

Discussion

Rejoinder to Michael Young

Egoism and Prudent Predation

Michael Huemer

I'd like to thank Michael Young for his interesting and helpful comments on my article. I can't discuss all the points he raises; instead, I'll focus on three topics: First, there is Young's bid to show that an ethical egoist should not embrace prudent predation because of the negative consequences to oneself of accepting a *principle* allowing for occasional predation. Second, I'll respond to the advantages that Young claims for an agent-relative conception of value, as opposed to an agent-neutral conception. Third, I want to answer Young's question as to how the agent-neutral conception might "do more work" than its rival.

The Consequences of Accepting the Principle of Prudent Predation

Let's define the Principle of Prudent Predation (PPP) as follows:

One should sacrifice others whenever the benefits one will obtain by doing so exceed the harms to oneself that will result from the action.

I think Young and I agree that there are at least some (non-emergency) cases in which the benefits of a particular act of predation exceed its costs, so PPP is not vacuous. Now, I think Young's line of thinking in his most central argument (Young 2004, 445–48) is something like this:

1. Huemer says that the ethical egoist should accept PPP.

2. But the acceptance of PPP, itself, has negative consequences, over and above the consequences of the particular predatory acts. For:
 - a. If the egoist conceals his acceptance of PPP, then he loses the advantage of “being recognized by others for who [he] genuinely is,” which would undermine his sense of identity and self-esteem. (446)
 - b. If the egoist does *not* conceal his acceptance of PPP, then he loses the trust, and therefore also the friendship, of others.
3. These consequences outweigh the total advantages of the predatory acts that PPP endorses.
4. So the egoist should not accept PPP after all.

There are several points where I disagree with this line of thinking. To begin with, step 1 is not exactly correct. My argument was not really about what propositions an ethical egoist should accept, but about what *actions* a person should perform if ethical egoism *is true*. My claim is that if egoism is true, then PPP is true, because egoism *deductively implies* PPP. This point is important, because the sorts of considerations Young brings forward cannot be relevant to this claim. The empirical observations of step 2 above show at most that it would not be in one’s interests to “accept” PPP; this cannot show that PPP does not logically follow from ethical egoism. And PPP certainly does follow from ethical egoism. Ethical egoism holds that a person should always do what most benefits himself; it logically follows from this that, whenever sacrificing another person most benefits oneself, one should sacrifice another person.

Young does not dispute the entailment—he is not saying that ethical egoism doesn’t entail PPP (442). What, then, can he be trying to show? One interpretation is that he is trying to show that an ethical egoist should not *believe* PPP, because it is not in one’s own interests to believe PPP. This is problematic, since it means that the ethical egoist should either not believe ethical egoism, or else believe ethical egoism while refusing to accept a logical consequence of that very belief. Another interpretation is that Young is trying to show that an

ethical egoist should not *act in the way that* PPP says one should act. This is equally problematic since, if ethical egoism is true, PPP must be true, and it cannot be the case that one should not act in the way that a true principle says one should act. A third interpretation is that Young is trying to show that an ethical egoist should not *act on* PPP, in the sense of having PPP in mind as part of one's intention when one acts. This is a consistent view, but it is a bit odd. A moderately reflective egoist must realize that PPP follows from ethical egoism, and therefore he must think PPP is true. So it seems that, in order to avoid acting on PPP, he must engage in some psychological repression—he must suppress his awareness of the truth of PPP when he is deliberating about actions.

As a fourth interpretation, Young may be trying to show that, although PPP is true, one should never sacrifice others because it turns out that the benefits one will obtain by doing so never in fact exceed the costs to oneself (442). Well, the costs of *what?* The costs of the action in question—that is, the act that constitutes the sacrifice of another? No—Young granted, or at least did not dispute, that it is possible that an individual act of sacrificing another person may benefit one more than it harms one (443–44), and he stresses that it is “practical principles, not simply particular acts,” that have the negative consequences he is discussing (446). But if the consequences under consideration are not consequences of a given action, then they cannot serve to show that *that action* is wrong. At most, they might show that something *else*—for instance, the “action” of “accepting PPP”—is wrong. But the latter idea was already discussed in the paragraph immediately above.

A fifth interpretation is that Young is implicitly moving to a new variant of ethical egoism, one in which it is *rules* of action, rather than particular actions, that are assessed for the degree to which they promote the agent's interests. On this view, you should *not* always do whatever most promotes your own interests; rather, you should perform the action that accords with *the general rule your acceptance of which* most promotes your own interests. (Compare the distinction between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism.) Though this would be an interesting move, I don't think we should accept it without

comment. We should ask why rule-egoism, rather than act-egoism, is the correct form of egoism—we should ask, for instance, whether and how Rand’s argument in “The Objectivist Ethics” leads to it. After all, we deliberate about actions, not rules—when making a decision, what one decides between is particular actions. If (some form of) egoism is true, why should one not choose the option, of those about which one is deliberating, that most serves one’s own interests? Act egoism appears to be the most natural form of egoism to hold.

