Can we be moral for self-interested reasons?

NO
In the handout on ‘Self-interest and morality’, we consider two answers to the question ‘why should I be moral?’. According to the first, this is the best means to getting what is in your self-interest. According to the second, being moral constitutes your self-interest. Both answers try to show a connection between acting morally and acting in a way that benefits oneself, or again, between being a moral person and being happy. So it looks like both answers say you should be moral because it is good for you.

But, intuitively, this is a peculiar and inappropriate answer to give. First, it seems to miss the heart or point of morality, which is about caring for and respecting other people because other people matter. Acting morally is a matter of recognising the importance and value of other people. And so, second, the answer doesn’t describe how morally good people think or feel. Behaving in a morally good way in order to get the best for oneself doesn’t make you a morally good person – you don’t really care about other people at all, only about yourself.

Third, it doesn’t explain the importance of morality. Suppose I know that if I exercise a bit more and eat a bit less, I’ll be healthier and feel better for it – so this is in my self-interest. But I don’t really want to do this, I like what I eat, and I don’t mind that I’m not all that healthy. This isn’t very important. Now suppose that I could be kinder and more thoughtful to other people, and I’d be a slightly happier person for it, but I can’t really be bothered, and I enjoy insulting them. This seems a more serious flaw, one for which I can rightly be criticised by other people. But if morality is just about self-interest, what’s the difference between the two cases?

Another way of putting this whole objection is that basing morality on self-interest doesn’t explain the moral ‘ought’. ‘You ought not to steal’ doesn’t (seem to) mean ‘if you were completely rational, you would not steal’ or even ‘you would live a better life if you don’t steal’. ‘You ought not to steal’ doesn’t depend, we think, on what you want or what you would gain from stealing or not stealing. If we knew someone thought this way about what they ought to do, we would find it difficult to trust them, because in deciding what to do, they are not taking other people into consideration in the right kind of way.

YES
Aristotle defends a version of the view that being moral is in one’s self-inters. In answer to ‘why should I be moral?’, Aristotle answers ‘because that will be the best life for you’ – but it is important to understand what he means by this. To live this best life, you must treat people in certain, morally good ways. Self-interest and morality are intertwined – it is not possible to use morality as mere means to self-interest.

We can illustrate this with friendship. It is a very important part of leading a good, happy life that one has friends. But someone who is a friend just out of self-interest is not a real friend. He will miss out on the good things – the feelings, the character, the state of mind – that come from being a real friend. On the other hand, someone who does not find
friendship a beneficial and important part of their life – who is a friend without feeling that they gain from it – is also missing out on what is important in friendship.

We can answer ‘why should I be moral?’ in a similar way. If we consider our relationships with other people just in terms of the benefits for us, we won’t gain the real benefits of those relationships. On the other hand, if we do not find relating to other people in morally good ways part of the good life for us, then we are missing out on the real value of those relationships.

We can now answer the three objections from the first section.

Being a morally good person, e.g. being just or generous, involves recognising that other people matter. Failing to do so means that our relationships with them will not be as good as they could be. Secondly, while morally good people think about what is good for other people, they also believe that being morally good is good for themselves. Doing what is morally good without seeing how it is part of the best life for you, is a dry and unattractive way to live. Third, morality is important because the quality of our relationships with other people is at the heart of the good life for us. Where there is a conflict between self-interest and morality, we will find that we cannot properly enjoy or benefit from acting on self-interest if this means acting immorally.

**NIETZSCHE ON MORAL MOTIVATION**

For Nietzsche, these arguments are all disingenuous. There are, he argues, two kinds of morality – a ‘master morality’ and a ‘slave morality’ (*Beyond Good and Evil*, § 260). The assumption that everyone is equal, has equal rights and deserves to be treated well is part of ‘slave morality’. A master morality aims at what is ‘best’, ‘noble’, at the exercise of power in the fullest way, and does not care about the consequences, least of all the effects on ‘common’ people. Common people simply do not matter. Slave morality – which is the greatest part of the morality we live by – is concerned with suffering, with approval and justifying ourselves to other people. And it is motivated, above all, by fear. In such a morality, ‘love’ of one’s neighbour or ‘respect’ for others is a smokescreen for fear of one’s neighbour. What is strong and individual is dangerous, what is conforming and beneficial to society is good (*Beyond Good and Evil*, § 201).

At heart, Nietzsche argues, morality has no rational basis. It is an expression of instinct. Most people have a strong need to obey, to be ruled; some individuals are more honest in their ‘will to power’, their desire to assert and develop themselves as individuals. From Socrates onwards, philosophers have tried to rationalize morality, to make it seem reasonable, to provide arguments for it. But this is hypocrisy.

Oversimplifying, Nietzsche’s view to ‘why be moral?’ is that, given one’s own weakness, fear of asserting one’s own power, inability to take responsibility for both weakness and fear, it is a good idea to agree with others to live according to rules. But even this is a rationalization – it is not reason that provides the motivation, it is a basic need to obey someone else.