2 Approaches to Ethics: Egoism and Altruism - Part 2

Each day we are required to make a variety of moral decisions, and exposure to ethical theories can deepen our practice of Christian discipleship.

Two major ethical streams are egoism and altruism, as I explained previously.

Both ethical streams, the egoist and the altruist, are found in the Christian Scriptures, as revealed by Paul’s divergent responses to two faith communities regarding food questions.

An ethical dilemma described in 2 Thessalonians 3:3-13 involved a group in the Christian community who had given up work and expected to live from the handouts of others in the congregation.

Paul first points to his own example of manual labor to pay his own way.

He then lays down the following principle: Anyone unwilling to work cannot depend on the generosity of the community.

This could be considered an application of ethical egoism – individuals bear the responsibility for their own well-being.

The apostle faced a different moral issue when a famine struck Palestine. The marginalized Christian community in Jerusalem was particularly vulnerable to hunger.

Paul organized a collection of funds from the churches in Asia Minor and Greece to provide relief.

Three ethical principles are particularly noteworthy in 2 Corinthians 8-9:

1. Each person was to participate in this altruistic intervention according to their means. No one was exempt.

2. The model for generosity was the altruism of the Lord Jesus Christ who, being rich, chose to become poor so that we might be rich.
3. The goal of altruism is some sort of a fair balance between those who suffer from poverty and those who live in security.

I propose that these two examples help us to see that people of faith always live in the tension between ethical egoism and altruism.

The problem is that egoism is more prevalent than altruism. The individualism and consumerism of Western societies throw cold water on the ideals of self-sacrifice for the common good.

I would like to conclude with a few additional points of reflection on these two ethical streams:

1. We will always live with the tension of ethical egoism and altruism.

2. A social world in which morality is based on personal advantage would require you to protect yourself in every relationship and encounter with other people.

3. The law of the jungle inevitably creates losers as well as winners. A compounding problem is that both wealth and poverty often are passed on to other generations unless there is some form of equalization of opportunity.

4. Humans have a tendency toward self-deception. It is a challenge to assess our own motivations and even more difficult to discern the motives of others.

Ethical egoists may present themselves as altruists in order to gain an advantage, build an image or advance in their careers. Each of us needs to engage in regular gut checks to recognize and purify our motives. Public figures must be judged by their actions rather than their words.

5. The road of ethical egoism does not guarantee well-being and happiness.

The current level of consumer debt in Canada and the U.S. illustrates that egoists will compromise the future because of weakness of will and lack of knowledge. Paradoxically, personal satisfaction is often the byproduct of a life of service to others.

6. Our response to the environmental crisis is dampened by the current of ethical egoism that mitigates against personal sacrifice for the collective good. As a result, it is convenient to question the science of global climate change.
7. Politicians and preachers generally appeal to our inherent egoism by emphasizing personal advantages of their platforms or religion. There is an overwhelming silence about the virtue of sacrifice for the common good and, in the case of the discourse of pastors, for the rule of God.

I propose that the witness of Christians will be strengthened by a renewed emphasis on an altruistic approach to ethics based on our reading of the New Testament and Hebrew prophets.

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Editor’s note: This is the second of a two part series. Part one is available here.