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Moral Squeamishness and the Invisible Contract: Revisiting the Underlying Logic of "Selflessness" from Ethical Egoism

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Abstract: In traditional ethics, "self-interest and altruism" is presented as a dichotomy. In the theoretical framework of ethical egoism, Hobbes" theory of the state of nature and social contract theory take self-interest as the fundamental driving force of human nature, and it has been consistently used in the construction of moral order in civilised societies, which dissolves the dichotomy of egoism-altruism. On the other hand, the purity of "good will" in Kant's deontology is essentially illusory, and rational pleasure and implicit self-interest always constitute the deep-seated driving force of behaviour. Therefore, "rational self-interest", as a new paradigm of moral practice, stresses that social cooperation and civilisation advancement is actually an invisible contract made by self-interested people based on long-term interests. This perspective not only challenges the Utopian presuppositions of traditional ethics, but also provides a more realistic path for understanding the rational symbiosis between individuals and society.

Keywords: ethical egoism, selflessness, self-interest, invisible contract, moral dispelling

1. Introduction

Traditional ethics often places self-interest and altruism at opposing poles and takes purity of motive as the touchstone of moral value. However, this dualistic narrative has been repeatedly thwarted in real-life experience - the moral satisfaction of the do-gooder, the gratitude of the recipient, and the social acclaim of the bystander all hint at the hidden collusion of altruistic behaviour with a complex network of interests. Ethical Egoism is profound in that it pierces the illusion of this moral rhetoric: it refuses to reduce "self-interest" to material desires, but reveals the ultimate dominance of spiritual interests such as honour, moral superiority, and existential significance over human behaviour. Adopting a theoretical deconstruction and case study approach, this study aims to break down the either/or framework of "self-interest-or-altruism", to argue how implicit self-interest becomes the deeper logic of ethical practice, and to propose "rational self-interest" as a new paradigm for understanding social cooperation.

This argument is not only a critical intervention in the tradition of ethical theory, but also an honest confrontation with the reality of human nature - only by recognising the ontological nature of self-interest can we get rid of moral hypocrisy, and explore the rational symbiosis between the individual and the society in "enlightened self-interest."

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2. The deconstruction of "self-interest" in altruistic behaviour: based on ethical egoism

When Hobbes depicts the "state of nature" in *Leviathan*, he is not trying to restore the real face of history, but to pierce through the moral camouflage of the civilised society with the sharp gaze of a philosopher, and to put human nature on the dissecting table of thought. In his view, stripped of the trappings of law, morality and religion, mankind is nothing but a trapped beast in the "bellum omnium contra omnes" (the war of all against all), and the only fuel to drive this war is the self-interested instinct rooted in the depths of human nature. This extreme assumption of the human condition not only provides the empirical foundation for ethical egoism, but also elevates self-interest from a biological fact to the justification of an ethical order through the logical derivation of a social contract. In order to understand the necessity of ethical egoism, one must first face up to the "state of nature" in Hobbes"s book, which is full of fear and violence - where the self-interested nature of human beings is revealed in the most naked way.

Hobbes"s classic description of the state of nature is chilling: without industry, agriculture, art, and writing, people live under the eternal threat of "solitude, poverty, meanness, cruelty, and shortness of life". The root of this horrific picture lies in his dual presuppositions about human nature. One is the absolute priority of self-preservation. In the wilderness of scarce resources, reason cannot be the moral faculty of Aristotle"s quest for the supreme good, but a tool of existential reckoning. "The most fundamental of man"s natural passions is the desire of preserving his life," writes Hobbes, "the fear of death, the desire of a comfortable life, and the hope of obtaining what is needful by labour" constitute the basic motivation for human behaviour [1]. When two people are fighting for the last bite of food in the wilderness, any altruistic behaviour (e.g. active retreat) implies the risk of self-destruction, and a pre-emptive attack is the rational choice. The second is the equal potential for violence. Even if there is a difference in physical and intellectual strength, the weak can still kill the strong through surprise attacks or alliances. This "equality of possibility of killing others" makes suspicion and fear the keynote of human relations. Hobbes is profound in that he does not attribute this violence to human "evil" but reveals a cold truth: in the absence of public authority, self-interest is not a moral failing but a necessary strategy for survival. The killer in the state of nature is not a demon, but a rational being trying to survive the threat of death.

