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Caspar Hare: On Myself, and Other, Less Important Subjects

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1 Self-Interest and Self-Importance

It is common to have a mildly exaggerated sense of the significance of your own joys and miseries, but *grand* self-importance is rare. Louis XIV was grandly self-important. He believed that, when he consumed too much foie gras, *France* suffered gastric pain. When he took satisfaction from the construction of a new fountain on the grounds of Versailles, that feeling would settle over his natural kingdom—from the docks of Brest to the pox-ridden slums of Marseilles. For Louis, self-indulgence was a *national mission*.

When we have the state in mind, we are working for ourselves. The welfare of the one creates the glory of the other. When the former is happy, lofty and powerful, he who is the cause of it has glory too and consequently should enjoy more than his subjects with regard to himself and to them everything in life that is most pleasant.¹

We, the undistinguished masses, are not as fortunate as Louis. As one of the masses, I know I have a set of unique qualities—a unique height, a unique weight, a unique time and place of origin, etc., but these give me scarce grounds for thinking that I occupy a special place in the larger scheme of things, that my pleasures and pains are more significant than anybody else's. I am not the physical embodiment of a national spirit. No God has chosen me as his special representative on Earth. I am hardly stronger, faster, or more delicate than the next person. And there are *seven billion* next people.

This means that, though I may be no less chronically attentive to my own comfort than Louis was, my self-attention is internally vexed in a way that his was not. Louis took his pleasures and pains to be especially important, so when he deliberated he discovered a pleasing harmony between *egocentric-hedonistic considerations* (of the form: 'over all, I will suffer less if I do ____ rather than ____') and *considerations of the greater good* (of the form: 'over all, things will be better if I do ____ rather than ____'). When I deliberate I discover no such harmony. I am continually faced

with situations in which these considerations conflict, situations in which I can make the world better at a cost to my comfort, and myself more comfortable at cost to the world.

This may seem a very obvious observation. Of course we are, most of us, chronically preoccupied with our own comfort. Of course, to be so preoccupied is not to be preoccupied with the greater good.

Can it be denied?

1.1 Conflicting Considerations

To get a more precise grip on this question, let us consider the position of someone, call her a *peacemaker*, whose desire for the kind of psychological harmony enjoyed by Louis leads her to be resolutely committed to the view that, for the most part, there is no conflict between egocentric-hedonistic considerations and considerations of the greater good.

This peacemaker notes, first, that although most of us are not *extreme egocentric hedonists*, caring about only our own pleasures and pains, we are at least *mild egocentric hedonists*. All other things being equal, we prefer that pain befall others rather than ourselves and pleasure befall ourselves rather than others.

If you are outraged by this suggestion, imagine learning that a hundred thousand people will suffer painful epileptic seizures tomorrow. This will, I guess, trouble you very little. Around a hundred thousand people suffer painful epileptic seizures every day. Now imagine learning that you are among the hundred thousand. This will, I guess, trouble you a good deal. And you will wish it were not so.

Never fear. The peacemaker then claims:

(Harmony) Whenever a mild egocentric hedonist favors a situation in which she suffers less, she thereby favors a simply better maximal state of affairs.

I have used some quasi-technical terms here, and they need to be glossed. What is it to for one thing to be “simply better” than another? Let us just say what it is not—not better in some qualified or three-way relational sense of the word, not better *for me*,

or better *for some purpose*, or better *in relation to a particular set of interests*, but better *period*.

What is a “state of affairs”? Think of a state of affairs as a way for things to be. So the way things in Yosemite National Park are is a state of affairs. The way things in the Russian economy are is a state of affairs. What is a “maximal state of affairs”? It is, first, a way for *everything* to be—if some things are this way, then there are no further things. And it is, second, a *fully specified way* for everything to be—if some things are this way, then there is no further way they might or might not be.

Finally, what is it to “favor a situation”? I mean the notion of “favoring” to be understood quite broadly: One way to favor a situation is bring it about; another is just to desire that it obtain. So, according to (Harmony), it is not just that the actions of a mild egocentric hedonist bring about the good (whenever she brings about a situation in which she suffers less, she brings about a better maximal state of affairs), it is also that the desires of a mild egocentric hedonist align with the good (whenever she wants a situation in which she suffers less to come about, she wants a better maximal state of affairs to come about.)

Is (Harmony) credible? Well, three seemingly insurmountable obstacles stand in the way of my believing it.

