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Egoism and the Limits of Ethics

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Abstract

The author discusses his experiences as the son of divorced parents, one a proud egoist and the other a dutiful altruist, and the resultant challenges in his own romantic life. Based on research from evolutionary psychology, he argues that ethical egoists and their critics have typically committed the same core error. By imputing a false dichotomy between 'selfishness' and 'altruism,' all sides have obscured the motivational intricacy of human behavior and the moral nuance entailed. How much of your own needs and happiness should be sacrificed for those you love? Drawing on Aristotelian insight, the author concludes that this is one of the most confounding ethical quandaries in life--which no moral theory can conclusively resolve.

Introduction

My dad, a consummate family man and a genuine *mensch*, has been married for decades, but not to my mom! My parents separated when I was five and officially divorced three years later, approximately thirty-three years ago. My mom, an egoist through and through, has remained blissfully single ever since, unwilling to give up her cherished independence. On the other hand, a lifelong partner is what my father has long desired, and finally found. I have always loved both my parents dearly, and as a child, I yearned deeply for them to be together. In retrospect, I can only laugh at this youthful folly: despite their great virtues as individuals, two people could not be more ill suited for each other! Indeed, theirs is a conflict of core values. My mother has long believed that one's chief obligation in life is to make oneself happy, without causing undue harm to others. My dad, on the other hand, was raised by his parents to be a faithful and dutiful son, willing to place their needs before his own at a moment's notice. This pattern of filial devotion, which drove my mother crazy during their marriage, had long become second nature to my father and characteristic of his relationship to others in general. To this day, my mother maintains that he is the "nicest and kindest" person she has ever met, a sentiment universally shared by all those fortunate enough to know him. Aside from his knack for 'tasteless humor,' in which I have always delighted (in contrast to my mom and his current spouse, both PhD clinical psychologists, interestingly enough), my father is morally unassailable by any traditional standard: a paragon of selflessness. Alas, like so many other features of her personality, my mother's egoistic ethical stance is anything but conventional!

Her moral perspective, however, is not without philosophical precedent. Existentialists, like Nietzsche [1] and Sartre [2], have endorsed similar positions, but perhaps the most notorious and unabashed champion of egoism is Ayn Rand [3]. My mother, a big fan, recommended that I read Rand's [3] *The Virtue of Selfishness*, which I did at the age of seventeen, and was immediately transfixed. My mom has never framed her egoistic approach as 'selfish' per se, characterizing it instead as being "highly self-aware," i.e., knowing what would make herself happy and acting accordingly. There was no mistaking, however, the parallels to the position Rand [3] stakes out. Here was a philosophical treatise that, as far as I was concerned, could have just as easily been entitled "Visions of My Mother," or, for that matter, "Rebukes of My Father." Who would have thought that the conflicting messages I was receiving throughout my childhood had such deep philosophical roots! Indeed, my mother, who had primary custody, encouraged me from a very early age to make autonomous choices and pursue activities based on my independent desires, as opposed to those of others. My dad bristled at this parental approach, which was so at odds with the way he was raised. From the ages of eight to seventeen, prior to moving to Oklahoma with my mom, I visited my dad every other weekend in Montreal via a two-hour long train ride. I cherished these visits, as did he, and missed him badly in the interim. Nonetheless, there were several occasions during these years when conflict emerged, visits were cancelled, and phone calls were left unanswered by me. Invariably, the source of these difficulties was the same: my dad wanting me to follow suit with what he had done his whole life and perform otherwise undesirable tasks (to my mind, at least)--like learning Hebrew or "paying respects" to a family acquaintance—because this is what duty required. I was not accustomed to making such sacrifices and did not want to "waste" what little time I had with my dad performing obligatory acts that seemed senseless to me. Resentment ensued and protracted standoffs, until either my dad or me finally relented and all was forgiven, until the next impasse. My mother, of course, Randian that she is, always took my side; while reminding my father, on the occasions that he would call her for advice, that I was raised very differently from the way he was. Notwithstanding my unique rearing, however, I have always been a dutiful and devoted son, much like my father, as both my parents would attest. In any case, all this to say, when I finally read Ayn Rand [3] for myself, the central issues she was tackling struck very close to home for me, and still to this day.

