Egoism in Chinese Ethics

Kim-Chong CHONG

The term “egoism,” *wei wo*, in Chinese ethics is usually associated with Yang Zhu, but it encompasses issues much wider than the narrow and overriding conception of self-interest attributed to him by Mencius (Mengzi): “Even if he could benefit the Empire by pulling one hair he would not do it (*Mencius* 7A26).” These include questions about the possibility of universal love, the extension of benevolence, human nature, the ultimate motivation for behavior, self-cultivation, the value of spontaneity, and the conflict between particularistic concern—i.e., concern for one’s kin—and nonparticularistic concern. These related issues surround classical figures like Mozi, Yang Zhu, Gaozi, Mencius, and, beyond them, the neo-Confucians.

Before describing these issues, we should first mention egoism in western ethics, where it has often been discussed in terms of ethical egoism and psychological egoism. This will enable us to make comparisons at certain points, so as to highlight the features of egoism in Chinese ethics. Ethical egoism is the principle that everyone ought to pursue his or her own self-interest; psychological egoism is the theory that, ultimately, self-interest motivates people’s actions.

The main issues concerning ethical egoism are whether it is rational and whether it can be called a moral or ethical principle at all. In this regard, ethical egoism has served as a testing ground for theories of morality that stipulate criteria of rationality such as universalization and the maximization of self-interest. Ethical egoism is therefore largely a heuristic device of the twentieth century, although the two criteria just mentioned had precursors in Hobbes and Kant.

A. C. Graham (1989) recounts a dialogue in the *Mozi* between Wumazi and Mozi, which can illustrate the issue of universalization, although we shall have to qualify this later. Wumazi claims to be incapable of concern for everyone; he says that although he is concerned for the people of his own neighborhood, he is by degrees more concerned for his family than for his neighbors, for his parents than for other members of his family, and ultimately for himself than for his parents. The issue for Mozi is whether this is a morality that can be prescribed: “Are you going to hide your morality, or tell others about it?” To Wumazi’s response that he will tell others, Mozi argues that Wumazi will harm himself by doing so. Wumazi’s egoistic doctrine benefits no one, since it cannot be prescribed. In that case, “If as beneficial to no one you refuse to say it, you might as well not have a mouth.” In contemporary western terms, Wumazi logically cannot espouse a morality of righteousness (in Chinese, *yi*) that is self-contradictory, although some have disputed the sense in which the egoist needs to prescribe or espouse his morality, what “universalization” really amounts to, and whether it is a necessary criterion of morality.
Although Chinese ethics has not been directly concerned with these issues, Mozi’s doctrine of universal love poses a challenge to the particularistic concern of the Confucians and raises the question how it may be extended. This question arises, for example, in Mencius (1A7) when Mencius tries to persuade King Xuan of Qi to tui or extend his compassion for a sacrificial ox to his people. It also arises (3A5) when the Mohist Yi Zhi argues that the Confucians cannot say there should be gradations in love, given their endorsement of the ancient sage kings who cared for the people, “as if they were tending a newborn babe.” It may be tempting to see this and the dialogue between Mozi and Wumazi as an issue of logical inference and consistency or, in Kantian terms, of universal principle. A. S. Cua (1985), however, has pointed out that what is applicable here might not be universalization but rather tui lei, “analogical projection”: “to project or extend on the basis of analogy among kinds of things.” In this respect, ethical reasons are always contextual, concrete, and particular, and they appeal to shared conceptions of reasonableness and the ideal of a dao, instead of universal reason.

Psychological egoism in western ethics has a longer and more varied history. It is espoused by certain speakers in the works of Plato, by Hobbes, and by twentieth-century psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and B. F. Skinner and, more recently, sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson and R. Dawkins. They have sought, in various ways, to establish the ultimately self-seeking or self-preserving nature of human drives. In Book 2 of Plato’s Republic, Glaucon describes the nature and origin of justice as a compromise between suffering from the injuries others inflict on us and being able to injure others with impunity. He tells the story of Gyges’s ring to demonstrate that anyone with the power to do as he liked would have a natural tendency to trespass, steal, seduce, murder, etc. Not everyone in the western traditions shares this bleak picture of human nature. There are more enlightened notions of self-interest that accommodate love for, or solidarity with, others as part of a natural and healthy human constitution. For example, Plato responds to the challenge raised by the story of Gyges’s ring (how to show that it pays to be just or moral) by presenting a theory of the three parts of the soul—reason, spirit, and desires—and their harmonious interaction through the governance of reason, the highest part. Aristotle, in Nichomachean Ethics, holds that eudaimonia is the ultimate good and end of human life. Although roughly translatable as “happiness,” eudaimonia is an enlightened and contemplative sense of happiness that is far removed from hedonism. For Aristotle, the cultivation of friendship based on admirable moral qualities is part of this ultimate good.