Hobbes"s contract theory overturns the naivety of the traditional theory of moral origins - the state is not founded on the pursuit of the "common good", but on the individual"s fear of violent death (metus mortis) and desire for a comfortable life. When people cede their natural rights to a sovereign, they are not suddenly acquiring altruistic virtues, but are engaged in a shrewd calculation of gain: the loss of some of their liberties in exchange for the security of their lives. Hobbes bluntly states that "the end of all voluntary acts is some advantage to the actor himself" [1]. Even seemingly altruistic contractual obligations imply a logic of self-interest. For example, the commandment "Thou shalt not steal" is observed not because people have suddenly realised the sanctity of the right to property, but because violating it would incur the sovereign"s punishment and thus endanger their own security. As Hobbes grimly asserted, "Without force, a covenant is but a piece of paper [1]." The essence of the social contract is nothing more than the optimal survival strategy of a group of self-interested individuals guided by reason.

This Hobbesian disenchantment of the origins of morality directly points to the theoretical foundation of ethical egoism, a theory that comprises two mutually reinforcing dimensions. The first is a descriptive proposition asserting that self-interest is the fundamental and inalienable driving force of human nature, and that even in civilized societies, the underlying motives of human behavior remain unchanged. Humans are inherently guided by self-interest, and even seemingly altruistic acts—such as donations, sacrifices, and expressions of empathy—ultimately serve hidden personal benefits. These may be physiological, such as avoiding pain (e.g., guilt over other’s suffering) or

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pursuing pleasure (e.g., the dopamine release triggered by helping others); social, such as gaining reputation (e.g., earning the title of "philanthropist") or strengthening interpersonal networks (e.g., fostering reciprocity); or spiritual, such as fulfilling a sense of moral superiority ("I am nobler than others") or reinforcing self-narrative coherence ("I am a good person"). From this perspective, altruism is merely a refined expression of self-interest, distinguished only by the form of the benefit rather than the nature of the motivation. This descriptive proposition thus forms the empirical foundation of ethical egoism, revealing with cold logic a truth often obscured by moral rhetoric: the ultimate motivation behind all human behavior is invariably the pursuit of self-interest.

The second is the normative proposition that the pursuit of self-interest is not morally condemnable, but should be a "legitimate choice" of rational individuals, which is a kind of moral legitimacy defence of self-interest. Since the conclusion and maintenance of the social contract are all based on rational self-interest, the pursuit of self-interest (to the extent that it does not disrupt the public order) should be regarded as the benchmark of moral behaviour. The pursuit of self-interest (to the extent that it does not undermine public order) should be seen as the benchmark of moral behaviour. This normative position actually dissolves the dichotomy of "self-interest and altruism" in traditional ethics - when "altruism" is reduced to "enlightened self-interest", the so-called "self-interest" is reduced to "enlightened self-interest", and the so-called "self-interest" is reduced to "enlightened self-interest". When altruism is reduced to "enlightened self-interest", the so-called "pure selflessness" becomes a meaningless and empty concept. As Ayn Rand wrote in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, "To claim to love others more than oneself is a logical absurdity and a moral hypocrisy [2]." She argued that true self-interest is a form of self-interest. [2] She argues that true morality lies in recognising the legitimacy of self-interest and achieving a win-win situation for the individual and society through rational calculation.

Common criticisms of Hobbes tend to accuse him of oversimplifying human nature and reducing people to self-interested machines. However, such charges misunderstand the methodological significance of the state of nature. Hobbes's "thought experiment" is not an empirical test, but an "ideal type" of human nature, the value of which lies in exposing the nature of behavioural motives obscured by civilisation. Just as the "perfect line" in geometry reveals the truth of spatial relations even though it does not exist in the real world, so the horrific picture of the state of nature highlights the universality of the self-interested instinct in an exaggerated way. Even if there are seemingly purely altruistic behaviours, there are actually hidden motives of self-interest behind them. The reason why pious believers abide by the precepts is merely the expectation of a happy afterlife; the reason why environmental protection organisations advocate sustainable development is essentially nothing more than delaying enjoyment and seeking to maximise benefits; the generous alms given to roadside beggars are actually about obtaining spiritual self-compassion and avoiding guilt. Some critics may use some extreme examples to refute this: a brave soldier in the battlefield fighting, in order to create opportunities for comrades at the critical moment of the attack, resolutely blocked the enemy's guns, this behaviour is almost instantaneous, the soldier simply do not have time to make utilitarian considerations. However, it is clear that the soldier does not at the time of blocking the gunshot before becoming a soldier, he may have become a soldier at the beginning of the war or enlisted in the army, in the school or the army has been educated about the relevant, thought about similar problems, if such a situation occurs, I want to sacrifice myself for the supreme honour and the peace of future generations. The difference between human beings and animals that migrate and go into heat at regular intervals is that human beings do not act on instinct, so it is totally unjustified to say that some behaviour is based on purely altruistic instincts. These explanations may seem cold, but they are in the same vein as Hobbes' theoretical logic: the forms and results of self-interest can be sublimated, but their ontological status is unassailable.

