



The problem of student egoism and its implications for ethics education

Dominik Balg¹ 

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Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss egoistic preconceptions among students – a phenomenon that I will dub ‘Student Egoism’ (SE) – as a potential challenge to successful ethics education. While the prevalence of this phenomenon is occasionally mentioned in the philosophical literature, there has been no systematic discussion of its pedagogical significance to date. The aim of this paper is to initiate such a discussion. To achieve this, I will first elaborate on egoism as a philosophical position in some detail in order to develop a more comprehensive account of SE. Against this background, I will argue that there are indeed good reasons to consider SE (i) a potentially widespread phenomenon that (ii) could have problematic implications for ethics education. Based on this, I will then identify three general desiderata that any successful strategy of dealing with SE has to fulfill and sketch one specific strategy in a little more detail

Keywords Egoism · Ethics education · Student relativism

Introduction

Ethics instructors, just like instructors in other subjects, have to take into account subject-specific preconceptions of their students when planning and organising their lessons. After all, students do not enter the classroom as empty vessels, but with their own convictions and attitudes. And these beliefs and attitudes have a decisive influence on whether and to what extent educational processes are successful.

This, of course, is nothing new. In fact, there are already well-defined debates in many subject areas about the specific preconceptions with which students participate in teaching processes and the potential or challenges associated with these

✉ Dominik Balg
dbalg@uni-mainz.de

¹ University of Mainz , Philosophy Department , Mainz, Germany

preconceptions.¹ With regard to the context of ethics education, examples of this include the debates on *Student Relativism* (see e.g. Balg 2020; Burkard 2017; Holweger forthcoming; Pfister 2019; Talbot 2012) and *Student Scientism* (see e.g. Edelman 2021; Holweger forthcoming; Koolage and Anderson 2023): the debate on *Student Relativism* revolves around the pedagogical implications of relativistic, constructivist, and skeptical metaphilosophical preconceptions among students, which are typically expressed in statements such as ‘When it comes to moral issues, there is no right or wrong’ or ‘What’s true for one person may not be true for another’. *Student Scientism*, on the other hand, refers to epistemological preconceptions that are based on a naïve idealization of scientific inquiry. These are expressed, for example, when students take the view that ‘in science we are able to “prove” things, and once they have been “proven to be true,” we have definitive knowledge of the world, full stop’ (Edelman 2021, p. 536).

In this paper, I would like to pick up on these lines of discourse and focus on a specific phenomenon that has not yet received sufficient attention in the literature on ethics education. More specifically, I will take a closer look at egoistic attitudes among students – a phenomenon that I will refer to as *Student Egoism* (SE). Whilst it has been sporadically pointed out in the philosophical literature that egoistic views are widespread among the wider public (see e.g. Sidgwick 1981, pp. 119–121) and particularly among students (see e.g. Burgess-Jackson 2013, p. 532; Callcut 2006, p. 223; Hattingh and Woermann 2008, p. 15; Putman 1998, p. 153), there has hardly been any systematic discussion of the implications of this observation for ethics education.² My aim in this paper is to initiate such a discussion. In order to maintain a clear focus, I will focus on the specific context of ethics education at the undergraduate level. However, I am optimistic that many of the following considerations can also be applied to other educational contexts. This paper has seven sections. In *Philosophical Egoism and Student Egoism*, I will first elaborate on egoism as a philosophical position in some detail in order to develop a more comprehensive account of SE. Against this background, I will present various reasons to consider SE a potentially widespread phenomenon in *The pervasiveness of Student Egoism*. Following this, in *Student Egoism as a challenge to successful ethics education*, I will argue that SE is also a potentially problematic phenomenon that poses a serious challenge to successful ethics education and accordingly requires more detailed discussion. In *How to deal with Student Egoism*, I will identify three general desiderata that any successful strategy of dealing with SE has to fulfill. Against this background, I will then sketch one specific strategy in a little more detail in *A possible strategy for dealing with SE*. The *Conclusion* wraps up the main results.

¹ For science education, see e.g. Schwichow et al. 2022, Vosniadou 2019; for maths education, see e.g. Dolores-Flores et al. 2021, Wakhata et al. 2023; for history education, see e.g. Conway 2006, Pendry et al. 1997.

² A notable exception is Putman 1998; to whom I will refer repeatedly in this paper.

Philosophical egoism and student egoism

In order to gain a better understanding of SE, it is helpful to first consider what kind of philosophical position egoism actually is. In its most basic form, egoism is simply the philosophical view that one's self is, or should be, the decisive factor when choosing between different options. As this formulation already suggests, egoism can be understood as both a descriptive and a normative thesis (for a general overview, see e.g. Shaver 2023). As a descriptive position, egoism claims that people are *de facto* ultimately guided by their own interests when making their decisions. In the philosophical literature, this position is usually referred to as *psychological egoism* (for an overview of psychological egoism, see Sober 2000). As a normative position, egoism claims that one *should* be guided exclusively by one's own interests when making decisions. In the philosophical literature, a distinction is usually made between two different ways of spelling out this basic idea: according to *ethical egoism*, one *morally* ought to act in one's own best interest (for an overview of ethical egoism, see Regis Jr 1980). *Rational egoism* drops the restriction to moral 'oughts' and claims that one always has best *overall* reasons to act in one's own best interest (for an overview of rational egoism, see Shaver 1998).

