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Review

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Review by: David Cummiskey

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## The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism

By ALISON HILLS

Oxford University Press, 2010. xii + 266 pp. £32.50

Alison Hills's *The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism* is an excellent book and I recommend it highly. Hills sets her sights on what she calls 'The Holy Grail' of moral philosophy, which is a response to the challenge of egoism that vindicates the superior authoritative status of morality. In pursuit of the Grail, she takes on Sidgwick, Moore, Williams, Nagel, Foot, Hursthouse, Korsgaard, Wood, Allison and Parfit. Her fast-paced and insightful analysis of recent ethical theory alone makes this book worth reading. In addition, Hills develops her own novel epistemological attempt at the Grail.

Hills's argument has three parts. The first two parts are closely linked and stand independently of the third part. The first part develops three types of egoism, each of which correlates with a major approach to moral theory. Hills shows that in addition to standard egoism, which correlates with utilitarianism, there are also forms of egoism that mirror Kantian ethics and virtue ethics. The second part argues that the Kantian egoist and virtue egoist have plausible responses to recent attempts to vindicate morality.

Standard egoism states that 'each agent has reason to maximize her own happiness; and no other reasons for action. The grounds for this reason are the agent's own happiness' (35). This contrasts with rational utilitarianism, which claims that the general happiness is good and so each agent has reason to maximize the general happiness. Focusing on Korsgaard and Wood in particular, Hills argues that Kantian conceptions of happiness and of the value of rational nature can be incorporated into a Kantian version of egoism. A Kantian egoist categorical imperative tells one to 'always treat humanity in *your own* person as an end and never as a mere means' (59). Hills argues that the Kantian egoist can accept the Kantian conception of reasons for action, autonomy and the unconditional value of (her own) rational nature. She takes a similar approach responding to virtue theory. In particular, she focuses on Foot and Hursthouse and their neo-Aristotelian, naturalist approach, and, using their arguments, develops a conception of virtue egoism. Hills argues that 'the egoist virtues are the traits of character that (for the most part) promote non-moralized flourishing better than any other traits' and that 'everyone has reason to do what the person with the egoist virtues would characteristically do in the situation . . . precisely because this is what the person with the egoist virtues would do' (77).

Building on her account of the three kinds of egoism, she responds to the ambitious vindications of morality offered by Nagel, Korsgaard, Allison and Parfit. The basic idea is that arguments against standard egoism do not undermine Kantian or virtue-based egoism. In this short review, I cannot present the details of her numerous arguments and conclusions, but suffice it to say that her analysis of the varieties and strengths of egoism is consistently clear, insightful and interesting.

The third part of Hills's argument focuses on modest vindications of morality. An ambitious vindication is 'a valid argument based on premisses that an egoist would accept that egoism is false' (90). In contrast, a modest vindication is based on premisses that a defender of common sense morality would accept, but that an egoist rejects (121). Even if all ambitious vindications of morality fail, a modest vindication of morality

might succeed. The egoist will be unmoved by these internal justifications of morality, but they still provide a modest vindication of morality sufficient for moral agents.

Of course, the problem with modest vindications is that they start by begging the question against the egoist (124). If the moralist has no ambitious reply to the egoist, how can the moralist start by assuming the egoist is wrong? If the egoist and moralist have the same evidence and reasoning abilities, they are epistemic peers. In general, the testimony of an epistemic peer has the same status as one's own initial judgement (153). If the moralist disagrees with the egoist, and yet recognizes that the egoist is an epistemic peer, how can the moralist assume that she is right and the egoist is wrong? In light of the disagreement, it would seem that both should suspend judgement until the disagreement is resolved (166). To address these concerns, Hills shifts her focus to moral epistemology.

Hills's response to the problem of disagreement focuses on the epistemic weight of testimony in the deliberations of a moral agent. She argues: (i) that a good moral agent strives for moral understanding, not just moral knowledge (198–213), and (ii) that moral understanding, unlike moral knowledge, cannot be based on expert testimony alone. If one defers to a reliable moral expert, one may have moral knowledge, she argues, but not moral understanding. Moral understanding, unlike moral knowledge, also requires a *grasp* of the basis and justification of morality (192). Moral understanding thus privileges one's own moral judgement (215–22). Hills concludes that (iii) in cases of disagreement with an epistemic peer, a good moral agent should rely on her own best judgement (221–26).

