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Egoism

John Beverley Robinson

1915

There is no word more generally misinterpreted than the word egoism, in its modern sense. In the first place, it is supposed to mean devotion to self interest, without regard to the interest of others. It is thus opposed to altruism — devotion to others and sacrifice of self. This interpretation is due to the use of the word thus antithetically by Herbert Spencer.

Again, it is identified with hedonism or eudaimonism, or epicureanism, philosophies that teach that the attainment of pleasure or happiness or advantage, whichever you may choose to phrase it, is the rule of life.

Modern egoism, as propounded by Stirner and Nietzsche, and expounded by Ibsen, Shaw and others, is all these; but it is more. It is the realization by the individual that they are an individual; that, as far as they are concerned, they are the *only* individual.

For each one of us stands alone in the midst of a universe. We are surrounded by sights and sounds which we interpret as exterior to ourselves, although all we know of them are the impressions on our retina and ear drums and other organs of sense. The universe for the individual is measured by these sensations; they are, for him/her, the universe. Some of them they

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interpret as denoting other individuals, whom they conceive as more or less like themselves. But none of these is his/ herself. He/she stands apart. His/her consciousness, and the desires and gratifications that enter into it, is a thing unique; no other can enter into it.

However near and dear to you may be your spouse, children, friends, they are not you; they are outside of you. You are forever alone. Your thoughts and emotions are yours alone. There is no other who experiences your thoughts or your feelings.

No doubt it gives you pleasure when others think as you do, and inform you of it through language; or when others enjoy the same things that you do. Moreover, quite apart from their enjoying the same things that you enjoy, it gives you pleasure to see them enjoy themselves in any way. Such gratification to the individual is the pleasure of sympathy, one of the most acute pleasures possible for most people.

According to your sympathy, you will take pleasure in your own happiness or in the happiness of other people; but it is always your own happiness you seek. The most profound egoist may be the most complete altruist; but he knows that her altruism is, at the bottom, nothing but self-indulgence.

But egoism is more than this. It is the realization by the individual that she/he is above all institutions and all formulas; that they exist only so far as he chooses to make them her own by accepting them.

When you see clearly that *you* are the measure of the universe, that everything that exists exists for *you* only so far as it is reflected in your own consciousness, you become a new person; you see everything by a new light: you stand on a height and feel the fresh air blowing on your face; and find new strength and glory in it.

Whatever gods you worship, you realize that they are *your* gods, the product of your own mind, terrible or amiable, as you may choose to depict them. You hold them in your hand, and

play with them, as a child with its paper dolls; for you have learned not to fear them, that they are but the “imagination of your heart.”

All the ideals which people generally think are realities, you have learned to see through; you have learned that they are *your* ideals. Whether you have originated them, which is unlikely, or have accepted somebody else’s ideals, makes no difference. They are *your* ideals just so far as you accept them. The priest is reverend only so far as *you* reverence him. If you cease to reverence him, he is no longer reverend for *you*. You have power to make and unmake priests as easily as you can make and unmake gods. You are the one of whom the poet tells, who stands unmoved, though the universe falls in fragments about you.

And all the other ideals by which people are moved, to which people are enslaved, for which humyns afflict themselves, have no power over you; you are no longer afraid of them, for you know them to be your *own* ideals, made in your own mind, for your own pleasure, to be changed or ignored, just as you choose to change or ignore them. They are your own little pets, to be played with, not to be feared.

“The State” or “The Government” is idealized by the many as a thing above them, to be revered and feared. They call it “My Country,” and if you utter the magic words, they will rush to kill their friends, whom they would not injure by so much as a pin scratch, if they were not intoxicated and blinded by their ideal. Most people are deprived of their reason under the influence of their ideals. Moved by the ideal of “religion” or “patriotism” or “morality,” they fly at each others’ throats — they, who are otherwise often the gentlest of neighbors! But their ideals are for them like the “fixed ideas” of lunatics. They become irrational and irresponsible under the influence of their ideals. They will not only destroy others, but they will quite often sink their own interests, and rush madly to destroy them-

selves as a sacrifice to the all-devouring ideal. Curious, is it not, to one who looks on with a philosophical mind?

But the egoist has no ideals, for the knowledge that his ideals are only *his* ideals, frees her from their domination. She acts for his own interest, not for the interest of ideals. She will neither hang a person nor whip a child in the interest of “morality,” if it is disagreeable to her to do so. He/she has no reverence for “The State.” She knows that “The Government” is but a set of men, mostly as big fools as he is himself, many of them bigger. If the State does things that benefit her, he will support it; if it attacks her and encroaches on his liberty, she will evade it by any means in his power, if she is not strong enough to withstand it. He/she is a person without a country.

“The Flag,” that most people adore, as people always adore symbols, worshipping the symbol more than the principle it is supposed to set forth, is for the egoist but a rather inharmonious piece of patch-work; and anybody may walk on it or spit on it if they will, without exciting their emotion any more than if it were a tarpaulin that they walked upon — or spat upon. The principles that it symbolizes, they will maintain as far as it seems to their advantage to maintain them; but if the principles require them to kill people or be killed themselves, you will have to demonstrate to them just what benefit they will gain by killing or being killed, before you can persuade them to uphold them.

When the judge enters court in his toggerly, (judges and ministers and professors know the value of toggerly in impressing the populace) the egoist is unterrified. She/he has not even any respect for “The Law.” If the law happens to be to his advantage, she will avail himself of it; if it invades her liberty she will transgress it as far as he thinks it wise to do so. But she has no regard for it as a thing supernal. It is to her the clumsy creation of them who still “sit in darkness.”

Nor does he bow the knee to Morality — Sacred Morality! Some of its precepts she may accept, if he chooses to do so;

but you cannot scare her off by telling him it is not “right.” He usually prefers not to kill or steal; but if she must kill or steal to save herself, he will do it with a good heart, and without any qualms of “conscience.”

And “morality” will never persuade her to injure others when it is of no advantage to himself. She will not be found among a band of “white caps,” flogging and burning poor devils, because their actions do not conform to the dictates of “morality,” though they have injured none by such actions; nor will he have any hand in persecuting helpless girls, and throwing them out into the street, when she has received no ill at their hands.

To her friends — to those who deserve the truth from him, — she will tell the truth; but you cannot force the truth from him because she is “afraid to tell a lie.” He has no fear, not even of perjury, for she knows that oaths are but devices to enslave the mind by an appeal to supernatural fears.

And for all the other small, tenuous ideals, with which we have fettered our minds and to which we have shrunk our petty lives; they are for the egoist as though they were not.

“Filial love and respect” he will give to his parents if they have earned it by deserving it. If they have beaten her in infancy, and scorned her in childhood, and domineered over him in maturity, he may possibly love them in spite of maltreatment; but if they have alienated her affection, they will not reawaken it by an appeal to “duty”.

In brief, egoism in its modern interpretation, is the antithesis, not of altruism, but of idealism. The ordinary person — the idealist — subordinates their interests to the interests of their ideals, and usually suffers for it. The egoist is fooled by no ideals: she/he discards them or uses them, as may suit his own interest. If he/she likes to be altruistic, they will sacrifice themselves for others; but only because they like to do so; they demand no gratitude nor glory in return