This conception of friendship is also important to Confucius (Kongzi) and Mencius, as part of the process of self-cultivation. For them, even though self-cultivation is not described in terms of an ultimate good, it is nonetheless either related to communal goals or crucial to the maintenance and development of human nature. Thus, for Confucius, self-cultivation is intimately linked to establishing oneself on the li or the rites, as well as being committed to and identifying oneself with others in terms of the ideal of ren or benevolence. For Mencius, self-cultivation is nourishing and developing the ethical predispositions of compassion, shame, courtesy or modesty, and (a sense of) right and wrong into the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. The ability to relate to others depends on the development of these virtues; the person who “fails to develop them . . . will not be able even to serve his parents” (Mencius 2A6). Several times, Mencius laments that, ironically, although people know how to tend to various external things (a tree, domestic animals) and the “smaller” parts of themselves (such as the mouth and belly), they seem to neglect the “greater”—their xin or heart-mind, which is the seat of the ethical predispositions (6A11–12, 14). In other words, ethical failure is a failure to act according to self-interest under a certain conception of human nature.

It should be evident by now that in both the western context and the Chinese context, self-interest is not to be equated with selfishness, and also that it is a much wider concept than, say, benefit or profit. Mencius, for example, strongly opposes speaking of benefit or profit (li) in contrast to ren and yi (benevolence and righteousness). If those who hold public office, for instance, think in terms of benefit or profit, “then those above and those below will be trying to profit at the expense of one another and the state will be imperiled” (1A1).

Both Plato and Aristotle have an enlightened sense of self-interest in which friendship and solidarity play an important naturalistic role in the life of the individual, but in recent western philosophy the model of social relations as a compulsion or imposition has been more influential. This model depicts morality as a bargaining process leading to a social contract between individuals that is an uneasy compromise—at worst, one avoids being harmed; at best, one maximizes self-interest. On the other hand, the basis of discussions of egoism in Chinese ethics has not been the problem of a social contract. Instead, the family has been assumed to be the basis of society, and filial piety is said to lead to obedience to a hierarchical order, and also to be the root of ren or benevolence, as stated in the Analects.
(1.2). But again, this raises the problem of how benevolence can be extended beyond the family. This will be discussed later.

The idea that moral behavior is based not on natural, spontaneous dispositions but on the conscious imposition of rules is found in the Xunzi. Xunzi holds that once the appetitive desires, humans are born with feelings of envy and hatred, aggressive and greedy tendencies, love of profit, etc. Social disorder is the consequence if they are not transformed by the influence of a teacher and model, and guided by ritual. We are asked to imagine what would happen in the absence of authority, ritual rules, and penal laws:

The strong would inflict harm on the weak and rob them; the many would tyrannize the few and wrest their possessions from them; and the perversity and rebelliousness of the whole world would quickly ensure their mutual destruction. (Knoblock 1994, 23.3a)

This is reminiscent of the motivations cited in the Republic and the “war of every man against every man” in Hobbes’s Leviathan. But it should be noted that for Xunzi, human nature is not evil in a deep or permanent sense, something to be restrained by law and ritual. Just as clay can be molded, human nature can be morally transformed through education, including aesthetics—cultivation of music and the rites. Cua has, notably, referred to this function of the rites as “ennobling” (1998, Essay 13). There is no discussion here of two matters commonly addressed in western social and political philosophy: the possibility of being a free-rider while pretending to uphold the social contract, and the rationality of either maintaining the contract or opting out. For Xunzi, the rites are not only regulative but morally and aesthetically transformative. The rules and functions of the rites come about not as a result of a bargaining process but through the accumulated wisdom of the sages.