In its normative readings, egoism has an obvious similarity to consequentialism – i.e. the view that the moral rightness of a given action solely depends on its consequences. In fact, ethical egoism can simply be regarded as a specific variant of consequentialism (Portmore 2022).³ More specifically, since ethical egoism focuses on maximizing one's own utility, it has an obvious similarity to utilitarian formulations of consequentialism.⁴ Accordingly, some authors have explicitly argued that ethical egoism and utilitarianism are structurally identical, differing only with respect to the question of *whose* utility should be maximized (for a more thorough discussion of the relation between utilitarianism and ethical egoism see e.g. Burgess-Jackson 2013; Portmore 2022; Schroeder 2007; Sidgwick 1981, pp. 83–87). While utilitarianism requires an impersonal maximization of utility, ethical egoism requires the maximization of *agent* utility. This parallelization is helpful insofar as it makes it easier to understand various questions that are discussed with regard to normative varieties of egoism – for example, questions about the significance of maximization, the importance of general rules for the evaluation of specific actions, or the correct interpretation of utility. In addition to such questions, which primarily concern the best formulation of certain egoistic positions, questions about the precise relations between different egoistic positions are also discussed. One main question in this context concerns the relation between descriptive and normative varieties of egoism. For example, some authors have suggested that psychological egoism, conjoined

³ Some authors adopt a broader understanding of consequentialism, which applies to all levels of normative deliberation and is not limited to moral evaluations (see e.g. Sinnott-Armstrong 2023). Against the background of such an understanding, rational egoism can also be regarded as a variant of consequentialism.

⁴ As I understand it here, utilitarianism is a specific variant of consequentialism, according to which the morally relevant consequences of an action are the effects of that action on the well-being of conscious beings (see e.g. de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2017).

with some further plausible assumptions, validly implies ethical egoism (see e.g. Palmer 2005, p. 38; Lukes 2006, p. 87; Deigh 2010, p. 34; Naticchia 2013, p. 250).⁵

With these clarifications in mind, we can now turn our attention to what primarily interests us here: Student Egoism. In the most general sense, SE is simply a term for egoistic preconceptions among students. However, just as it is regularly pointed out in the literature on Student Relativism that the relevant preconceptions will usually not take the form of explicit philosophical beliefs (see e.g. Paden 1987; Pfister 2019), the same is plausibly also true when it comes to SE. Instead of presenting reflected philosophical positions, egoistic preconceptions among students will often be rather implicit and comparatively vague. In fact, students will be insensitive to most of the distinctions introduced above. In particular, given that they usually won't have a strong awareness of the distinction between normative and descriptive statements anyway, they will probably not distinguish clearly between psychological egoism on the one hand and ethical or rational egoism on the other. In this sense, SE is not limited to explicit philosophical views that can be clearly assigned to specific egoistic positions, but also includes (pseudo-)egoistic preconceptions in a broader sense.

How do such preconceptions manifest themselves? One obvious manifestation would simply be the *explicit defense* of egoistic views by students. And indeed, there are sporadic reports of such cases from instructors – referring, for example, to situations in which students point to the liberating effect of an egoistic attitude (Cummins 2016) or argue that the world as a whole would be a better place if everyone pursued their own interests (Mintz 2018). At the same time, it shouldn't be assumed that such explicit defenses of egoism are the only – or even a particularly common – manifestation of SE. One important reason why manifestations of SE are likely to be rather 'hidden' is that an egoistic attitude does not necessarily lead to antisocial behavior: even a diehard egoist will, for example, take care of his family and friends and be helpful to others, as long as it is reasonable to assume that such behavior will pay off in the long term. Given this, egoistic preconceptions among students are unlikely to manifest themselves in blatant pleas for recklessness or aggression. Instead, more likely manifestations of SE would be a reciprocal view of interpersonal relationships ('*You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours!*'), a denial of genuinely altruistic motives ('*Mother Theresa did it for herself!*') or skeptical comments regarding the relevance of moral considerations ('*Morality was invented by the powerful to control the weak!*').

The pervasiveness of student egoism

How widespread is SE? As already mentioned in the introduction, there are repeated remarks in the philosophical literature that egoistic views are widespread among the general public (see, for example, Sidgwick 1981, pp. 119–121) and especially among students (see, for example, Burgess-Jackson 2013, p. 532; Callcut 2006, p. 223; Hattingh and Woermann 2008, p. 15; Putman 1998, p. 153). To a certain extent, these remarks can be corroborated by empirical evidence. For example, there are psycho-

⁵ For a critical discussion, see e.g. Tilley 2023.

logical studies suggesting that people systematically overestimate the influence that self-interest has on other peoples' decisions and actions (Miller and Ratner 1998). Furthermore, there are studies suggesting that people are uncomfortable with appearing too altruistic and that, when justifying their behavior, they exaggerate the role of egoistic motives in order to satisfy a perceived individualistic norm of reasonable behavior (Holmes et al. 2002). Finally, and in line with this, there are studies suggesting that people react with anger and confusion when others do not act according to their own interests (Ratner and Miller 2001).