So far I’ve been criticizing step 1 and, by extension, questioning the *relevance* of step 4, in (my formulation of) Young’s argument. Young may have a relevant point, if his aim is to shift to the rule-based form of egoism just described, and if he can convince us that this is otherwise the most plausible form of egoism. But now I want to move on to step 2, which I believe suffers from three problems.

In step 2, Young argues that once others become aware of your acceptance of PPP, they will refuse to trust you, and that this will interfere with your personal relationships. The reason others will distrust you is, presumably, that they will never be sure you aren’t about to attack or rob them. As Young says:

You aren’t going to hang out with your neighbor, let alone seek out friendship or solidarity with her . . . if you think they just might kill or maim you if there is enough to gain. (447)

The first problem with this argument is that, when other people correctly understand your Prudent Predation principles, they will know that you believe predation is prudent only in certain special, unusual circumstances—circumstances which (they will usually be able to ascertain) you are not presently in. Your neighbor may well know that you stand to gain nothing from killing him, so he may know that you are not going to kill him, just as surely as he would if you believed that murder is always wrong. Admittedly—and, I think, importantly—most people would nevertheless feel some discomfort about your attitude towards them and would not want to befriend you. But this would not be because they were really afraid you were going to kill them. It would be because they would find your attitude

towards others morally repugnant. (Compare: I would not befriend a Nazi, even though, as a non-Jewish white man, I know that the Nazi does not want to send *me* to the gas chambers.) Now, one might think that this is enough to support Young's point—it's not in your interests to accept the Prudent Predation Principle, albeit for a reason different from the one Young gives. But most of those who would find PPP repugnant would probably also find *ethical egoism* repugnant (particularly since ethical egoism seems to imply PPP). And while there might be some who would find act-egoism but not rule-egoism repugnant, I doubt that this would be a common attitude. Therefore, it looks as though we have the same reason not to accept egoism as we have not to accept PPP.

A second problem is that the prudent predator might simply restrict the class of people he considers candidates for predation in such a way as to exclude those he wants to befriend. He might accept a variant of PPP in which, for example, one only preys on members of a particular race, or on people with whom one has no personal relationships, or on people from other communities. Regrettably, it appears that moral codes of this kind have often been adopted in human history; nevertheless, such moral codes are equally repugnant as the unqualified form of PPP.

Finally, there are certain kinds of predation that do not cause distrust in others, because they are socially accepted. Return to my example of the welfare-state politicians (Huemer 2002, 265). Most people in our society accept the government's wealth-redistributing programs, as well as various other rights-violating activities, as being morally legitimate. Consequently, they *don't* feel any particular mistrust towards people who support those programs. Left-wing politicians have little difficulty finding friends among other leftists (and even some rightists). It is true that distrust of politicians abounds, but this is not because of the wealth-redistribution programs. And certainly citizens who *vote* for such politicians are rarely distrusted on those grounds. Yet, on the Objectivist view (as well as my own), the rights-violations committed by the government are extremely serious and extensive—Ted Kennedy is far more guilty than any petty thief.

The Mysteries of Agent-Neutral Value

Young claims several advantages for the agent-relative conception of value, as opposed to the agent-neutral, or absolute, conception. First:

One of the fundamental advantages of a purely agent-relative view . . . is that, on such a view, value to an agent is identical to the rather uncontroversial, ordinary, natural properties that constitute benefit to agents. (Young 2004, 452)

The argument here seems to be that ethical naturalism is open to the agent-relativist but not to the absolutist. I don't see why he says this. Most ethical naturalists are not agent-relativists; indeed, most don't even consider such a view.¹ Ethical naturalism does face serious objections, including the Open Question Argument (recently revived by Horgan and Timmons 1992) as well as objections to its account of moral knowledge (Huemer 2000). If these objections refute a naturalistic account of absolute value, then why would they not also refute a naturalistic account of agent-relative value? And if they don't refute a naturalistic account of absolute value, then why shouldn't the absolutist embrace naturalism?

