter of necessity and nature. Morality, benevolence, and altruism, therefore, are a matter of perspective, "according as the stronger or the weaker feels benevolent."²⁹ Third, Nietzsche's egoism differentiates between noble and petty actions, and argues that the value and, therefore, the interests of some persons are more important than others.

The value of egoism depends on the physiological value of him who possesses it: it can be very valuable, it can be worthless and contemptible. Every individual may be regarded as representing the ascending or descending line of life. When one has decided which, one has thereby established a canon for the value of his egoism. If he represents the ascending line his value is in fact extraordinary – and for the sake of the life-collective.

If the person represents the "descending development, decay, chronic degeneration," she or he has little value and should not be able to sponge off of the "well-constituted." The qualities of individuals, and the egoistic choices that individuals make, have value according to the "canon" defined by "ascending life." Thus, for Nietzsche, noble actions and the actions of the

noble serve both the interest of the individual actor and a larger social and historical purpose, the ascending line of the "life-collective."

From a Stirnerite point of view, the problem with Nietzsche's egoism is that it includes an assumption of an external standard, or a "canon of the ascending line of the life-collective," that should be used to measure nobility or pettiness of actions and the importance of individuals. What is this canon and where did it come from? How can individuals know if their actions are noble or petty?

How can they know which individuals are more important than others? Nietzsche's supposition of a "canon of the ascending line of the life-collective" is nothing more than what Stirner would call a "spook." It is a humanly constructed fiction that is attributed the appearance of an external, constraining, and absolute yardstick to assess the value of actions and persons.

It fundamentally contradicts Stirner's notion of egoism since ownness opposes the application of any external measure of value to the person's qualities or actions. Individuals are the totality, they are not part of some mystical life-collective. Individuals are unique; they are without "norm." Stirner's critique of self-renunciation was based on his judgment that all forms of external measurement contradict ownness. It is impossible for individuals to own their lives, minds, and bodies if they renounce their ability to assign meaning and value to themselves, to others, and to objects in the external environment, in favor of some external canon. Egoism, ownness, the affirmation of self, entails an absolute rejection of external measures of meaning and value.