Three Realistic Principles for Nurturing Ethical Prosocial Behavior

Thomas G. Plante

(Santa Clara University and Stanford University School of Medicine, Santa Clara, USA; tplante@scu.edu)
ORCID: 0000-0001-5314-2991

Abstract: The world is in trouble with numerous significant challenges to life and society such as climate change, divisive politics, economic disparity, war, racism and discrimination, and violence. At the core of these issues is human behavior and in particular, ethical decision making. The purpose of this reflection is to underscore three practical principles to encourage more prosocial behavior by (a) embracing the reality of egoism, (b) finding ways to merge egoism with the common good, and (c) socially engineer ethical behavior that benefits society. Considering ethical decision making and nurturing prosocial behavior in a realistic manner provides at least some hope for relieving the many difficulties that our society faces.

Keywords: Egoism; common good; ethical behavior; prosocial behavior; ethics.

I. Introduction

The world is experiencing deep suffering and is troubled in diverse ways (Anderson 2015; Bennett 2019): rapid and unprecedented climate change, divisive and extreme political conflicts, war, racism and discrimination, frequent gun violence, crime, widening economic disparity, and a global immigration and refugee crises have taken their toll and are threatening our survival (Anderson & Anderson 2014; Sleeman et al. 2019; Trenin 2020). What these serious societal problems have in common is the contribution of problematic and intentional human behavior. At their core, these troubles are ethical problems, as individuals and groups of people choose to behave in ways that either contribute to these serious challenges making them worse or potentially acting in ways to help relieve them (Biglan 2015; Morscher 1998; Plante, 2024a; Plante 2024b).

All societal problems that threaten us the most and make daily news headlines are ethical issues involving human decision making and resultant behavior. Unfortunately, few people have any training in ethical decision making and moral philosophy, which are the foundation of applied ethics (i.e., examine moral problems in real-world situations

and apply ethical theories and principles to address them) (Mizzoni 2017; Plante 2024b). Even if they had sufficient training, quality and thoughtful ethical education does not guarantee better ethical decision making or better behavioral outcomes (Klugman & Stump 2006; Watts et al. 2017). Knowledge does not always translate into actual desired behavior change. Much more is needed (Baykara et al. 2015; Steele et al. 2016).

The myriad approaches to ethics and moral decision making can overwhelm the average person, even if they are highly motivated to seek out ethical education and guidance. For example, classic and time-tested general approaches to ethical decision making that emerged from centuries of moral philosophical reflections include, but are not limited to, the utilitarian, absolute moral rules, virtue, egoism, subjectivism, cultural relativism, justice, social contract, and the common good (Mizzoni 2017; Plante 2024a). Most organizational and institutional codes of ethics highlight a virtue approach that underscores aspirational values and principles such as competence, honesty, transparency, responsibility, integrity, and responsibility (Borysowski et al. 2021; Knapp & Fingerhut 2024). Knowing about these ethical decision-making approaches can be helpful but applying them to everyday matters in a productive and consistent manner is difficult to do and sustain (Plante 2024a).

A careful review of the various well-established approaches to ethics suggests that most ethical decisions and resultant behavior can be categorized as based on either egoism or the common good (Liu 2024; Mangone 2020; Plante 2024a; Weiß et al. 2022). Egoism reflects on the question, "What is in my best interest?" The common good approach addresses the question, "What is in the best interest of the community?" (Plante 2024a; Rothstein 2022; Tilley 2022; Walsh 2024). Thus, ethical decision making considers one's own needs and desires versus those of others. This fundamental question of selfish versus non-selfish decisions seems to be at the core of human behavior. Do we act in our own best interests, or do we act in the interest of the broader community? Although there are typical tensions between these interests, our task for a better world must consider strategic ways to merge them, so that what is good for me is also good for my community and the world (Bussen et al. 2024; Marques 2024). Perhaps this is the key to better ethical decisions that are good for our world.

The challenge to secure better ethical decisions is to design problem-solving methods where egoism and the common good can overlap yet not oppose each other. For example, someone might wish to donate a large sum of money for a good cause to help their community. However, their motivations for donating the money might be for attention and praise by their community members or for a helpful tax write off. Thus, they may act in a generous manner that helps their community but do so for self-centered or egotistical reasons. This might be referred to as altruism in the service of narcissism, but it is a win-win situation for both the individual and the community at large (Drea et al. 2021; Otterbring et al. 2021).