Second, Young finds the motivating power of absolute value mysterious:

[H]ow is it that benefit-to-an-agent *inherently* reaches out in some distinctive normative respect to each and every person equally . . . ?² (Young 2004, 452)

This might be the familiar Hume/Mackie objection that mere awareness of a fact cannot motivate action (Hume 1975, appendix I; Mackie 1977, 40–41). If so, I do not see what it has to do with agent-neutral versus agent-relative conceptions of value. Hume and Mackie assume (a) that moral values are inherently motivating, and (b) that mere knowledge of a fact cannot be inherently motivating (motivation always requires a *desire*). They conclude that accepting a moral value is not merely recognizing a fact. Now, either of these assumptions might

be (and has been) disputed. What is not clear to me is why an agent-relative or agent-neutral conception of value would be relevant—why, for example, should one think knowledge of a relational fact to be more liable to have intrinsic motivating force than knowledge of a non-relational fact? Alternately, Young's point might be that he finds it mysterious that knowledge of facts about absolute value should provide *good reasons* for action. But again, I do not see the relevance of absolute versus relational theories of value. One might well wonder—and this, too, is a point that Hume and Mackie would push—whether mere knowledge of any fact can provide good reasons for action; but why should one think that knowledge of a *relational* fact is, by virtue of the fact's relational character, more capable of providing good reasons for action than knowledge of a non-relational fact?

Third, Young finds it odd that in some cases, a non-relational fact—a certain state of affairs being (absolutely) good—should supervene on a relational fact—an event's benefitting some person. I don't see what is odd about this. On the absolutist conception, value is a property that (sometimes) attaches to states of affairs (i.e., some states of affairs are good). Some states of affairs involve things standing in relationships. Why shouldn't value attach to those states of affairs?

Fourth, Young refers to Occam's Razor. The argument here seems to be that (a) even the absolutist accepts the existence of agent-relative value, and (b) a theory with only agent-relative value is simpler than a theory with agent-relative value *and* agent-neutral value. As a rule, I don't find this sort of appeal to simplicity persuasive in philosophy; it just strikes me as irrelevant. But be that as it may, it is unclear how agent-relative value is supposed to fare differently from agent-neutral value under Young's argument. Moral skeptics argue against the existence of *any* kind of moral facts, on the basis of Occam's Razor. If we should reject agent-neutral value for this reason, why should we not equally reject agent-relative value, along with all moral facts?

One last, incidental point before moving on: Young mischaracterizes the notion of absolute value when he writes:

[A]bsolute or agent-neutral value is such that . . . if a token of

it is valuable to one person then, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, it is equally valuable to others. (Young 2004, 453)

The mistake here is construing absolute value as merely a form of agent-relative value—i.e., interpreting absolute value as value *relative to* every agent. The idea of absolute value is the idea that something's being good is not relative—not even relative to everyone. Compare the absolutist conception of truth: the idea that truth is absolute is not the idea that some propositions are true *for everyone*; rather, the truth of a proposition is not relative to anyone. The logical form of “*p* is true” is such that the phrase “for me” cannot meaningfully be appended to it.

Why Agent-Neutral Value?

Young asks why my view of the absolute, intrinsic value of every person is better than the egoistic view:

Why would this do more or better work than, say, egoistic natural sympathy (or the various hard-wired pleasures and functionalities associated with human social interaction) in establishing good reasons to have concern and respect for others? (453)

One answer to this is that the natural-sympathy view entails that other people's rights depend on how I feel about them. It implies that, if I didn't feel sympathy towards someone, then that person wouldn't have any rights (at least, he would have no right not to be harmed by *me*). This result seems wrong. And it seems that this might be a practical problem and not just a theoretical one, because there are many cases in which one person feels little or no sympathy towards another. For instance, racists feel little sympathy towards members of other races, and most of us have little feeling towards total strangers. But other races and strangers still have just as strong rights as our friends do.

Another problem is that the natural-sympathy view seems to imply that others would have just as strong *positive* rights (rights to be helped by us) as they have *negative* rights (rights not to be harmed by us). If

I naturally care about the well-being of others, then it would seem that I have as much reason, in fact the *same* reason, to help them increase their well-being as I have to refrain from lowering it.

It may be that the sort of view Young has in mind is not limited to natural sympathy—his parenthetical remark suggests that other natural sentiments might be brought into play. In that case, I think that we would have to look at particular proposals individually in order to assess whether any strategy of this kind succeeds.