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When the philanthropists of the 21st century sign donation agreements under the limelight, and when the "punch cards of good deeds" on social media harvest traffic and praise, what we see is only an upgraded version of the natural state of civilisation - self-interested motives put on the cloak of morality, and continue to play a never-ending drama in the theatre of the human world. The theatre of the world continues to play a never-ending drama. The task of ethical egoism is to debunk the scripts of these dramas and restore a traumatised but authentic humanity. This is not a denial of morality, but an honest confrontation with the limitations of human nature - only by recognising the ontological nature of self-interest can we find a way of symbiosis between the individual and society through reason and compromise.

3. Refutation of Deontology: The Illusory Nature of Kant's "Good Will"

The Hobbesian theory of the state of nature outlines the primordial undercurrent of human self-interest in cold strokes, revealing the utilitarian roots of moral order in civilised societies. However, while deconstructing the myth of morality, the theory also reveals a fundamental dilemma: if self-interest is indeed the ultimate driving force of human behaviour, then are the moral paradigms of traditional ethics that claim to transcend the calculus of interests - such as the purely good actions "out of obligation" in Kant's are they merely illusory rhetoric? This question leads us to another high point in the history of ethics: Kant's deontology.

Kant's attempt to build an ethical sanctuary untainted by empirical interests on the basis of the "good will", with its stringent criterion of motivational purity, stands in stark contrast to Hobbes's self-interested narrative. However, if the truth of human nature revealed by Hobbes is taken as a mirror, Kant's moral idealism reveals a gap that is difficult to be bridged - when de-ontology requires actors to completely divest themselves of emotional preferences and interests, does it not essentially deny the truth of human nature? From the bloody jungle of the state of nature to the pure starry sky of deontology, the duel between the two theories is not only a philosophical debate on the nature of morality, but also an ultimate interrogation on whether "man can transcend himself." The critical edge of ethical egoism is about to pierce the Utopian veil of Kant's system from this confrontation: if even the "self-interested beasts" in Hobbes' writing can conclude a social contract under the guidance of rationality, then the moral law of Kant, which requires human beings to instantly transform into "pure rational beings", is not only about the essence of morality, but also about the ultimate questioning of "whether human beings can transcend themselves." Is Kant's demand that human beings instantly transform into "purely rational beings" just an arrogant transgression of human nature?

Kantian ethics, centred on the motive "out of obligation" (aus Pflicht), attempts to construct an unconditional moral law by excluding all empirical preferences (Neigung) [3]. However, ethical egoism reveals that Kant's defence of the purity of the "good will" is based on a simplification and self-deception of human motives. Next, this paper will develop three aspects of the argument.

First, the central proposition of Kantian ethics is that the moral value of an act exists only in the purity of the motive. An act of helping the poor that is motivated by compassion (Neigung) rather than duty (Pflicht) has no moral value, even if the result is the same. This stringent standard narrows morality into an internalised psychological scrutiny - the actor must constantly interrogate himself, "Am I acting out of mere reverence for the moral law?" However, this questioning itself is mired in logic. The obvious question is how can the purity of motives be verified? Kant's solution relies on the universalization test of the categorical imperative (kategorischer Imperativ), which assesses the external consistency of maxims but fails to penetrate the agent's inner psychology [3]. When a wealthy businessman anonymously donates a large amount of property, he may think he is doing so purely out of obligation, but subconsciously there may be a hidden desire for "moral superiority" or an indirect expectation of "posthumous fame". The unobservability of motives reduces the "good will" to a self-proclaimed moral gesture, the purity of which is merely a Kantian theoretical illusion.