Taking public moral stances or making donations to support those who are

marginalized and oppressed is another good example. Someone may make efforts to help and support people who are struggling and suffering (e.g., the homeless and the poor) but do so to attract attention to themselves or to virtue signal to others (Wallace et al., 2020; Westra 2021). Again, their efforts may help their community, but they also help themselves. Another example is people wishing to feed the homeless during end-of-year holiday seasons (e.g., Thanksgiving, Christmas). They may feel good about themselves in doing so and perhaps tell people about their generous charitable activities or post photos of themselves doing so on social media. While it may seem crass or tacky to brag about one's charitable activities or views (even if packaged in a subtle humble-bragging manner), this behavior may still be a win-win situation in that homeless individuals get fed and supported and those doing the feeding feel virtuous about themselves.

Of keen interest herein is the premise that the role of egoism (self-interest) in decision making is often underestimated. After teaching ethics to graduate students and postdoctoral fellows at Stanford University Medical School as well as undergraduate students at Santa Clara University for over 30 years, it became apparent that egoism is strongly considered in all ethical decision making. People may choose to act or not on these considerations (i.e., egoism impulses), but they are always seriously considered as they reflect on how to act and solve ethical dilemmas.

Perhaps we should pragmatically and realistically acknowledge this fact and not pretend that people act, or should act, in truly selfless ways. People may donate their time and resources to those in need to feel good about themselves, to brag or virtue signal to others, for tax write offs, to relieve guilt, or many other purposes. People may sacrifice to support their children, elderly parents, or friends and neighbors, to relieve guilt for their selfish impulses or maintain social status within their communities. People may choose to be honest in their work and personal lives but do so to avoid guilt and the fear of getting caught. Perhaps interior motives, conscious or not, are not as important as actual behaviors. Perhaps we should focus on encouraging people, even for egotistical and selfish reasons, to do good in the world and engage in behaviors that make the world better.

How can we do so? There are three critical principles to consider. First, we should acknowledge that egoism is a strong consideration for people as they make important ethical decisions. People will consider their own best interests and typically act in ways that are favorable to themselves or their immediate loved ones. Second, we should work to find ways where 'helping others helps ourselves' and then nurture these prosocial behaviors without any conflicts with self-interest. It is helpful to reinforce others for their good works with praise or other incentives. Third, research in social engineering (i.e., influencing people towards desired outcomes especially social and ecological sustainability) suggests that it is a powerful model for behavior change (Plante 2004c). In other words, if we design environments that help the community without relying on individual motivation and willpower, we can be more successful in acting in ethical ways

that help the community. Additional elaboration and reflections on and examples of each principle are now presented. Method-wise, these ideas were inspired by my decades of experience with this particular notion of ethics in progress.

II. Principle 1: Assume Egoism Is Part of Every Decision

Although people may wish to present themselves as selfless and gracious by putting the needs of others before themselves, this is generally not true for most people who tend to act in their self-interest. If we normalize egoism as a fact of life, then we can use it to guide people towards better ethical decisions. For example, just encouraging people to spend their time, energy, and resources on an important prosocial cause (e.g., recycling, or climate change) will likely not result in sustainable prosocial behavioral change without incentives and reinforcement. Addressing egoism directly in terms of why making ethical decisions for the common good is also good for *you* personally would be a more *realistic* approach (i.e., see things as they really are and deal with them in a practical way). Appealing to egoism interests provides the leverage one might need for people to also consider behaviors that help others. Let us consider two examples where egoism can be used to improve the community.

II.1. Example 1: Joe

Joe is wealthy but has no family relationships. He is an only child, his parents have passed away, and he never married or had children. He generally lives frugally and enjoys low-cost hobbies. Now that he is retired, he is interested in finding smart ways to spend his money after a successful high-tech career. Joe decides to donate his many resources to causes that support children, admitting that he gets more from his philanthropy than those who directly benefit from it. Additionally, he claims that the tax write off is appealing, and he is proud to see his name on hospital wings, clinics, and buildings saying that maybe his legacy will live on after his passing. While Joe is generous with his philanthropy, he freely admits that he richly benefits from his efforts.

II.2. Example 2: Pam

Pam is very active in her local church volunteering for various committees and activities. She helps manage the church-sponsored food pantry and soup kitchen for the homeless, teaches in the Sunday school program, manages the visiting of the sick and elderly ministry, and seems to be willing to assist in the needs of the church community whenever needed. The clerics and parishioners all report and often joke that the church would collapse if Pam wasn't around to make everything work. Pam admits that she enjoys helping, and that it gives her life meaning and purpose. Her husband passed away several years ago, and her adult children live far away such that she only sees them for major holidays. Pam is semi-retired and has time on her hands. She feels that her volunteer

activities allow her to feel useful, rewarded, and loved. She states that she would likely be pretty depressed if she wasn't so involved. Her generous spirit and commitment help her community, and she freely admits that they help her directly as well.