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Despite its widespread influence and towering commercial success across the globe [4], Rand's philosophy has generally been dismissed out of hand by academic ethicists. Although her magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged* [5] ranked as the second most influential book in the United States, behind only the *Bible*, in a 1991 survey conducted by the US Library of Congress [4], I cannot recall any mention of Rand in a philosophy classroom, journal, or conference to which I have been privy. As an undergraduate student, I once brought her up to my ethics professor, only to be shot down immediately and informed that

"nobody in the field takes her seriously!" To be fair, this criticism was primarily aimed at her *arguments* for ethical egoism—a controversial moral view stipulating that 'we ought to act selfishly' [6]—more so than the general stance itself. In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, Rand [3] characterizes her brand of ethical egoism as "Objectivist Ethics;" which she defines as a "morality of *rational* self-interest—or of *rational selfishness*" (xi). She notes that "selfishness" is "concern with one's own interests," which can be pursued either "rationally" or "irrationally" (xi). The former requires careful deliberation regarding one's long-term interests and values, as opposed to short-sighted indulgence (xi). She contends that we are often mistaken in this regard, blinded by temptations for immediate gratification and other false ideals: the most damaging of which, according to her, being the widespread ethical teaching that 'selfishness' is immoral since we are duty-bound to serve others (viii-xii). She underscores, in contrast, that we are "ends" in ourselves, "not the means to ends... of others;" on which basis she concludes, "*the achievement of our [own] happiness is [our] highest moral purpose*" (30).

While Rand's central thesis is worthy of consideration, her mode of argumentation is flawed and question-begging, providing her critics with ample ammunition. In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, she (1964) repeatedly insinuates without any sufficient justification that her thesis is 'objectively true,' 'logically dictated,' and 'scientifically verified.' Among other problems, her argument runs afoul of the 'is/ought' distinction in ethics, first formulated by David Hume [7] and widely endorsed by moral philosophers today [8]. According to this principle, science can reveal facts about our moral cognition and behavioral tendencies, but it cannot provide ethical *justification* for them: since what comes naturally to us (e.g., nepotism), is not necessarily morally right [9]. In violation of this standard, Rand [3] argues that we *ought* to be "selfish" because this is how we are supposedly hardwired by evolution (14). The latter claim is problematic in and of itself [10], but even assuming its scientific veracity, we could not conclude solely on this basis that acting selfishly is morally justified. Alas, Rand [3] should have heeded the wisdom of Aristotle, who she calls the "greatest of all philosophers," and followed his guidance that ethics has not been and never will be an 'exact science' (14). Contrary to her pretentions, neither science nor logic requires the adoption of ethical egoism—or any other moral theory, for that matter—and her claims to 'objective truth' appear entirely too subjective; a common problem for ethicists who have made similar claims regarding their preferred moral stance.

Indeed, although Rand's [3] presentation is characterized by haughtiness and fallacious reasoning, the same could be said of many famous ethicists, and her central claims cannot be so readily dismissed. What has resonated with many of her devoted followers, including my mother, is the core idea that 'selfishness' and ethical living are not mutually exclusive: there are limits to what should be morally required of us, especially at the expense of our own happiness. Competing ethical theories, such as Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, run afoul of this core insight. Instead, they require seemingly boundless self-sacrifice in the service of others [11]. Kant [12], to his credit, at least makes this feature of his view explicit, writing "morality is not the doctrine of how we make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness" [6]. According to his approach, which closely parallels that of my father, morality is chiefly about doing your 'duty' and meeting your obligations to others, irrespective of your personal feelings and desires [6]. If, for instance, you pay all the income tax you are supposed to, but primarily out of fear of a potential audit, then this does not qualify as a moral action for Kant, since your motive was self-regarding. While my father does not share Kant's preoccupation with motivational purity, the importance of doing one's 'duty' has long been the focal point of my dad's moral outlook.

Utilitarians, on the other hand, make 'promoting happiness' the centerpiece of their ethical approach [6]. It is not your satisfaction as a moral agent that truly matters, however, but rather the gratification of everyone else! Utilitarianism is predicated on the 'greatest happiness principle,' which stipulates that we should strive to bring the most satisfaction possible to the largest number of people [6]. Lest there be any confusion in this regard, utilitarians underscore that your happiness, and that of your friends and loved ones, is of no greater ethical importance than that of anybody else's, including the needs of strangers whom you will never meet [6]. Ironically, this 'greatest happiness' standard must invariably lead to personal misery for any faithful practitioner. By, in effect, subsuming your needs to those of everyone else, utilitarianism leaves no room for anything more than an abstemious existence, devoid of hobbies, recreation, and luxuries of any sort [11]. How could one justify such 'indulgences' when there is so much need and inequity in the world? Hence, just like Kantian deontology, utilitarianism requires boundless altruism [11]. Rand's ethical approach, in contrast, prudently acknowledges that there is only so much self-sacrifice that can be reasonably demanded of an individual.