In holding that human nature is evil, Xunzi was disagreeing with Mencius. According to Xunzi, the virtues are learned through a process of wei, conscious effort or acquired ability. Something that belongs to nature, like the appetitive desires and senses, cannot be learned. Mencius himself was reacting against Yang Zhu and Mozi; he said that the teachings of these two philosophers “filled the empire,” and he had no alternative but to oppose them (3B9). Graham (1986) has described Yang Zhu as being among certain “individualists who first urge the advantages of private against public life, and refuse to sacrifice a hair of their bodies for power, possessions or any other external benefit which involves the risk of injury to health and life.” This is due to their doctrine of nature (xing) as the process of life (sheng), and its nurturance. This doctrine encompasses a belief in the spontaneous enjoyment of sensual pleasures, although not without awareness of the danger of overindulgence. At the same time, however, its sense of self-interest need not necessarily exclude a concern for others. Consider, for instance, the story of King Dan Fu, whose state was invaded by the people of Di, as described in the Yangist chapter “Giving Away a Throne” in the Zhuangzi. (Graham identifies certain chapters in the Zhuangzi as “Yangist.” Other works describing the Yangist philosophy are Liu-shi chunqiu and Huainanzi.) After failing to entice the invaders to leave, Dan Fu decides to leave the state himself, to preserve his subjects’ lives and his own life. He feels that there is no difference whether he or the Di are the rulers, citing the principle that “one must not injure that which he is nourishing for the sake of that by which he nourishes it.” In other words, one should not confuse attachment to material things with life itself. Thus, although the cost of pulling out one hair seems trivial, this example is a way of emphasizing that the risks of holding office during the a time of social and political disorder outweigh the benefits. On the other hand, there may be circumstances where refusing to take office or to do one’s duty could result in dire consequences for the empire as a whole. One can therefore imagine Mencius’s chagrin about the implications of Yangism, if it was widely adopted.

In other Yangist chapters of the Zhuangzi, such as “Robber Zhi” and “The Old Fisherman,” there are criticisms of the rituals of the Confucians, who are seen as imposing artificial morality, thereby inhibiting or cramping natural, spontaneous behavior. Mencius’s response is to argue for the spontaneity of moral behavior in terms of the duan or “sprouts” of the xin (heart-mind), referred to earlier as ethical predispositions. This is in fact the strategy he adopts against Gaozi, who asserts that there is nothing more to human nature than the life process typified by the desire for food and sex. As he says, “Appetite for food and sex is nature” (Mencius 6A4). In his debate with Mencius, he likens the construction of morality from the nature of human beings to making cups and bowls from willow.

Unlike Yang Zhu or Gaozi, Mozi cannot be said to be an egoist in any sense, but his insistence that it is possible to love others as oneself, their parents and friends as one’s own, their cities and states as one’s own, etc., gives rise to skepticism as to how all this is possible. This is the doctrine of jian ai, variously translated as “universal love” (Watson 1963), “indiscriminate concern” (Shun 1997), “concern for everyone” (Graham 1989), and “impartial caring” (Nivison 1999). Mozi traced the disorder of his time to the partiality of particularistic relationships. Partiality leads to conflict, war, and injustice. The remedy is to reject
partiality and adopt an attitude of equal regard for everyone. Thus universal love amounts to a rejection of particularistic concern.

It is possible to interpret Mozi as holding the egalitarian idea that in the moral scheme of things, each is to count as one. However, although Mozi does take as his measure of right action the utilitarian criterion of whether a course of action benefits everyone, he constantly harps on the possibility of loving others as oneself, others’ friends and parents as one’s own, etc. The question how this is possible is raised several times but is not answered convincingly. Thus, in response to the point that trying to adopt universal love would be like picking up a mountain and leaping over a river with it—i.e., that it is practically impossible—Mozi denies the relevance of the analogy by claiming that the ancient sage kings practiced universal love. However, it is doubtful that the beneficent rule of the sage kings actually took the form of universal love as advocated by Mozi. We may also doubt Mozi’s charge that partiality is inconsistent because a partial-minded man would go off to war and leave his family under the care of a universal-minded man. In reality, given the choice of leaving his family in the hands of someone who would treat them just like anyone else, i.e., impartially, or leaving them with someone—a friend or a relative—who would treat them partially, the partial-minded man would be unlikely to opt for the former.