III. Principle 2: Find Ways to Merge the Common Good with Egoism

To survive as a community and a world, we must be highly attentive to the common good (i.e., collective welfare over individual well-being). The numerous serious problems of the world could lead to potential human extinction or at the least terrible suffering on a grand scale. We have the capacity to either destroy our planet and everything in it or work hard to preserve it for everyone. Finding ways to help ourselves by helping others is key to sustainable and positive behavior change for the common good. Thus, wherever we can merge our interests with the interests of others will likely result in more positive prosocial behaviors that help everyone. Let us consider two examples of merging the common good with egoism.

III.1. Example 1: Bernie

Bernie's community offers a generous recycling program where he can get money for various types of metal. He retired, divorced, and his children live far away. He looks for discarded metal in his rural community and is excited to find it – like treasure that directly provides him with extra money. He also enjoys helping to clean up his community. He often brags about how much money he makes with this activity and is proud that he is helping the community at the same time.

III.2. Example 2: Marie

Marie is very active in the gun-control movement. She works with local political action groups to support candidates who are interested in gun control and talks frequently about the problem of gun violence. She lost a niece to gun violence during a school shooting and a beloved neighbor in a domestic violence incident. She lives in a state and community where everyone seems to own guns. She feels nervous shopping and going about her daily life, as she believes that violent incidents are common enough to potentially harm her at any time. Because she works with the public in a popular restaurant within a large shopping area, she further feels that anyone at any time could be a perpetrator and harm her. Marie admits that her volunteer efforts regarding gun- control measures (common good) help her feel that she is doing all she can to help keep people safe, including herself (egoism).

IV. Principle 3: Socially Engineered Good Ethics

Socially engineered behavior that is in the interest of the common good is especially important, as it avoids the challenges of depending on people's motivation and goodwill. When behavior is properly socially engineered, the community does not need to convince anyone of better behavior or depend on people's goodwill, selfless desires and selfless behaviors. For example, if cars were designed to operate when drivers blew into a device to prove that they were not inebriated, then drunk-driving car crashes would no longer be a problem for society. If we use incentives to make it easy to recycle and harder to throw things away (e.g., charging nothing for home recycling services but a premium on garbage collection), then recycling would be more popular and common. Some communities have embraced social engineering efforts with great success. Let us look at two examples.

IV.1. Example 1: Tokyo

With a population of about 40 million people, Tokyo is the most populous metropolitan area in the world. Yet, it has essentially no trash or graffiti and is remarkably safe with minimal crime. A combination of societal expectations, traditions, and rules (i.e., a cultural ethos valuing orderliness in public spaces) has created an environment that is remarkable for their social engineering efforts to enjoy a clean, safe, and efficient metropolis, which is the envy of the world.

IV.2. Example 2: Matt

Matt needs to purchase a new car. He decides that buying an electric car makes good sense for him and the environment. He lives in a community that encourages sustainability, and his employer provides both free recharging and preferred parking for employees' electric vehicles. A state-sponsored rebate program also makes the car more affordable. Due to these combined social engineering efforts, Matt lowers his carbon footprint (common good) and personally benefits from advantages gained by doing so (egoism).

V. Conclusion

The world is in dire straits with so many serious and life-threatening, ever-worsening problems thwarting our very existence (Anderson & Anderson 2014; Sleeman et al. 2019, Trenin 2020). These troubles are all due to intentional and problematic human behavior that ultimately are ethical issues (Biglan 2015; Morscher 1998; Plante 2024a, 2024b). It is imperative that we do all that we can do to encourage prosocial ethical behavior for the common good to manage these challenges and offer hope to reverse their concerning trajectories. We must be realistic in our strategies for positive behavior change that are more prosocial and take into consideration the important and common role of egoism in

our decisions.

Wherever we can merge egoism with the common good, and thus merge what is best for the individual with what is best for the community, we will more likely be successful with our efforts to encourage behaviors that help our world and minimize damaging activities. Socially engineered efforts are also likely to be more successful with behavior change, as they avoid depending on individual goodwill, motivation, and willpower. These three important and realistic ethical principles should guide our efforts to encourage more prosocial behavior moving forward. Encouraging ethical behavior among everyone to act for the common good, as well as their own best interest, may be our only hope for a better future for all humanity.

References

Anderson R. E. (Ed.) 2015. *World Suffering and Quality of Life*. Springer Netherlands.

Anderson R. E. 2014. "Suffering on a Global Scale," in Idem, *Human Suffering and Quality of Life: Conceptualizing Stories and Statistics* (pp. 49–68). Dordrecht – Heidelberg – New York – London: Springer Nature.