The Grounding Problem

First, if I am to believe it, then it must be true of *me* that when I enhance my own comfort at the expense of other people, I am making for a better maximal state of affairs. So I must adopt a picture of the world according to which my comfort makes an especially weighty contribution to the value simpliciter of maximal states of affairs. Call this the *Grounding Problem*: My picture of who I am, and of how I fit into the world, must somehow give me grounds for thinking that my pains and pleasures have an especially important place in the larger scheme of things.

But how can this be? I am not the Sun-King. I am ordinary in all measurable respects. So perhaps my only hope is to believe I am extraordinary in some immeasurable respect, that I am metaphysically unique in some way that bears on the value of my suffering—perhaps I am a God, perhaps I am dreaming up the

world, or perhaps I am a solitary utility monster, loose among the unsuspecting masses.

The Solitary Utility Monster | My physiology is not unusual in any measurable way—I wince when punched, smile when pleased, and frown when saddened, just like anyone else. But there is one important, hidden difference between me and other people: My experiences are qualitatively far more intense than theirs. If their experiences are like watercolors by Joseph Turner, mine are like oil paintings by Francis Bacon. Drinking tea feels to me just the way taking morphine feels to them. A touch of indigestion feels to me just the way being disemboweled feels to them.

What if this were true of me? It is a bleak thought. Beyond my immediate horizons, things are dull. My feelings of love and compassion are only faintly reciprocated. My generosity causes little pleasure, my spite little pain. The world is, in a certain sense, unresponsive to me. Perhaps the only consolation would be my blissful ignorance. It is hard to imagine evidence that would count for or against this picture, so only a desperately self-interested person would suspect the awful truth.

But if I were a solitary utility monster, then one might argue that I *should* be self-interested. One might argue that my pleasures and pains would be intrinsically more important than everybody else's. For surely what is intrinsically good or bad about pleasure or pain is its phenomenal aspect. Hit your hand hard against your desk. What is bad about pain is *that* feeling. Run your fingers gently across your scalp. What is good about pleasure is *that* feeling. And there are more of those sorts of feelings associated with my experiences than with anybody else's.

So the solitary utility monster picture would do a fine job of grounding self-interest on my part. But it is, of course, ridiculous. Serious philosophers do not believe they are metaphysically unique. At best they use the idea as a foil—the *problem* of the “problem of other minds” is almost always taken to be the problem of how one can know that other people's mental states are just like one's own, very rarely taken to be the problem of *whether* other people's mental states are just like one's own. And to my

knowledge, no serious philosopher has ever even considered the view that I, Caspar Hare, am metaphysically unique. It has not even been in the ballpark!

So this does not seem like a very promising strategy. If I am to solve the Grounding Problem, I must do so without committing myself to a wildly implausible metaphysical picture. And that appears impossible.

The Generalization Problem

Furthermore, if I am to argue, quite generally, that there is no conflict between the considerations that move a mild egocentric hedonist and considerations of the greater good, it is not enough just to show that there is no conflict in my own case. I must show that *any* mild egocentric hedonist, in favoring situations in which she suffers less, is favoring better maximal states of affairs. And it is very difficult to see how this can be so. Call this the *Generalization Problem*.

The central difficulty is illustrated by a famous argument against ethical egoism, in G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*. Moore, for reasons that do not concern us here, endorsed a strong consequentialist constraint on reasons and argued, from this assumption, that ethical egoism must be false.

The only reason I can have for aiming at 'my own good' is that it is good absolutely that what I so call should belong to me—good absolutely that I should have something, which, if I have it, others cannot have. But if it is good absolutely that I should have it, then everyone else has as much reason for aiming at my having it, as I have myself. If, therefore, it is true of any man's 'single interest' or 'happiness' that it ought to be his sole, ultimate end, this can only mean that that man's 'interest' or 'happiness' is the sole good, the universal good, and the only thing that anybody ought to aim at. What Egoism holds, therefore, is that each man's happiness is the sole good—that a number of different things are each of them the only good thing there is—an absolute contradiction! No more complete and thorough refutation of a theory could be desired.²

To see Moore’s thought, imagine a situation where my interests are at odds with someone else’s. For example:

Competing for a Scarce Resource | Jane and I are competing for a scarce resource. It is better for Jane that she get it, and better for me that I get it.