Mozi seems to realize that his replies are none too convincing and so is ultimately forced to appeal to the concept of benefit (li). For example, a filial son wants to ensure his parents’ welfare. One way to do this is “to make it a point to love and benefit other men’s parents, so that they in return will love and benefit my parents.” Mozi cites a passage from the Book of Odes—“There are no words that are not answered, no kindness that is not required. Throw me a peach, I’ll requite you a plum”—and comments: “The meaning is that one who loves will be loved by others, and one who hates will be hated by others. So I cannot understand how the men of the world can hear about this doctrine of universality and still criticize it!” Thus we may say that in the final analysis, the motivation for universal love is reduced to an egoistic investment to ensure benefits for oneself and particular others. When Mencius preferred to talk about righteousness and benevolence instead of benefit or profit (1A1), he may well have had Mozi in mind.

It is illuminating to see how Mencius’s account of human nature is a response to Yang Zhu, Gaozi, and Mozi. Consider the famous example of the child about to fall into a well:

No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others . . . . My reason . . . is this. Suppose a man were, of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. (Mencius 2A6)

Hardheaded empiricists will refuse to accept this as an empirical theory, since it is un falsifiable. Indeed, if someone failed to come to the rescue of the child, Mencius himself would explain this as a loss of the “original heart.”

However, instead of seeing Mencius as espousing an empirical claim or theory, we may see him as clarifying the conceptual grounds of altruism and other direct social and moral responses by using this and other hypothetical examples (e.g., 3A5). Note that Mencius carefully distinguishes compassion from certain motives. In a sense, “nothing” motivates the concern for the child. In other words, concern is direct, and it is different from these motivations. The idea that this concern is direct may be reinforced by seeing that the perception of the child on the verge of falling into a well is not pure cognition. Compassion is not a concomitant part of this cognition, but it may be said to constitute the mode in which the situation is registered or perceived. Clearly, concern for the child’s welfare is unlike the desire to attain pleasurable states and escape unpleasurable states. Those desires are directed inward and seem to require consummation. Compassion for the child, on the other hand, is directed outward. (Compare this with Bishop Butler’s critique of psychological egoism, “That all particular appetites and passions are towards external things themselves, distinct from the pleasure arising from them,” in sermon 11 of his Fifteen Sermons.)

This example may explain the possibility of a direct, nonparticularistic concern, independent of whether the object of concern is related to one. However, Mencius would still insist that, other things being equal, one would (and should) give preference to one’s kin, especially one’s parents (3A5). There is a tension here between the two kinds of concern. Mozi would argue that particularistic concern is opposed and also harmful to nonparticularistic concern. Certainly, with its emphasis on particularistic relationships and on giving priority to one’s kin, Confucianism faces the problem of how to extend this concern to nonparticular others—a problem that has cropped up repeatedly. If it is unable to meet this challenge, Confucianism is actually committed to egoism regarding the family or kinship group, despite its avowal of concern for others in terms of a harmonious social and political order.

One answer Mencius seems to offer is that although priority is to be given to one’s parents, ethical
predispositions are themselves neutral between particularistic and nonparticularistic concern. These predispositions need to be developed into the virtues if one is to flourish as a human being. For Mencius, a human being is defined not just by possession of the four sprouts of the heart-mind (xin) but also by an ability to relate to others in terms of the corresponding virtues of benevolence, righteousness, observance of the rites, and wisdom. In general, this means that concern—particularistic and nonparticularistic—is a function of the development of these virtues, which both define and shape human relationships. As mentioned earlier, Mencius holds that without the overall development of these virtues, one cannot be in a position even to tend to one’s parents, let alone have regard for others (2A6). Thus the parent-child relationship is important not just for the special love it involves but also as a basis for the development of love and concern for others. Nonparticularistic love begins with the feelings and the virtues that one develops in a particularistic relationship. Wong (1989) discusses this in relation to psychological theories of child development.