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Secondly, a deeper contradiction lies in Kant's ambiguous treatment of vernünftige Lust (rational pleasure) [4]. He admits that the fulfilment of duties is accompanied by a "rational pleasure" - a sense of self-affirmation resulting from the observance of the moral law. But this pleasure is deliberately distinguished by Kant from "sensual preferences" in order to preserve the purity of motives. This distinction is a false rhetorical exercise in the light of ethical egoism. Whether it is the emotional satisfaction gained from helping others or the mental peace experienced through honesty, it is essentially positive feedback from the actor on the state of his or her self. As Nietzsche sneered in On the *Genealogy of Morals,* "When moralists package 'rational pleasure' as a transcendent value, they are merely flipping the coin of self-interest and continuing to circulate in the marketplace [5]." A Kantian might argue that he rescues a man overboard out of respect for the law that "man is an end in himself," but would he maintain the same moral fervour if the act of rescuing failed to bring the slightest self-affirmation (e.g., if he were falsely accused of being the perpetrator)? The hesitancy of the answer reveals the indispensable driving force of "rational pleasure", which is still essentially a spiritual variant of self-interest.

Finally, Kant's theory of ethics is, to a certain extent, as much a counterintuitive theory of morality as utilitarianism. Kant's followers often cite the duty not to lie as an example of the transcendence of the good will: even if lying saves innocent lives, the moral law cannot be violated. This extreme case exposes the absurdity of deontology. When Nazi soldiers knocked on the door to ask where the Jews were hiding, Kantian "absolute honesty" would have led directly to murder. This counterexample is not accidental; it reveals the fatal flaw in Kantian ethics: when moral laws conflict with the most basic human instincts for survival, their "universality" collapses in an instant. The saints who proclaim "duty for duty's sake" often either never encounter real moral dilemmas or unconsciously slip into self-interested choices in those dilemmas-like Kant himself, who spent his entire life in a study and was never confronted with the fatal questioning of concentration camp guards.

4. Rational Self-Interest: Morality as an Invisible Contract for Social Win-Win

In *Notre Dame de Paris*, when Bishop Claude uses despicable means to force the beautiful girl Esmerdara into submission, everyone identifies him as the embodiment of evil; and when Quasimodo resolutely pushes Claude, who has nurtured him for many years, out of the church in order to save his beloved girl, he is worshipped as the messenger of justice. This black-or-white moral narrative exposes the fundamental dilemma of traditional ethics - it pits self-interest against morality, while ignoring the true miracle of human society: those civilisational orders that are the most solid are often born out of the rational calculations of the self-interested. The point is not to deny the self-interested undercurrent in human nature, but to understand why that undercurrent can breed the fruits of altruism, and why the only way to construct nonhypocritical and sustainable moral practices is to recognise the legitimacy of self-interest.

The most enduring patterns of cooperation in the history of civilisation have never depended on the sacrifices of saints, but have arisen from the self-interested"s clear-eyed recognition of the long-term good. On the Silk Road, the cornucopia of caravans crossed the desert in strict observance of the commandment "not to abandon one's fellow travellers", not because they were believers in Aristotelian ethical theories, but because any single act of treachery would lead to the collapse of the credibility of the entire trade route - and that would cut off everyone's financial resources. The guild system in medieval Europe required craftsmen to guarantee the quality of their products, not out of a cult of "craftsmanship", but because poor quality would lead to a loss of customers, and ultimately jeopardise the survival of the whole industry. These cases reveal a truth that has been obscured by romantic grand narratives: when the perspective of self-interest is broad enough, altruism becomes the inevitable strategy for achieving a win-win situation. Like trees competing for sunlight in a tropical rainforest, the "selfish" growth of individuals creates a canopy that shades the entire ecosystem.

This logic is equally clear in contemporary society. An entrepreneur investing in environmental technologies may do so both to obtain policy subsidies (short-term self-interest), anticipating the market potential of clean energy (medium-term self-interest), and realising that future generations will inherit a polluted planet (intergenerational self-interest). His behaviour attempts never to divest himself of self-interest at the motivational level, but the result is that he has pushed the goal of carbon neutrality. On the other hand, philanthropists who are kidnapped by "pure altruism" are often caught in a deeper moral dilemma - when the recipients ask for a continuous blood transfusion rather than their own blood production, the handouts promote dependency and ultimately destroy the balance of interests between both parties. The success of the Nordic high-welfare societies, for example, did not come about because people suddenly became altruistic, but because they realised that it was in their own interest to pay high taxes in exchange for education and healthcare rather than to take the risk alone.