At the same time, these findings should certainly be treated with some caution in the present context. For apart from the fact that the above studies are already somewhat older, they are neither specifically related to educational contexts nor sensitive to the various philosophical distinctions introduced in the previous section. A satisfactory empirical assessment of the pervasiveness of SE would therefore require more targeted studies. In the absence of such studies, however, I would like to examine some independent reasons for taking SE seriously as a potentially widespread phenomenon in this section. As a starting point, I will draw on the considerations of Daniel Putman: in his paper 'Virtue Theory and the Self', Putman suggests several reasons why ethical egoism is likely to be widespread among students (Putman 1998). These reasons can be divided into *direct* and *indirect* reasons: direct reasons refer to various forms of (implicit or explicit) propagation of egoism to which students are exposed. Indirect reasons simply refer to factors that are independent of such direct propagation. Based on this distinction, I will first summarize Putman's considerations and then supplement them with a broader consideration of other variants of egoism. With regard to direct reasons, Putman states that 'students are bombarded by the claim that being an egoistic consumer is what life is about' (Putman 1998, p. 154). To corroborate this diagnosis, he refers to prominent athletes who promote individualistic consumerism as a desirable ideal through successful advertising campaigns. While this observation would certainly need to be examined more closely due to its controversiality and the time that has passed since Putman's publication, I still think that the basic diagnosis that many students are exposed to the direct propagation of egoistic views is entirely plausible. To see this, one just needs to consider the commercial success of authors who explicitly endorse egoism. A particularly notorious example of this is certainly Ayn Rand, whose books not only continue to sell very successfully, but whose ideas are aggressively propagated by institutions such as the *Ayn Rand Institute* or celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Eva Mendes. At least in the US context, Rand's work is thus likely to continue to have a significant influence on the philosophical views of laypeople. Regardless of the specifics of the US context, the same is probably true of authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who is also strikingly popular with the wider public and who is also often categorized as a representative of egoism (see e.g. Franco 2011; Reginster 2000; Young 2010).⁶

What's more, if we broaden Putman's narrow focus on ethical egoism and also consider other variants of egoism, there are plausibly additional direct reasons that could promote the spread of SE. To see this, it's helpful to have a closer look at the global economic system and associated ideas about human nature. This, of course,

⁶ For a critical discussion, see e.g. Elgat 2015.

is contested terrain. For example, a natural reference point in this context would certainly be the concept of the ‘neoliberal subject’, which is prominent in much of the recent sociological literature: influenced by Michel Foucault’s reflections in his lectures at the Collège de France (Foucault 2008), many authors there take the view that, against the background of a systematic infiltration by neoliberal ideology, values of individual responsibility, autonomy and self-realization have been set as unquestioned norms of public discourse. The result of this dynamic, so the further thought, is that people perceive themselves and others as a kind of *homo oeconomicus*, i.e. as selfish utility maximizers who see interpersonal interactions primarily as opportunities for personal gain (for a more detailed analysis, see e.g. Brown 2006, 2015; Cornelissen 2018; Pickren 2018).

The concept of the ‘neoliberal subject’ has an obvious proximity to psychological egoism. At the same time, it is also obviously controversial (for a critical discussion, see e.g. Watts 2022). Fortunately, however, one does not have to fully accept the above lines of argumentation in order to assume a plausible connection between prevailing economic conditions and the spread of egoistic ideas. For irrespective of the plausibility of the assumption of a direct infiltration of public discourse by neoliberal ideology, it is undeniably the case that the *homo oeconomicus*-model is an explicit standard assumption in dominant parts of economic research. And although it is ultimately only a working hypothesis, used not for its descriptive adequacy but for its theoretical fruitfulness, it is regularly noted that the standard use of this model has led to its widespread acceptance as an accurate description of reality (see e.g. Wörsdörfer 2014; Von Kriegstein 2019). This observation is probably also – and presumably especially – true with regard to the wider public, as laypeople are plausibly less able to understand the specific theoretical role that this model plays in economic theory (see e.g. Miller 1999; Holmes et al. 2002).

With regard to indirect reasons, Putman points to the following three factors: First, he refers to the young age and the special developmental phase that students are in and argues that ethical egoism ‘appeals to those [...] whose “self” is in a state of flux and who often feel they deserve a little recognition’ (Putman 1998, p. 153). Second, he notes that students generally do not yet have much responsibility for others, and that they thus have ‘a limited experiential base for appreciating other normative views [than ethical egoism]’ (ibid., p. 154). Third, he points out that ethical egoism can serve as a convenient fallback position for students, because ‘[other] than the difference between enlightened self-interest and immediate gratification, [it] [...] does not require [...] to make judgments about other people being right or wrong’ (ibid.).