Rand [3], however, errs in the other direction, by failing to concede the obvious: self-indulgent behaviors can hurt others, and there must therefore be some constraints! Alas, this has been the major blind spot for ethical egoists, like Rand [3] and Nietzsche [1]. In fairness, they are correct that many of our social relations are not zero-sum contests, in which either you or I win, but not both. Rather, in many situations, my gain can be your gain too, and vice-versa. Indeed, mutually beneficial arrangements of this sort are characteristic of all sorts of relationships, romantic, platonic, employment, etc. [13]. Hence, ethical egoists are right that 'selfishness' is not inherently unethical and, in many circumstances, will do no harm to others; but they overgeneralize these examples. There are undoubtedly also situations in which our decisions negatively impact others, and it can be profoundly difficult to balance the competing interests in these cases—contrary to what moral philosophers have typically implied.

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The ethical debate concerning egoism has been hampered by a common error. Theorists on all sides have generally failed to acknowledge the reality of mixed motivations, i.e., the challenge of clearly demarcating 'selfish' from 'altruistic' actions. Trailblazing research from the field of evolutionary psychology underscores this problem. One of the central implications from this discipline, in accord with overwhelming findings from the cognitive science of decision-making [14], is that we are not always consciously aware of the driving forces behind our behaviors [13]. In this general sense, Freud has been vindicated by contemporary science: as he speculated, unconscious motivations do play a significant role in human behavior [13]. Freud, however, was woefully wrong regarding the underlying mechanisms [13]. Fortunately, evolutionary psychologists like Robert Wright [13] and David Buss [15,16] have helped to fill the explanatory void, offering much more empirically plausible accounts of these hidden forces. Wright's [13] outstanding book *The Moral Animal* is especially germane to the question at issue here. In this work, he emphasizes the psychological complexity of ostensibly 'selfless' behaviors, many of which can be self-serving as well, irrespective of the agent's conscious motivation.

Coincidentally, my mom made the same point during a memorable guest appearance in one of my Intro to Ethics courses. She had arrived in town for an annual visit, and we decided she should 'sit in' my ethics lecture, which would be focusing on, you guessed it, Randian egoism. The plan was for her to observe the class, as opposed to actively participating. This idea quickly went out the window, however, when the topic of *psychological egoism*—a widely derided theory that we always act 'selfishly,' whether we realize it or not [6]---came up at the beginning of class. What was supposed to be a perfunctory discussion instead became the central

focus of the lecture, as my mom unrelentingly criticized my dismissive treatment of psychological egoism. My students, of course, could not have been more entertained and delighted to see their instructor heckled and completely blindsided by his own mother!

Before my mother's vociferous objections, I had been parroting the canonical view among moral philosophers that psychological egoism is an untenable view [6]. This dismissive attitude is strange, however, given that this theory has deep philosophical roots running all the way back to Aristotle. In his seminal book *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle [17] famously contends that facilitating our personal happiness is the ultimate goal of every choice we make. Contemporary proponents of psychological egoism make a similar argument [6], a version of which I presented in class when my mother was visiting:

1) If you made an uncoerced choice to do something, then this must have been your desire.

2) If you do what you desire, then you act selfishly.

Hence, if you made an uncoerced choice, then you acted selfishly.

The above is an example of what logicians call a valid argument, which means that, *if* the premises are true, the conclusion follows with necessity. But is this argument sound? According to the standard view, the second premise is false because it supposedly relies on a "non-conventional" definition of 'selfishness' [6]. These critics note that when we call someone 'selfish' in everyday life, we are not merely saying that they did what they desired, but rather we are assessing the 'object' of their desire (i.e., the primary goal of their action). For example, if people donate to charity with the aim of helping others, then it would be absurd to call this 'selfish,' because the goal was other-directed. In contrast, if the main reason for the charitable donation was a tax write-off, then this characterization would be apt. In both scenarios, agents did what they desired, but the motivational divergence makes all the difference. Psychological egoism does not allow for such important distinctions while leading to counter-intuitive implications [6], like "Mother Teresa was selfish because she wanted to help the needy!" This was precisely the critique of psychological egoism I presented to my class, with the intent of quickly moving on before my mom halted the proceedings. "But if it makes you happy, then it is selfish," she insisted, "and what's wrong with calling mother Theresa selfish?" Before long, many of the students in my class had been won over to her side of this public mother-son debate.