This does not deny the possibility of conflict between the two forms of concern, and Mencius could also agree that there are circumstances in which a particularistic concern may unrighteously triumph over nonparticularistic concern. But, contrary to Mozi, there is nothing inherently wrong with particularistic relationships or the partiality inherent in them. Instead of taking particularistic concern as simply a hindrance to nonparticularistic concern, one would have to evaluate the situations and contexts in which partiality may or may not be appropriate. Furthermore, partiality is constrained by the role one occupies. Here is an example: Mencius is asked by someone called Tao Ying to consider what the sage emperor Shun would have done if his father had killed someone. Mencius’s reply is: “The only thing to do was to apprehend him.” Mencius is then asked whether Shun would not have tried to stop his father’s arrest. He replies, “How could Shun stop it? Gao Yao (the judge) had authority for what he did.” Pressed to say what Shun would have done, Mencius says:

Shun looked upon casting aside the Empire as no more than discarding a worn shoe. He would have secretly carried the old man on his back and fled to the edge of the Sea and lived there happily, never giving a thought to the Empire. (7A35)

In this case, the conflict between particularistic and a nonparticularistic concern is resolved by referring to one’s roles and what, given these roles, it would be appropriate or inappropriate to do. In his role as emperor, Shun would be morally powerless to prevent the arrest of his father; the duty attached to this role would override his duty as a son. Shun, however, could decide that the empire was not as important to him as his filial duty, relinquish his post, and perform the filial duty. This example is but one illustration of an allowance for the exercise of quan—discretion—in Confucianism (Mencius, 4A17; Analects, 5.30), amounting to the exercise of autonomous judgment in deciding about an exigent situation (Cua 1998, Essay 12).

A doubt could be raised about the example just discussed: Is this actually a case of conflict between the two kinds of concern? Should it not be described, instead, as a conflict between two duties—to the state and to one’s father? This leads us to the realization that no conflict between the two kinds of concern can be resolved simply by weighing one against the other. In other words, in determining the rightness of an action, motivation alone is inadequate; roles, duties, proprieties, responsibilities, etc., must also be considered. Nice questions can arise here about whether Shun was taking his duties as emperor too lightly or being irresponsible. To make a proper judgment, one would have to determine specific factors, such as how important it was that Shun remain as emperor, what the social and political circumstances were, whether there were any able successors, and so on. But it is interesting that Mencius describes Shun’s attitude toward his position as emperor in terms that a Yangist could appreciate: “Shun looked upon casting aside the Empire as no more than discarding a worn shoe.” This reminds us of the attitude of King Dan Fu, who was prepared to relinquish his state. In the same chapter where this example appears, it is commented of another character:

The Empire is the weightiest thing of all, but he would not harm his life for the sake of it, and how much less for any other thing! Only the man who cares nothing for the Empire deserves to be entrusted with the Empire.

Perhaps we can say that because Shun was concerned about his (particularistic) duty as a son, he manifested an admirable virtue and was therefore worthy to be an emperor. In this capacity, he was able to do much for (nonparticular) others. Similarly, the Yangist who cherishes his life above material possessions and office has gone beyond the desire for riches and power, with its associated intrigues; he would be able to devote himself to the (nonparticularistic) tasks of public service.

These examples illustrate the close link between character and action. For the Confucians in general—and this is something shared by the classical trio of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi—what is yi or right cannot be totally divorced from the person who is yi or righteous. Not everyone will be disposed to act...
righteously or even to see what is right. (Yi can be analyzed as a second-order “aretaic” notion, referring to the conscientious and committed agent who is concerned with performing the right action; Cua 1998, Essay 13.) We have already seen how Mencius laments the fact that some people fail to look after their best interests. For Confucius, there is self-deception if a man says that he does not have the strength to act (Analects 6.12); and for Xunzi, although the agent may be able to do something, he cannot be made to do it. In addition, although it may be possible for someone to do something, in fact he may not be capable of doing it (Knoblock, 23.5a, b).

Finally, we should note that the neo-Confucians have taken the problem of extending benevolence seriously and given it a metaphysical solution. Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi have described benevolence or ren as a metaphysical reality (ti) that is different from love as a function (yong). As a pair, “reality” and “function” are technical terms in the neo-Confucian lexicon, which among other things encapsulates the attempt by Cheng-Zhu and others to give a metaphysical explanation for the simultaneity of universal love and love with distinctions. Their predecessor Zhang Zai took love to be universally applied to all things as well as people; he also supplied the theory that “the Principle is one but its function is differentiated into the many” (li yi fen shu). This paved the way for Cheng-Zhu to harmonize universal love and love with distinctions (Chan 1955).

See also Mencius; Mohism: The Founder, Mozi; Ren; Xunzi; Yang Zhu.

Bibliography