In connection with this last point, Putman explicitly notes a close connection between egoistic and relativistic preconceptions. Once we take a closer look at this connection, an additional factor becomes apparent that Putman – again, due to his narrow focus on ethical egoism – does not take into account: in fact, it seems plausible that SE and SR could be two closely related phenomena in that both are likely to have similar *causes*. And as Putman rightly notes, one such cause might be a desire to appear tolerant and non-judgmental. However, this is surely not the only cause: for example, in the literature on SR, it is often pointed out that another major cause of skeptical-relativistic attitudes among students is the pervasiveness of philosophi-

cal disagreement. Anne Burkard, for example, describes this connection as follows (Burkard 2017, p. 298):

When they are confronted with the bewildering array of conflicting views endorsed by philosophers over the centuries, and when they learn how much disagreement there is among contemporary philosophers, some students raise doubts about the philosophical enterprise as a whole. They may worry that even philosophical experts disagree on virtually everything and seem unable to settle any major philosophical disputes. [...] Apparently, everyone just has their own opinion when it comes to philosophy.

The connection between philosophical disagreement and SR that is suggested in this passage seems immediately plausible: if seemingly almost all philosophical questions are controversial, then it is not surprising that many students assume that there are no objective truths with regard to these questions, or at least that such truths are unattainable. If we focus on the moral domain, however, an equally obvious path seems to lead from moral disagreement to rational egoism: if seemingly all moral questions are notoriously controversial, then perhaps the idea of authoritative moral norms is merely an illusion, and ultimately everyone can – and should – simply do what is best for them. From a student's perspective, this is a natural train of thought. Thus, a closer look at the connection between SE and SR has revealed an additional factor that might contribute to the spread of SE.

At the same time, given that SE and SR seem so closely connected, one might question whether SE should be seen as an independent phenomenon at all. Perhaps SE is just a particular manifestation, or another facet of SR? This suspicion is all the more pressing given that – as we have seen – SR is usually not considered as an elaborate philosophical view, but merely a loose notion for a diffuse mixture of pessimistic metaphilosophical preconceptions. While it might indeed be plausible to assume some significant overlap between SE and SR, I will nevertheless continue to treat SE as an independent phenomenon in what follows. For on the one hand, SE is a phenomenon that is clearly specific to ethics education. With regard to SR, however, this is not immediately clear – after all, some authors have explicitly argued that SR is not limited to moral issues, or even necessarily to philosophy education (see e.g. Burkard 2017). On the other hand, SE should also not be limited to attitudes that students adopt in response to factors that also facilitate the spread of SR. As we have seen, there are plausibly other causes of egoistic attitudes, and the corresponding manifestations of SE are unlikely to bear much resemblance to ordinary SR attitudes.⁷

⁷ Although I will treat SE as a separate phenomenon in this paper, ultimately not much depends on the assumption that SE and SR are (largely) independent of each other. Even if it is plausible that students' egoistic preconceptions should merely be seen as a variation, or a specific manifestation of SR, there is still widespread agreement in the philosophical literature that different variations and manifestations of SR require specific approaches (Pfister 2019, pp. 222–223). In this sense, the question of whether SE and SR are independent phenomena ultimately boils down to a purely conceptual decision that is not of great significance for the considerations presented here.

Student egoism as a challenge to successful ethics education

As far as the previous considerations are convincing, we have good reasons to consider egoistic attitudes among students a potentially widespread phenomenon. Although these considerations ultimately require closer examination and empirical verification, they should nevertheless suffice to justify a discussion of the pedagogical implications of SE. In fact, such a discussion would still be worthwhile even if it turned out that SE is not particularly widespread, but more of a sporadic phenomenon. So let us assume that SE is at least a phenomenon that *sometimes* occurs in ethics classes. To what extent is this a worrying result? Or, to put it another way: why should SE be seen as a challenge for successful ethics education? A first natural suggestion would be to point out that the egoistic views that students often express in class are simply false. After all, these views are subject to serious objections in both their descriptive and normative varieties and therefore hardly defended by anyone in contemporary philosophical research.⁸ Take for example ethical egoism, a view that is not only widely considered as implausible and false in the philosophical literature, but as ‘wicked’ (Rachels 1974, p. 298), ‘preposterous’ (Rolston 1988, p. 294) and ‘pernicious’ (Rachels 1974, p. 297). Holmes Rolston summarizes this widespread resentment as follows (Rolston 1988, p. 294): ‘If moral philosophers [sic] have nearly agreed to anything, they agree that ethical egoism [...] is both incoherent and immoral.’⁹ At this point, however, one might argue that considerations regarding the plausibility of egoism are not even relevant with respect to educational contexts. To better understand this objection, it is again helpful to take a look at the debate on SR. In this debate, skeptical-relativistic preconceptions among students are considered problematic primarily for pedagogical rather than philosophical reasons. More specifically, most authors agree that SR attitudes are problematic because they undermine students’ willingness to actively engage with philosophical questions – and not because they are implausible or false. In fact, it has been explicitly pointed out in the literature on SR that philosophical considerations regarding the plausibility of skeptical-relativistic views must be irrelevant in this context, since it is generally considered completely unproblematic for students to express implausible philosophical views in class (Balg 2020). The basic idea behind this seems to be that philosophy

⁸ Although in the case of egoistic views the situation is reasonably clear in that even proponents of these views usually freely admit the unpopularity of their position, statements about the popularity of specific philosophical theories are notoriously difficult to make. The results of the latest PhilPapers survey, in which professional philosophers were asked to assess various ethical theories, provide a useful starting point in this context. Here, 32.05% chose deontology, 30.56% consequentialism, and 36.99% virtue ethics (these numbers refer to ‘inclusive’ results, i.e. results that include answers of respondents who endorse multiple options. For more details, see Bourget and Chalmers 2023). Given that most consequentialist endorsements can plausibly be attributed to various forms of utilitarianism, and that the most frequently mentioned keywords in the ‘alternative view’ category are ‘pluralism,’ ‘particularism,’ and ‘contractualism,’ these results lend further support to the assumption that the vast majority of professional philosophers do not hold egoistic views. Of course, that doesn’t mean that *no one* holds such views. For example, see Burgess-Jackson 2013 for a recent defense of ethical egoism.