In retrospect, I think she was right. Who determines what the 'proper usage' of a term is, and why should this be a reliable guide, in any case? No doubt, in everyday parlance, 'selfishness' carries a negative connotation in some contexts; like when my ex-girlfriends have labelled me in this manner, for pursuing my independent needs and desires as opposed to theirs. I, of course, would characterize my actions differently, in terms of "being self-aware and doing what it takes to make myself happy." Clearly, the usage and conception of the term 'selfish' can vary widely. In fact, consistent with the historical trend in my previous ethics courses, none of the students in the class my mom visited took issue with the definition (i.e., doing what you desire) proffered in the second premise of the argument, which they found to be compelling in general. Evidently, then, the framing was not that "unconventional." Accordingly, calling Mother Theresa "selfish" is only problematic if you consider that a pejorative, which ethical egoists like my mother certainly do not. These definitional questions, however, for which there can be no authoritative scientific adjudication, miss the central point. The criticism of psychological egoism outlined above presupposes that we can easily identify the underlying motivation for an action, but this is precisely the difficulty underscored by evolutionary psychology, to which my clinical psychologist mother was also alluding in class. The reasons for our behavior are often not fully transparent to ourselves, let alone to others! If we are mirrors unto ourselves, the glass is foggy, to say the least, regardless of how self-aware we might otherwise be.

This inherent ambiguity stems directly from our Darwinian origins, as underscored by Wright [13]. From an evolutionary perspective, the central purpose of human 'morality' is to facilitate group cohesion, so that individuals can derive the ample benefits of social living [8]. Our ancestors had a better chance of surviving and reproducing (i.e., 'winning' the Darwinian contest) as members of well-functioning groups, rather than as isolated individuals faring for themselves [8]. It can be exceedingly difficult to differentiate 'selfish' from 'altruistic' behaviors, because characteristically 'moral' actions can also bring substantial benefit to the agents performing them [13]. As it turns out, in many cases, doing the 'right thing' for others can also be a boon for oneself. For example, we have an evolved tendency to reciprocate, 'do unto others as they do unto us' [13]. Hence, being kind to others increases the likelihood that they will return the favor. Similarly, public displays of magnanimity and 'self-sacrifice' build prestige [13], which, in turn, can confer all sorts of advantages, e.g., entre into desirable groups, enhanced mating opportunities, etc. Again, as emphasized by Wright [13], the agent performing these 'good deeds' need not be fully aware of the personal incentives nor consciously motivated to attain them, but the rewards flow, nonetheless. Whatever the inspiration, 'virtue signaling,' i.e., demonstrating to others that you are a 'morally good' person, carries potent social currency [13]. Some people are all too aware of these benefits and actively work to exploit them, such as the 'brownnosing co-worker' who self-consciously makes a great show of company loyalty and dedication, or the 'unctuous politician' who champions causes in public while privately acting contrariwise. Today, anyone who doubts our species' penchant for 'virtue signaling,' need only to peruse social media outlets, like Facebook or Twitter, where examples abound. As Nietzsche [1] sagely observed in *The Genealogy of Morality*, a forerunner of contemporary work in evolutionary psychology, 'morality' and group 'politics' are inextricably tied: and for this reason, we should be especially wary of the self-proclaimed "ethical guardians" of society who stand to gain from this public perception. Of accord, Wright [13] cautions, "human beings are a species splendid in their array of moral equipment, tragic in their propensity to misuse it, and pathetic in their constitutional ignorance of this misuse" (13).

Maybe so, but notwithstanding Wright's cynical framing, the picture emerging from evolutionary science is not nearly so bleak. While our evolved 'moral repertoire' is undoubtedly abused and prone to exploitation, it also brings great benefit [18]. As a species, we have an unparalleled capacity for wide-ranging empathy, which many people put to good use [18]. Psychopathy is a rare exception, not the general rule [19]. Our ape relatives display heartwarming acts of kindness, and so do we [18]. The fact that we can derive pleasure and personal benefit from these prosocial acts, and feel sympathy and guilt when we hurt others, is something to be celebrated rather than bemoaned. Empathy, as the 'glue' that binds us, blurs the lines between 'self" and 'other'[10]—which is a great thing! How wondrous that we have evolved such that most of our interactions are not zero-sum contests, but rather occasions for mutually beneficial exchange. Indeed, the scientific implications of our Darwinian genealogy must not be misinterpreted. Even though our 'moral' motivations may be less 'pure' than commonly supposed, this does not render all actions equal. Meaningful empirical distinctions can still be drawn between behaviors that are relatively more or less 'self-serving' or 'altruistic,' both with respect to their consequences as well as to their conscious motivation. While we may not be fully aware of all the underlying reasons for our actions, some people are more prone to self-deception than others, and the motives we consciously recognize matter. To return to the above example, there is a difference between giving money to charity with the primary intention of helping others versus