In this situation there seem to be two ways everything might be:

Way (1)	CJH gets the resource and is content	Jane misses out and is miserable
Way (2)	CJH misses out and is miserable	Jane gets the resource and is content

Being an egoist, I favor Way (1) over Way (2). Being an egoist, Jane favors Way (2) over Way (1). But it cannot both be better simpliciter that things be Way (1) and better simpliciter that things be Way (2). So surely in this case at least one of us, in favoring what is better for ourselves, is not favoring a simply better maximal state of affairs. So, for at least one of us, egocentric-hedonistic considerations do not align with considerations of the greater good. If I am to believe the peacemaker, I must somehow find grounds for denying this.

The Problem of Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences

The third problem arises from the fact that, for me, caring about CJH and caring about *me* do not always amount to the same thing. Given that I am broadly egocentric and that I believe myself to be CJH, I want to promote my well-being and the well-being of CJH. But, given that I am broadly egocentric, the moment I ceased to believe I was CJH, I would cease to care about *him* and continue to care about *me*. Here is the kind of situation in which this might happen:

After the Train-Crash | I wake up in hospital, achy and bewildered, unable to remember who or where I am. I try to move and find that my body is swathed in rigid plaster and my head is locked in

a brace. I call for help and receive no reply. But, happily, some kind nurse has placed a television directly in front of me. From it I learn that there has been a terrible train accident, that only two survivors, CJH and Joe Bloggs, have been prised from the wreckage, and that both have been taken to the hospital and placed in full-body plaster casts. "Interesting!" I think, "I must be either CJH or Joe Bloggs." The television then tells me a great deal about the conditions of CJH and Joe Bloggs—CJH is physically like so . . . , while Joe Bloggs is physically like so . . . ; CJH has such and such a biographical history . . . , while Joe Bloggs has such and such a biographical history . . . ; they are in adjacent rooms, CJH to the north and Joe Bloggs to the south, but both rooms have a west-facing window; they are both watching television right now, etc. "Interesting!" I think, "I now have an extremely vivid picture of what's going on in this hospital, and I know a tremendous amount about CJH and Joe Bloggs, although I still don't know which of them I am." Finally, the television tells me that one of the two is scheduled to have an extremely long and painful operation in a few hours time. "Interesting!" I think, "I hope that's not *me*."

My first concern in this situation, is for me, not CJH. If I were to discover that CJH was to be the unfortunate subject of the operation, I would be neither happy nor unhappy, because two importantly different possible scenarios would remain open, scenarios that we can represent like this:

Scenario (1):	CJH suffers	Joe Bloggs is comfortable ↑ And this is <i>me</i>
Scenario (2):	CJH suffers ↑ And this is <i>me</i>	Joe Bloggs is comfortable

I very much want the first scenario to obtain. I want to be Joe Bloggs, the person who will not be suffering.

But surely this is a clear example of a mild egocentric hedonist favoring a scenario in which he suffers less without thereby favoring a better maximal state of affairs. For there are not distinct maximal states of affairs corresponding to scenarios (1) and (2). A maximal state of affairs is a fully specified way for everything to

be. But it would appear that all the same things exist in scenarios (1) and (2)—both scenarios involve Joe Bloggs, CJH, the television, and so on. And it would appear that all those things are just the same way in both scenarios—Joe Bloggs has a blemish on his right earlobe, CJH’s earlobes are perfectly formed, the television is mounted high on a wall, and so on.

If I am to believe the peacemaker, I must somehow find grounds for denying this. I must somehow find grounds for saying that when a mild egocentric hedonist favors Scenario (1) over Scenario (2), he or she is thereby favoring a better maximal state of affairs. But it is very hard to see how this can be so.

1.2 The Way Forward

In light of the Grounding, Generalization, and Irreducibly Egocentric Preferences problems, you may think that the peacemaker’s project is hopeless. You may think that the pressing question for ethicists to address is not *whether* the considerations that move a mild egocentric hedonist misalign with considerations of the greater good, but how we should respond *when they do*. And sure enough, ethicists have been responding to some form or other of this question for a very long time.

This may seem like a compelling argument. But it relies on a substantive and questionable metaphysical picture of what the world is like and of how the self fits into the world. If a different picture is right, then the peacemaker’s prospects are not so bleak. My aim over the coming chapters is to develop and defend this different picture.

Chapter two is a warm-up. I show that, by adopting an appropriate metaphysical picture, a peacemaker can align time-biased considerations with considerations of the greater good. Chapter three is the main event. By adopting an analogous picture, a picture I call *egocentric presentism*, a peacemaker can align egocentric considerations with considerations of the greater good. In Chapter four I draw some detail into the egocentric presentist picture. In Chapters five and six I argue that it can make sense of some otherwise perplexing matters to do with personal identity over time.