⁹ This assessment requires some qualification. While it is true that ethical egoism is indeed an extremely unpopular view, its assessment as inconsistent is at least controversial (see e.g. Donway 1969; Versenyi 1970).

education is all about enabling students to think independently about philosophical questions, rather than teaching them any specific views.

Applied to the case of SE, this would mean that assessments concerning the philosophical plausibility of egoistic views are largely irrelevant here as well. Ultimately, however, I do not find the considerations outlined above particularly convincing. To begin with, one might already doubt on a general level that it is actually unproblematic for students to express implausible philosophical views in class. Although the ability to engage independently with philosophical questions may be the main concern of philosophy and ethics education, this does not mean that the plausibility of the views that students arrive at as a result of such engagement is completely irrelevant. What's more, there are also good reasons to not simply put egoistic views on a level with other philosophical views that are widely considered implausible. For as we have seen, most philosophers consider egoistic views not only as false, but as straightforwardly *immoral*. This is an important difference. To see this, consider views like racism, sexism or homophobia. In contrast to other philosophically implausible views, such as substance dualism or solipsism (and, arguably, metaphysical skepticism or relativism), these views are surely considered as pedagogically problematic when voiced by students – because they are not only implausible, but morally problematic. And for the same reason, instructors should also be concerned if their students express egoistic views in class.¹⁰

At the same time, however, the above considerations regarding SR are anything but irrelevant to our discussion of SE. For just as students with skeptical-relativistic attitudes, students with egoistic attitudes will probably also tend to shy away from engaging in tedious discussions of ethical issues – albeit for slightly different reasons: students with SR attitudes are skeptical about the meaningfulness of ethical discussions because they suspect that these discussions are aimed at something that does not exist or that cannot be attained (i.e. objective moral insights). This, however, is not necessarily the case for students with SE attitudes, who will often be skeptical about the meaningfulness of ethical discussions because they simply suspect that these discussions persistently ignore some obvious ethical or anthropological insights. Keith Burgess-Jackson describes this line of thought as follows (Burgess-Jackson 2013, p. 532):

[Many] students (readers of Rand, for example) are strongly attracted to egoism. If contemporary philosophers fail to engage it, openly and fairly, without disparagement or condescension, then perhaps it is *philosophy* and not *egoism* that must go – or so a student might conclude.

¹⁰ In light of the preceding considerations, it might seem somewhat inappropriate to compare egoistic views to strongly discriminatory views such as racism, sexism, or homophobia. After all, it has been explicitly noted in [Philosophical Egoism and Student Egoism](#) that egoistic attitudes do not necessarily lead to immoral behavior. However, it is important to see that the same holds for strongly discriminatory views: in fact, one major advance in thinking about racism, sexism, and homophobia is precisely that even supposedly harmless manifestations of these attitudes are now considered clearly immoral. The decisive factor in this context is therefore not whether people with the corresponding views actually behave immorally to a sufficient degree. Rather, the decisive factor is whether the corresponding views provide the basis for such behavior. And this is certainly also the case with egoistic views.

Surely, a lot depends on the details here. For example, some varieties of rational egoism are plausibly closely related to metaethical nihilism – i.e. the view that nothing is morally wrong (Sinnott-Armstrong 2024): if there is no such thing as binding moral norms anyway, then one should simply do what's in one's own best interest. As we have seen, such varieties of rational egoism will particularly appeal to students drawn to egoistic views in response to widespread moral disagreement. Such manifestations of SE will not only be closely related to SR attitudes in that they stem from similar causes, but will also lead to a similar form of skepticism towards ethical discussions: if morality is simply an illusion, then of course any form of discourse aimed at gaining moral insights is doomed to failure.

However, this kind of skepticism is not licensed by ethical or psychological egoism. After all, these views are not directly linked to any revisionist metaethical assumptions. Accordingly, someone who holds these views doesn't necessarily have any reasons to consider ethical discussions as pointless. However, such a person will indeed see little point in participating in the *specific kind* of ethical discourse that is characteristic of moral philosophy and ethics education, where standard moral theories such as utilitarianism, deontology or virtue ethics are critically discussed and applied to concrete moral problems. From their perspective, this kind of discourse completely disregards some important ethical and anthropological insights that must be taken into account. To put it in a nutshell: such a person doesn't consider standard ethical discourse as being *absurd*, but simply as being *misguided*.

Of course, the above considerations should only be applied to the phenomenon of SE with a certain degree of caution. As already mentioned, SE attitudes do not necessarily consist in explicit philosophical convictions, but also include unreflected preconceptions that are comparatively vague and often implicit. Accordingly, most students will hardly be aware of the above distinctions and implications. Nevertheless, I still think it is important to point out that egoistic views often suggest a different attitude towards standard ethical discourse than relativistic or skeptical views, as this indicates that egoistic views also require a different form of treatment. In the next section, I will discuss what such treatment might look like.