helping oneself (tax write-off). Clearly, the former would be more 'altruistic' than the latter, as a matter of descriptive fact.

These scientific findings also have normative implications. Notwithstanding the 'is/ought' distinction, our prescriptive moral theories must at least be empirically realistic, otherwise they are of limited practical use [20]. As such, we should reject any normative theory relying on a scientifically dubious dichotomy between 'selfish' and 'selfless' action. While there are paragon examples of each, even these paradigmatic cases are often more 'blended' than commonly believed; and for every relatively clear-cut example, there will be many more that are less straightforward than initially meets the eye. Real life is messier in this regard than ethicists of all stripes have typically acknowledged. Most, like Kant, have assumed that selfishly motivated actions are inherently unethical; and so, they have bent over backwards to insist that purely altruistic acts are possible: anything to avoid the taint of 'selfishness!' Psychological egoists, on the other hand, have committed the same basic error in the opposite direction; by insisting that all our actions are equally 'selfish.' This, too, misses the mark. There are empirical and normative distinctions to be drawn in this regard, but they are much more nuanced than these conventional theories imply. Undoubtedly, as compared to my mom, my dad more dutifully serves others; but as he would tell you himself, this makes him happy and does not exclusively define his personality. He also carves out time for more self-indulgent pursuits, like playing hockey, going to football games, and enjoying the lighter side of life. Similarly, while my mom is less self-sacrificing than my dad, she has been a dedicated and devoted mother to me and a cherished confidante to the many friends in her life. A simple label of 'altruistic' or 'selfish' would not be fair to either of my parents, which is the case for everyone, to varying degrees. Indeed, this is the central upshot from evolutionary psychology: we must stop thinking of 'morality' and 'selfishness' as mutually exclusive, all-or-nothing phenomena—when evolution has serendipitously provided grounds for their convergence in many cases.

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While the boundaries between 'selfishness' and 'altruism' are hazier than commonly supposed, genuine conflicts present themselves. This has been especially true for me in the context of romantic relationships, which have required a difficult juggling act between pursing the self-fulfilling activities I love while also meeting my partner's needs. Although I have long envisioned a future in which I am married with at least one child, at the age of 41, this has yet to happen. I have had several long-term relationships with wonderful women, in which the general challenge has been the same. As the relationship progresses, my partners have always wanted increasing amounts of time and attention, including cohabitation, that I have been unwilling to provide, notwithstanding my other virtues as a mate. In my past relationships, I have typically served as an unfailing source of support and strength for my partners, as they have dealt with major life challenges and upheavals. They have repeatedly expressed gratitude for my uncharacteristic ("for a man, at least") "emotional depth" and "thoughtfulness," as well as for my encouragement to pursue their independent talents and interests—a necessary ingredient for a healthy relationship, I believe. I am pleased that these relationships have generally ended on friendly terms, with gratitude for the good times spent together. Nonetheless, there has been a recurrent complaint about me: you guessed it, in the shared estimation of my exes, I am just too "selfish!" From their perspective, I am insufficiently flexible regarding how I choose to spend my time, and I do not make enough sacrifices for them. While I am "loving" and "caring" in general, I am also too "uncompromising" and "self-involved." My viewpoint, of course, differs. No matter how much emotional support I provided, it never seemed to suffice; and I would have appreciated greater regard for what makes me happy. Indeed, it seems that these criticisms have been primarily based on my refusal to put their needs before my own. So, who is really being "selfish," here?