Baykara Z. G., Demir S. G., & Yaman S. 2015. "The Effect of Ethics Training on Students Recognizing Ethical Violations and Developing Moral Sensitivity," *Nursing Ethics* 22(6):661–675. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733014542673

Bennett O. 2019. *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Biglan A. 2015. *The Nurture Effect: How the Science of Human Behavior Can Improve Our Lives and our World*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Borysowski J., Ehni H. J., & Górski A. 2021. "Ethics Codes and Medical Decision Making," *Patient Education and Counseling* 104(6):1312–1316. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec.2020.10.034

Bussen T. J., Biggs H., & Bono T. 2024. *Enlightened Self-Interest: Individualism, Community, and the Common Good*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Drea K. M., Brown M., & Sacco D. F. 2021. "Functional Altruism Among Agreeable and Narcissistic Donors: Evidence from Crowdsourced Fundraisers," *Psihologijske Teme* 30(1):125–143. https://doi.org/10.31820/pt.30.1.7

Klugman C. & Stump B. 2006. "The Effect of Ethics Training upon Individual Choice," *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 30(02):181–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770600617703

Knapp S. J. & Fingerhut R. 2024. *Practical Ethics for Psychologists: A Positive Approach*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Liu Y. 2024. "The Influencing Factors of Altruism and Egoism," *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 26:567–571. https://doi.org/10.54097/kxq67452

Mangone E. 2020. *Beyond the Dichotomy between Altruism and Egoism: Society, Relationship, and Responsibility*. Charlotte, NC: IAP.

Marques J. F. 2024. "Leadership Today: Balancing Ego and Altruism," *The Journal of Values-based Leadership* 17(2):5. https://doi.org/10.22543/1948-0733.1494

Mizzoni J. 2017. *Ethics: The Basics*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Morscher E. 1998. *Applied Ethics in a Troubled World*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Otterbring T., Festila A., & Folwarczny M. 2021. "Selfless or Selfish? The Impact of Message Framing and Egoistic Motivation on Narcissists' Compliance with Preventive Health Behaviors during COVID-19," *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 2:100023. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cresp.2021.100023

Plante T. G. 2024a. *Living Ethically in an Unethical World: Doing the Right Thing,* Second Edition. San Diego, CA: Cognella.

Plante T. G. 2024b. *Living Better with Spiritually Based Strategies that Work: Workbook for Spiritually Informed Therapy* (SIT). San Diego, CA: Cognella.

Plante T. G. 2024c. *Health Behavior Change: Proven Strategies for a Longer and Healthier Life.* San Diego, CA: Cognella.

Rothstein J. K. 2022. "Egoism and the Limits of Ethics," *Journal of Mental Health and Social Behaviour* 4(1):161–166. https://doi.org/10.33790/jmhsb1100161

Sleeman K. E., De Brito M., Etkind S., Nkhoma K., Guo P., Higginson I. J., Gomes B., & Harding R. 2019. "The Escalating Global Burden of Serious Health-Related Suffering: Projections to 2060 by World Regions, Age Groups, and Health Conditions," *The Lancet Global Health* 7(7):e883–e892. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(19)30172-X

Steele L. M., Mulhearn T. J., Medeiros K. E., Watts L. L., Connelly S., & Mumford M. D. 2016. "How Do We Know What Works? A Review and Critique of Current Practices in Ethics Training Evaluation," *Accountability in Research* 23(6):319–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2016.1186547

Tilley J. J. 2022. "Does Psychological Egoism Entail Ethical Egoism?" *The Review of Metaphysics* 76(1):115–133. https://doi.org/10.1111/theo.12440

Trenin D. 2020. "It Will Get Worse Before It Gets Worse," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 17:86–93.

Wallace E., Buil I., & De Chernatony L. 2020. "Consuming Good on Social Media: What Can Conspicuous Virtue Signalling on Facebook Tell Us about Prosocial and Unethical Intentions?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 162(3):577–592. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3999-7

Walsh R. 2024. "Common Good Constitutionalism and the Individual – A Property Perspective," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 69(1):77–87.

Watts L. L., Medeiros K. E., Mulhearn T. J., Steele L. M., Connelly S., & Mumford M. D. 2017. "Are Ethics Training Programs Improving? A Meta-Analytic Review of Past and Present Ethics Instruction in the Sciences," *Ethics & Behavior* 27(5):351–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2016.1182025

Weiß M., Iotzov V., Zhou Y., & Hein G. 2022. "Th Bright and Dark Sides of Egoism," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13:1054065. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.1054065

Westra E. 2021. "Virtue Signaling and Moral Progress," *Philosophy & Public Affair* 49(2):156–178. https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12187