How to deal with student egoism

In this section, I would like to discuss how instructors should deal with egoistic preconceptions among students. To be clear, however, it would certainly be naïve to assume that there is one single strategy that all instructors can use in all situations to solve the problem of SE satisfactorily. Accordingly, the point of the following considerations is not to offer a simple one-fits-all solution. Instead, I would like to develop some *general* desiderata for dealing with SE that can be fulfilled by many different strategies.

To begin with, let's have a closer look at the passage from Burgess-Jackson that has already been cited above. If the broader context of this passage is taken into account, we can see that some considerations on how instructors should deal with SE are already suggested here (Burgess-Jackson 2013, p. 532):

With all due respect to my philosophical colleagues, [...] [the] disparagement of egoism and its proponents must stop. It is unfair and unseemly – and frankly, it gives philosophy and philosophers a bad name, for many students (readers of Rand, for example) are strongly attracted to egoism. If contemporary philosophers fail to engage it, openly and fairly, without disparagement or condescension, then perhaps it is *philosophy* and not *egoism* that must go – or so a student might conclude. The purpose of this essay is to persuade my fellow moral philosophers, and especially *teachers* of moral philosophy, that egoism deserves to be taken as seriously as utilitarianism, Kantianism, contractarianism, or any other normative ethical theory.

According to Burgess-Jackson, philosophy instructors should treat egoistic views in their classes as legitimate philosophical positions that have to be taken seriously. In what follows, I will take this idea as a starting point. However, I think that it needs to be modified and complemented in several ways.

To begin with, the above considerations of Burgess-Jackson are comparatively vague. In fact, it is not entirely clear what their implications are with regard to educational practice. What does it mean *to take egoism seriously*, or *to engage it openly and fairly* in the philosophy classroom? At a most basic level, this would simply mean not to react in a polemical or disrespectful way to egoistic statements from students. However, this is nothing more than a pedagogical truism. According to a stronger – and more plausible – reading, what Burgess-Jackson calls for in the above passage is to explicitly address egoistic views in the classroom as serious philosophical theories that are worthy of discussion. In light of our previous considerations, this looks like a promising idea. For as we have seen, many students with egoistic preconceptions won't necessarily consider ethical discussions as being absurd: from their perspective, the problem with standard ethical discourse is not that there are no moral truths, or that such truths are unattainable – but simply that it is based on naïve anthropological or normative assumptions. Given this, many of them will in principle be open to participating in ethical debates – as long as these debates take into account some central assumptions that they consider as obviously plausible.

According to an even stronger reading of the above passage from Burgess-Jackson, ethics instructors should not only explicitly address egoistic views in their classes, but treat them as serious philosophical theories that are on a par with standard moral theories such as utilitarianism, deontology or virtue ethics. Given the wording of the above passage, and given that Burgess-Jackson himself is an explicit proponent of ethical egoism, this is probably exactly what he has in mind. However, I don't consider this to be a particular convincing recommendation. To my mind, there are at least two reasons why egoistic theories should not be treated on a par with standard moral theories in educational settings. First, such an approach would probably reinforce students' egoistic preconceptions. And this would be problematic despite the possible increase in their willingness to participate in ethical discussions: for as we have seen, SE is not only problematic because of its potentially undermining effect on students' motivation to participate in ethical discussions, but simply because it is reasonable to assume that egoism is wrong and immoral.

Second, treating egoistic views on a par with standard moral theories would give a false impression of the philosophical literature. Just as in other subjects, students should not only be confronted with different theories in ethics classes, but should also develop an awareness of the respective significance of these theories for current academic research. For example, while it might be appropriate to explicitly address cosmological theories that deny the existence of dark matter in physics classes, these theories should definitely not be treated on a par with standard cosmological models that directly imply the existence of dark matter. And the same is probably true with respect to egoistic theories: treating these theories on a par with standard moral theories would simply be a form of *false balancing*.

Let's take a step back. What the above considerations show is that instructors who are confronted with SE have to take into account a number of factors that give rise to some basic desiderata that any successful strategy of dealing with SE has to fulfill. A first desideratum is that an appropriate way of dealing with SE should take students and their philosophical views seriously: instead of ignoring or simply rejecting their students' egoistic attitudes, instructors should actively include them in classroom discussions as serious philosophical positions. A second desideratum is that an appropriate way of dealing with SE should enable students to situate their philosophical views in the current philosophical research landscape: although egoistic views should be treated as philosophical positions to be taken seriously, their radical and controversial nature should also be made transparent. A third desideratum is that an appropriate way of dealing with SE should lead to a decrease in egoistic views: SE is not only problematic because of its potentially undermining effect on students' motivation, but because egoism is wrong and immoral. Given this, a successful way of dealing with SE does not simply increase the willingness of students to participate in classroom discussions, but in the best case actually leads to students giving up their egoistic preconceptions.