Unquestionably, there has been a glaring inequity in my previous relationships with respect to the needs of my partner versus my own. Much like my mother, I am a fiercely independent person, who requires a lot of privacy. I was raised as an only child, and while I enjoy socializing, I am a loner, nonetheless. My interests are also numerous. I have a great passion for surfing, tennis, yoga, and writing, just to name a few. Other than the many important relationships in my life, these are the components that make me the happiest. I believe, like Aristotle [17] espoused, that the most gratifying life is a balanced one, and I have strived to cultivate nothing less. I do my best to prioritize the people closest to me, without sacrificing the other activities I cannot live without. Alas, difficult compromises must be made; and I understand that my exes would have liked me to relinquish some of these other pursuits, to better meet their substantially greater needs. I knew, however, that to do so would not make me happy and would only cause me to become resentful. What they considered my intractable "selfishness," I viewed alternatively as being "self-aware" and "honest." At the same time, I share my father's penchant for empathy and guilt. Like him, I am attuned to the desires and feelings of others, and I hate to let them down. While my mother claims to have never felt guilty in her life, this is a quotidian affliction for both my dad and me. As such, these previous romantic relationships have presented a real challenge for me, as I have struggled to strike the right balance between making myself happy and my partner too, given our starkly differing requirements. How much should I indulge my personal interests? Am I making sufficient sacrifices for the person I love? These are the questions with which I have always wrestled, with the dueling specters of my diametrically opposed parents lingering in the background. While these issues have been most pressing in the romantic domain for me, they apply similarly to a variety of relationships, familial, platonic, etc. Since they impact the wellbeing of oneself and others, these are not merely personal dilemmas, but ethical ones too—which are among the most important and vexing in life.

Unfortunately, evolutionary psychology is not of much help in this regard. To their credit, leading theorists in the field, like David Buss [15,16], have done far more to address romantic relationships than academic ethicists, who have generally steered cleared of this thorny topic. For many people, however, romantic concerns—who to date, whether to marry, whether to break up, etc.—are of the utmost significance. From an evolutionary perspective, this preoccupation makes sense. With respect to the successful transmission of genes via offspring, nothing could be more weighty than appropriate mate selection [13]. It is of no great surprise, then, why so much of our time, energy, and focus is devoted to this task. Unfortunately, if you are seeking romantic encouragement, you may want to look elsewhere, as the picture painted by Buss [15,13] is not a pretty one, to say the least. He (2021) emphasizes that, given the differential reproductive costs for men and women, there is natural conflict between the sexes. They tend to differ both with regard to sexual selectivity and to the traits they find most attractive; while infidelity, of one sort or another, is a frequent occurrence for both sexes [15]. Those seeking a mate are driven to find an 'optimal' one, rather than somebody that is just 'good enough,' and the possibility always remains that someone better suited could still be out there [15]. Hence, we can never be sure if we are merely 'settling' by staying with a present partner. In general, when it comes to romantic relationships, the Rolling Stones song title "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" appears to be the main theme from evolutionary psychology. This may be unduly cynical, however. As Buss [15] himself outlines, these are evolved tendencies only, admitting of many exceptions, individual, cultural, etc. Many people buck these trends and make long-term monogamous relationships work [15]; and learning about these common Darwinian pitfalls may even facilitate this aim. Nonetheless, this scientific field offers no easy answers regarding the core question at issue here:

how much of your personal desires and ambitions should be sacrificed to make a relationship work, as opposed to compromising too much?

As described above, prevailing moral theories have also failed to adequately address this quandary. Too often, the debate has been framed in 'black and white' terms, with insufficient focus on the relationships that matter most in life, in contrast to our obligations to strangers. Utilitarianism and Kantian deontology both imply that acting 'selfishly' is inherently immoral, while failing to acknowledge that there is only so much that can be morally required of us at the expense of our own happiness [11]. While correct on this point, egoists, like Rand [3] and Nietzsche [1], overshoot in the opposite direction. In proclaiming the morality of egoism, they do not place enough constraints. These theories neither do justice to the motivational complexity of human behavior nor the everyday challenges of conducting close relationships, with the difficult trade-offs required.To his credit, in contrast, Aristotle [17] realized that balance is essential for all pursuits, including the precarious tightrope that must be traversed in reconciling our obligations to self and others. He [17] understood that ethics is not an 'exact science' and what constitutes the 'right equilibrium' will vary, both individually and circumstantially.

Hence, there are limits to ethics, both with respect to the duties entailed and to the guidance we can hope to receive. Aristotle cannot tell you how much to sacrifice for others, and nor can any other ethicist. My parents diverge substantially, and I continue to muddle through the gulf, in pursuit of the right long-term romantic partner. There may be hope in this regard. In response to this paper topic, my current mate concluded, "you are selfish, and so am I, and I wouldn't have it any other way!"

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