Here is the rub. The egoist, in contrast, is not concerned with being a good moral agent but does claim to have moral knowledge. There is thus no intrinsic reason for an egoist to give priority to moral understanding over moral knowledge, Hills argues (238), and so (iv) the egoist should suspend judgement in cases of disagreement with an epistemic peer (239). Hills concludes that (v) the result is an important asymmetry between the rational status of egoism and morality (240). The Grail is almost in hand. The moralist can vindicate her own morality and also show that the egoist should suspend judgement. And, indeed, even the egoist must recognize this asymmetry and the irrationality of a continued affirmation of egoism.

Hills's argument is provocative and interesting. It is unclear, however, why the moralist can claim moral understanding. Hills argues that moral understanding requires a *grasp* of the basis and justification of morality (192). It thus seems that understanding moral reasons should include an understanding of the basis of the authority of morality. But Hills has shown that establishing the authoritative status of moral reasons is the unattained Holy Grail of moral philosophy.

Let's return to her argument. She argues that '[l]istening to the views of others, and sometimes taking their advice, is sensible. But if you give weight to their conclusions, independently of the force of the reasons that they cite for those conclusions, you are not forming your own moral beliefs for the right reasons' (222). Fair enough, but how is this analogous to the dispute between the egoist and the moralist? The egoist does more than assert egoism; the egoist *argues* that morality does not have authoritative status that the moralist takes for granted. Indeed, in the first two parts of her book, Hills argues that the utilitarian, Kantian, Parfitian and virtue theorists cannot vindicate morality against the egoist. The basic problem is that the premisses of the arguments, used by those defending the authority of morality, do not establish the authority of morality because they equally support one of the alternative forms of

egoism. So how can Hills also claim that the moralist understands the basis of the authority of moral reasons? If Hills is right in the first two parts, the moralist should instead understand that the arguments that are supposed to vindicate the authority of morality do not succeed. If a good moral agent is committed to understanding morality, she must acknowledge that she does not understand and cannot justify her moral claims.

Hills writes, 'Consider the reasons why morally understanding was important to the moral agent. It was morally important not just that you did what happened to be the right action, but that you orient yourself the right way with respect to reasons for action' (245). There are three additional problems with the supposed priority of moral understanding. First, this is a specifically Kantian conception of morality. In contrast to the moralist, Hills emphasizes that, according to egoism, 'orienting yourself with regard to reasons is not significant for its own sake . . . what matters fundamentally is that your life goes well' (245). But for many moralists, consequentialists for example, 'orienting yourself with regard to reasons is not significant for its own sake'. For consequentialists, what is fundamentally important is that we do as much good as possible. Her vindication of morality, thus, seems to presuppose a distinctly Kantian conception of morality. Secondly, it is unclear how Hills would respond to religious conceptions of morality. Islamic ethics, for example, emphasizes submission to the Divine will, which is accomplished by following the Qur'an, the example of life of the prophet Muhammad and deferring to the *testimony* of religious scholars. Many Christians, Jews and Buddhists also defer to religious authorities, teachers and scholars. These religious conceptions of morality are not based on the priority of individual moral understanding (cf. 173). Thirdly, returning to her core argument, although Hills very briefly addresses the question, she does not adequately explain why her Kantian egoist, or virtue egoist, would not be just as concerned with being rightly oriented with respect to reasons. Indeed, her earlier defence of Kantian egoism implies that any reason the Kantian moralist has for this intrinsic concern (Chs 3, 96–106), the Kantian egoist would have the same reason (cf. 243–44). Similarly, one might argue that, even for a virtue egoist, human flourishing includes the full actualization of human potential, which includes intellectual virtues and practical wisdom, and thus also moral understanding (cf. 201 and 224). In short, Hills's own defence of egoism threatens her vindication of morality.

Whether or not one agrees with her original vindication of morality, Hills's analysis of recent responses to egoism is compelling, engaging and exceptionally clear. Her elaboration of the varieties of egoism and her account of the importance of moral understanding to moral agency are welcome additions to contemporary moral philosophy. *The Beloved Self: Morality and the Challenge from Egoism* is an excellent book.

DAVID CUMMISKEY  
 Bates College  
 Lewiston, Maine 04240  
 dcummisk@bates.edu