We have thus identified three general desiderata that any successful strategy of dealing with SE has to fulfill. In the next section, I would like to sketch one such strategy in a little more detail. The basic idea behind this strategy is that in some educational contexts SE can be effectively mitigated by a specific way of teaching standard moral theories.¹¹

A possible strategy for dealing with student egoism

Usually, standard moral theories are taught with a clear emphasis on their differences. For example, a typical realization of this standard way of teaching normative ethics is the widespread use of trolley cases, which are used to contrast consequentialist and deontological theories as irreconcilable opponents. In principle, such an approach can certainly be fruitful: in order to encourage students to actively engage with ethi-

¹¹ An alternative strategy for dealing with SE can be found in Putman 1998. Putmans strategy is essentially based on the idea that teaching virtue ethics has particular potential for successfully dealing with SE. In this paper, I will not discuss whether this strategy is capable of fulfilling the desiderata formulated above, or what advantages and disadvantages it has in comparison to the strategy presented below.

cal issues, it is often helpful to start with a tension that needs to be resolved, or a disagreement that needs to be settled. In fact, the assumption that cognitive dissonance in this sense can be an important catalyst for philosophical learning processes is a key motivation behind problem-centered teaching arrangements (see e.g. Barz 2019).

However, such a way of teaching moral theories also comes with certain problems. One obvious problem is that it makes moral philosophy appear to be a hopelessly controversial discipline in which there is no agreement whatsoever on fundamental questions. As we have seen, such a focus on ethical disagreement can easily promote the emergence of SE. In this section, I would like to sketch an alternative way of teaching standard moral theories. This approach also revolves around a philosophical tension that needs to be resolved, but it does not present moral philosophy as an eternal arena of irresolvable disagreement. In what follows, I will first present this approach in greater detail. Then, drawing on the three desiderata developed in the last section, I will argue that this approach offers a promising strategy for dealing with SE.

As already indicated, the following strategy revolves around a specific philosophical tension, the resolution of which serves as a motivational basis for student engagement. This tension arises from a contrast between an egoistic and an impartial standpoint. To introduce this contrast in the classroom, instructors can first present some ‘inspirational’ quotes such as ‘at the end of the day all you have is yourself’ or ‘put yourself at the top of your to-do list every day and the rest will fall into place’. Slogans like these are widely shared on social media, where they are presented as recipes for a fulfilling life or expressions of healthy self-love. Accordingly, many students will probably consider them as rather unproblematic and take an affirmative stance toward them. Later on, these slogans can be contrasted with some influential quotes that express an impartial point of view. Examples of this would be Jesus’ second great commandment (‘Love your neighbor as yourself’) or the famous passage from the Isha Upanishad: ‘He who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings, loses all fear.’ The aim of this juxtaposition should be to trigger cognitive conflict among students: while many will still consider the initial egoistic slogans as legitimate, many will also recognize the binding character of an impartial standpoint.

Given this, a clear philosophical question can now be established, the answer to which will enable a resolution of the generated tension. Possible formulations could be, for example, ‘Is it okay to put yourself first?’ or ‘Is selfishness reasonable?’. In a first step, students should first try to formulate well-founded answers to this question on their own. To support this process, it is helpful to provide them with some concrete example cases in which persons violate the principle of impartiality. In a class where SE is widespread, many students are likely to consider such violations as largely unproblematic. Based on a discussion of such cases, students can ultimately formulate general principles that explain whether and under what circumstances they judge egoistically motivated violations of impartiality to be justified.

After this first step, instructors should proceed by introducing abstract principles from moral philosophy that can then be applied to the example cases. These principles should include egoistic principles, but also ethical standard principles such as the Categorical Imperative, the Golden Rule or Peter Singer’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. Of course, the level of detail and sophistication with which such

principles can be developed in class certainly depends on the prior knowledge of the students. In any case, the development and application of such principles should lead to the result that, while ethical egoism fundamentally legitimizes partiality in favor of one's own person, all other moral principles characterize many if not all such forms of partiality as illegitimate.

In a third step, students should develop an understanding of why various standard theories of normative ethics converge in this regard. The key insight that should be facilitated at this point is that these theories are different formulations of a common idea of impartiality. The concept of a 'moral standpoint', which is traditionally *defined* in terms of a principle of impartiality,¹² should be helpful in this context – consider, for example, the following famous passage by Susan Wolf (Wolf 1982, p. 436 f.):

The moral point of view, we might say, is the point of view one takes up insofar as one takes the recognition of the fact that one is just one person among others equally real and deserving of the good things in life as a fact with practical consequences, a fact the recognition of which demands expression in one's actions and in the form of one's practical deliberations. Competing moral theories offer alternative answers to the question of what the most correct or the best way to express this fact is.