I now want to conclude with some general remarks about the nature of the dispute between absolute and agent-relative conceptions of value. I think the remarks in this and the preceding section have really been incidental to the dispute so far, much as it might initially appear otherwise. I think that the dispute is a *logical* or *conceptual* dispute, which concerns the right way of understanding the concept of moral value. Absolutists hold that moral value is a monadic property; agent-relativists hold that it is dyadic (and identical with the relation of *benefitting*). It seems to me that this *kind* of dispute could not be resolved by the sort of remarks that Michael Young and I have just exchanged. The concept of moral value is either *necessarily* monadic, or *necessarily* relational; the logical properties of a concept cannot be contingent. If I seem to myself to have a concept of non-relational value, then reflecting on the simplicity of a view which denies the existence of such a concept cannot move me. Likewise, if you seem to yourself to have no such concept, then nothing I tell you about the “work” that such a concept would do can move you.

I am not, then, arguing for an agent-neutral conception of value in something like the manner in which a scientist would argue for an unobserved entity postulated by a scientific theory. I am arguing that agent-relativists are *confused*, just as they should be arguing that I am confused. That may seem like an odd sort of dispute, but I think it is the nature of most disputes in philosophy. In any case, I tried to explain how the confusion would come about in my original article, where I distinguished three different statements, two of which are highly plausible and are easily confused with the agent-relative theory of value (Huemer 2002, 280–84).

I now want to propose three examples to show that we do

frequently use an agent-neutral conception of value. First, let's assume that the asteroid-impact theory of the extinction of the dinosaurs is correct. If the asteroid had not struck the Earth, then, the dinosaurs would probably still be roaming the planet, and there would probably be no intelligent life. So, one might conclude: *It's a good thing that the asteroid struck the Earth.* This is a perfectly normal use of the concept of value; it is not a particularly confused thought, nor is it a misuse of the word "good." Is it an agent-relative use? I don't think so. The point of the statement is not that the asteroid impact benefitted the speaker personally. The point is that intelligent life is better than unintelligent, dinosaur life, and so it is better that the event happened which allowed intelligent life to evolve, even though it destroyed a lot of dinosaurs. In the absence of intelligence, there would be no art, no science, no self-awareness, no acts of courage or kindness, none but the simplest and crudest of emotions, and so on —these seem to be reasons why intelligent life is better than dinosaur life. This would be true even if I personally had never existed, and it would be true on other planets, which might have other, non-human forms of intelligent life. Nor is the point merely that the asteroid impact was better *for humans*; it could equally well be said that it was worse *for* the dinosaurs. But the point is that *intelligent life matters more*, so, objectively, it was a good thing. Compare one of the standard objections to cultural relativism: some cultural mores really can be judged to be better than others, and this judgment cannot itself be understood as being relative to a culture. Similarly, some kinds of life can be judged to be more valuable than others, and this judgment cannot itself be understood as being relative to some individual life or form of life.

Second, I believe that the institution of slavery in America was extremely bad. But it did not harm *me* or anyone now living. Besides the fact that no one now living was directly a victim of slavery, there is the fact that, if the institution had not existed, then probably no actual individual now living would ever have existed. If slavery had not existed in America, then the whole subsequent part of American history would have been radically different. As a result, entirely different people would be here now. (To see this, notice that each individual person is the product of the union of a specific egg cell with

a specific sperm cell, which was one among many millions of sperm cells produced by the father; a different pair of cells would have produced a different person. And notice that if either of your parent's lives had gone even slightly differently prior to your conception, then almost certainly the particular egg and sperm cell from which you were created would not have been united, and so you wouldn't exist.) So, if anything, slavery *benefitted* me, by indirectly leading to my existence. But that really has nothing to do with the moral judgment about slavery. Indeed, it would strike us as bizarre were someone to adduce considerations of this *kind* in arguing about whether slavery was bad.

Third, some environmentalists believe that human beings are using up natural resources at such a rate that in, let's say, 200 years, human beings will experience massive shortages, which will cause the world economy to collapse and perhaps cause major international tensions. Suppose, hypothetically, that this is true. It would be natural to say about such an eventuality: *That would be terrible*. But it won't be terrible in its effects on *me*. I know I'll be long dead then, and so will everyone I care about. Even if the environmentalists are right, I'll still be able to finish my life in comfort, and presumably, no matter what (plausible) theory of self-interest one takes, things that go on long after I am gone will not retroactively benefit or harm me. So, on the agent-relative theory, why should I think the event terrible?

All of these examples are, in my opinion, paradigmatic uses of the concept of value. None of them is a particularly odd or puzzling usage from a commonsense standpoint. And none of them is a judgment about how something benefits or harms the speaker (nor all people, nor all living things). So it is difficult for me to see the motivation, on the face of it, for the claim that the concept of value is inherently agent-relative.

Notes

1. Sturgeon (1985), Railton (1986), and Moore (1992) are representative naturalists.

2. Here, Young is assuming that, on the absolutist view, each person's welfare has absolute value, in addition to its value to the person in question.

References

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