The stigmatisation of self-interest is essentially a form of cognitive laziness. When we dismiss a businessman's quest for profit as "greed" or a mother's desire for her children to give back as "selfishness," we are simply using moral terms to mask the complex spectrum of human nature. As Hobbes pointed out in *Leviathan*, self-interest is not simply a matter of material gain - the desire for security, the defence of dignity and the search for the meaning of life are also deep expressions of self-interest. A doctor who works around the clock to save patients does so to earn a salary to support his family (material self-interest), to gain a sense of professional fulfilment (spiritual self-interest), and because he understands that the collapse of the healthcare system will put his own health at risk (systemic self-interest). The web of behaviours woven together by these motivations is far more realistic and explanatory than the thin narrative of "selflessness". From this perspective, altruistic behaviour is essentially more like an invisible contract, based on self-interested realisation of a win-win situation for both parties. In fact, it is this multi-dimensional pursuit of self-interest that has propelled mankind to invent health insurance systems, establish scientific research funds, and formulate public health policies - the gears of civilisation have always been driven by self-interested lubricants.

But that does not mean we should embrace naked self-interest. True moral wisdom lies in recognising that the boundaries of self-interest need to be drawn by reason, and that the standard of reason is precisely respect for the interests of others. When 18th-century British workers smashed up machinery, they thought they were defending their livelihoods; but when they realised that industrialisation would create more jobs and lower the price of goods, vandalism was gradually replaced by collective bargaining. This shift was driven not by moralising, but by workers learning through experience that destroying machines, while satisfying short-term self-interest, impedes technological progress and ultimately harms the long-term interests of all. All successful moral rules are essentially intelligent channelling of self-interested impulses rather than simple repression.

Those who defend "pure altruism" often fall into the paradox of self-denial. When Kant stresses that moral values must exclude "preferences" altogether, he is forced to admit, with embarrassment, that the "rational pleasure" of fulfilling one's duties can still give the actor spiritual satisfaction. This theoretical rift proves that attempts to base morality on a denial of human nature only create hypocritical dual personalities. In contrast, an ethical system that is honest about self-interest is much more viable: it allows environmentalists to admit that "protecting the rainforest is also about clean air for my children and grandchildren," doctors to admit that "saving patients makes my life worth living," and entrepreneurs to say openly that "doing business with integrity is a good way to make a difference." Entrepreneurs are allowed to say openly that "integrity is the best brand investment."

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Instead of moral degradation, this kind of honesty frees moral practice from heavy self-censorship and gives it a sustainable internal impetus.

5. Conclusion

Hobbes' state of nature is like a cruel mirror reflecting the primitive survival instinct of human nature - self-interest is not a moral defect, but the foundation of civilisation. When human beings come out of the bloody "war of all against all" and enter into a social contract, the seemingly altruistic order is in fact the product of the self-interested person's rational trade-offs: short-term freedom is given in exchange for long-term security. At the academic level, this article breaks the dichotomy of "self-interest and altruism". By deconstructing Hobbes's contract theory and Kant's deontology, it reveals the unshakeable nature of self-interest as the origin of morality, and opens up a space for the theoretical deepening of ethical egoism. On the practical level, this study confronts the chronic problem of moral hypocrisy: when society celebrates "selflessness", it often ignores the complexity of individual motivations. By recognising the legitimacy of self-interest, we are injecting pragmatism into public policy - from environmental protection to social security, only an institutional design that respects the interests of the individual can inspire a sustainable willingness to cooperate.

However, the thesis also has obvious shortcomings. Firstly, the evidence data is too limited: the argument for implicit self-interested motivation mainly relies on philosophical analysis and case induction, and lacks the theoretical support of biology and psychology, as well as the support of large-scale empirical data. Second, the cultural context is limited: the study takes the Western philosophical tradition as the main theoretical resource, and does not fully incorporate the contrasting perspectives of non-Western cultures, which may weaken the generalisability of the conclusions.

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