Of course, students should not simply be confronted with the fact that standard theories of normative ethics are based on a common idea of impartiality. Rather, they must develop an understanding of the basis on which this idea is founded. Enabling such an understanding is the final step of the approach presented here. A prominent and very influential line of argument that can be productive in this context is the idea that interpersonal impartiality is simply in line with other neutrality principles that we naturally accept. For example, most people would certainly accept that it is rational to be neutral towards the temporal distribution of pain that one experiences: if we have the choice between experiencing a small amount of pain in a week or experiencing a significant amount of pain in a month, then it would be clearly irrelevant that we experience the bigger amount of pain at a later point in time. Derek Parfit illustrates this idea in his well-known 'Future-Tuesday-Indifference' thought experiment (Parfit 1984, p. 123 f.):

A certain hedonist cares greatly about the quality of his future experiences. With one exception, he cares equally about all the parts of his future. The exception is that he has *Future-Tuesday-Indifference*. Throughout every Tuesday he cares in the normal way about what is happening to him. But he never cares about possible pains or pleasures on a *future* Tuesday. Thus he would choose a painful operation on the following Tuesday rather than a much less painful operation on the following Wednesday. This choice would not be the result of any false beliefs. This man knows that the operation will be much more painful if it is on Tuesday. Nor does he have false beliefs about personal identity. He agrees

¹² see e.g. Baier 1958, ch. 8; Harsanyi 1977; Scheffler 1982, 1985; Smith 1976; Wolf 1992.

that it will be just as much him who will be suffering on Tuesday. Nor does he have false beliefs about time. He knows that Tuesday is merely part of a conventional calendar, with an arbitrary name taken from a false religion. Nor has he any other beliefs that might help to justify his indifference to pain on future Tuesdays. This indifference is a bare fact. When he is planning his future, it is simply true that he always prefers the prospect of great suffering on a Tuesday to the mildest pain on any other day.

This man's pattern of concern is irrational. Why does he prefer agony on Tuesday to mild pain on any other day? Simply because the agony will be on a Tuesday. *This is no reason*. If someone must choose between suffering agony on Tuesday or mild pain on Wednesday, the fact that the agony will be on a Tuesday is no reason for preferring it. Preferring the *worse* of two pains, for no reason, is irrational.

Based on this consideration, various authors have argued that accepting temporal impartiality and rejecting interpersonal impartiality amounts to an incoherent combination of positions (see, for example, Nagel 1979; Parfit 1984, Part 2; Sidgwick 1981, pp. 418–422). For example, Henry Sidgwick explicates this point as follows (Sidgwick 1981, p. 418):

From the point of view, indeed, of abstract philosophy, I do not see why the Egoistic principle should pass unchallenged any more than the Universalistic. I do not see why the axiom of Prudence should not be questioned, when it conflicts with present inclination, on a ground similar to that on which Egoists refuse to admit the axiom of Rational Benevolence. If the Utilitarian has to answer the question, 'Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater happiness of another?' it must surely be admissible to ask the Egoist, 'Why should I sacrifice a present pleasure for a greater one in the future? Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?'

Teaching and discussing the above strands of argument would enable students to recognize (i) that various standard theories of normative ethics are not completely irreconcilable approaches, but rather different formulations of the same basic idea, (ii) that there are weighty arguments in favor of this basic idea, and (iii) that this basic idea stands in direct conflict with egoistic views. At this point, it is easy to see why the presented approach offers a promising strategy for dealing with SE. To see this, let's consider the three desiderata that have been identified in the last section.

Desideratum 1: An appropriate way of dealing with SE should take students and their philosophical views seriously. The above approach does this by explicitly addressing the philosophical plausibility of an egoistic standpoint. Instead of simply ignoring students' egoistic attitudes, or dismissing them outright, the above approach respects these attitudes as serious philosophical positions that require closer examination.

Desideratum 2: An appropriate way of dealing with SE should enable students to situate their philosophical views in the current philosophical research landscape. The above approach clearly achieves this by presenting egoistic views as fundamentally incompatible with a basic assumption that underlies all standard theories of normative ethics. By doing this, it not only contradicts a widespread view of normative ethics as an eternal arena of irresolvable disagreement – a view which, as we have seen, can foster the development of SE. Furthermore, it also gives students an initial impetus to distance themselves from their egoistic views by clearly demonstrating the radical and eccentric nature of egoism.

Desideratum 3: An appropriate way of dealing with SE should lead to a decrease in egoistic views. The above approach has the potential to be successful in this regard as well. The reason for this is that it does not merely contextualize the students' egoistic views within the philosophical debate, thereby making them aware of the radical nature of their views. Instead, it helps them to better understand *why* their views are rejected by most philosophers by providing insight into an example for the argumentative foundation of the philosophical agreement that opposes their views. In this way, it gives students good reasons to critically question their views without trying to convince them of any specific, and potentially controversial, moral theory.

Conclusion

In this article, I have addressed egoistic preconceptions among students as a pedagogically significant phenomenon that has hitherto been neglected in the philosophical literature. More specifically, I have argued that there are good reasons to expect that such preconceptions are (i) a potentially widespread phenomenon that (ii) should be seen as a potential challenge to successful ethics education. Against this background, I have identified three general desiderata that any successful strategy of dealing with this phenomenon has to fulfill. Finally, I have sketched one specific strategy in a little more detail.

As already stated at the outset, the considerations presented in this paper are primarily meant to initiate a systematic discussion of egoistic preconceptions among students and their implications for ethics education. In addition to empirical questions about the exact nature and prevalence of such preconceptions, such a discussion would also have to take into account pedagogical questions concerning the goals of ethics education and philosophical questions about the tenability of egoistic views. I hope that this paper has highlighted some lines of thought that could be fruitful to pursue further in this context.

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