

A critique of refined egoism

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Abstract: As an ideological value system and moral proposition, refined egoism doesn't emerge accidentally, it is a product of human society at a specific historical stage of development. It manifests itself in the pursuit of self-interest in a "refined" manner. Extremely destructive, refined egoism constantly challenges the bottom line of moral standards, triggers conflicts in social relations, and distorts people's values. This paper explores the causes of refined egoism from the perspectives of family, school and society, and effectively addresses it from the dimensions of traditional Chinese ethics, socialist core values and the Marxist view of justice and interest, so as to guide people to establish correct values.

Keywords: refined egoism; morality; Marxist view of justice and interest; socialist core values

1 Introduction

Refined egoism is a product of social and historical development with profound historical origins. Refined egoism is usually characterized by high intelligence, worldliness, sophistication, good performance and cooperation skills. Its practitioners disguise and perform to make self-serving behaviors seem reasonable or even noble [1]. While people are alert to various external manifestations of "refinement", they can't ignore that the inherent essence of such behaviors is egoism, which is contrary to the requirements of socialism and collectivism [2]. An in-depth identification of refined egoism, an analysis of its social harms and an exploration of its root causes are of great significance for consciously criticizing and effectively resisting this tendency.

2 Perspective: the prominent problems of refined egoism

As a more concealed and sophisticated form of self-serving conduct, refined egoism is essentially different from traditional overt egoism. Instead of pursuing personal interests crudely, it skillfully takes advantage of existing institutional frameworks, moral norms and even social expectations as a cloak, rendering its behaviors appear legally compliant and morally standard on the surface. However, such superficial "refinement" and "rationality" actually constitute potential damage and distortion to social relations, baseline of morality and values, posing a profound potential threat to the overall harmony, stability and long-term healthy development of society.

2.1 Conflicts in social relations

The social relation conflicts caused by refined egoism are mainly reflected in two aspects: interpersonal conflicts and conflicts between individuals and society. The former mainly brings about the opposition between "others" and "self". "Others" are treated as means to achieve self-interest, while "self" is the ultimate goal of value. Individual-oriented refined egoism misinterprets the true meaning of human self-realization and self-development. Under the infiltration of refined egoism, the original intention of interpersonal communication changes quietly: from pure communication based on emotional resonance and mutual support to a utilitarian act solely pursuing the maximization of personal interests. People tend to calculate personal gains from each interaction, and adopt strategies such as concealing real intentions, exploiting

and betraying others to maximize their own interests, thus ignoring the value of building and maintaining deep interpersonal relationships. This short-sighted behavioral shift makes people focus excessively on personal gains and losses in social interactions, neglecting emotional bonds and shared well-being with others. Such self-centered driving force of communication weakens trust and cooperation among people, leading to long-term emotional alienation, triggering divergences and oppositions in interpersonal relationships, and further eroding the cornerstone of interpersonal harmony.

In terms of conflicts between individuals and society, people overemphasize personal interests, neglect collective interests, and even sacrifice the collective interests to maximize personal gains, thereby forming refined egoism that contradicts the Marxist view on justice and interest. This concept places the self at the center, deviates from mainstream social values, distorts normative outlooks on value, narrows vision and horizon, challenges the unity of individuals and the collective, and weakens social cohesion. Refined egoists harm public interests in a concealed way to seek private gains, reject the view of ethical motivation, and demonstrate rationality grounded in self-interest. For example, during the epidemic, some people openly violated epidemic prevention regulations, such as concealing travel history and refusing isolation, increasing the difficulty and risks of prevention and control and impairing public interests and legitimate rights and interests of others; corrupt officials flout laws, abuse power for bribery and corruption, privatize public resources, and damage the overall interests of society. These dishonest and immoral behaviors exert a profound negative impact on the relationship between individuals and society, leading to declined social trust, uneven resource distribution, weakened cohesion, and triggering social contradictions and conflicts.

2.2 Weakening of moral standards

Refined egoism is quietly eroding the moral foundation of society. It extremely emphasizes that personal interests are above all else, placing personal desires above social, family and personal morality, resulting in the serious neglect of the importance of professional ethics, family virtues and personal morality. Such neglect not only exists at the theoretical level, but also causes a serious weakening of moral standards in practice, dealing a huge blow to the social moral system.

In terms of personal morality, people's cognition has been seriously eroded by refined egoism. Wrong ideas such as "I would rather betray the world than let the world betray me", "money supremacy" and "profit-seeking" cloud the moral cognition of some people like fog, leading them to ignore the restrictions of social morality and ethics in the pursuit of personal interests and exhibit a "dual moral personality", becoming refined egoists. They flexibly adopt different moral standards and codes of conduct when facing different situations and objects, and resort to deception, lies and other improper means to pursue self-serving gains such as money, status and rights and interests. The traditional Chinese virtues of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustfulness, gentleness, kindness, respect, frugality and modesty" are replaced by selfishness, indifference, sophistication and unscrupulousness to achieve their goals. Refined egoism turns people into absolutely isolated individuals and hinders human socialization.

When the concept of refined egoism excessively permeates the family environment, it not only destroys the harmony and stability within the family, but also weakens the function and role of the family as a basic social unit. On the one hand, it seriously weakens the emotional bonds among family members and affects the construction of family traditions. Due to the overemphasis on personal interests, family members may dispute over resource allocation, power struggles and other issues. Such interest-based disputes seriously undermine the harmonious atmosphere of the family, alienate family ties, make the family lack warmth and support, and deviate the construction of family traditions from the track of harmony, tolerance and mutual assistance, thus affecting the long-term development of the whole family and even the clan. On the other hand, refined egoism breaks the inheritance chain of family virtues. As the essence of family culture, family virtues are precious treasures passed down from generation to generation. However, the conduct of refined egoists runs counter to

these virtues. Such egoists focus excessively on personal gains and losses and ignore the practice of traditional virtues such as filial piety, respect and unity, which serves as a negative example for the younger generation, making it difficult for them to form correct values and moral concepts, and further affecting the effective inheritance of family virtues.

"Morality is the foundation of a country." Physicians uphold medical ethics, teachers adhere to educational ethics, and all industries have their own professional ethics requirements. In the professional environment, refined egoists often excessively pursue personal interests, place personal gains and losses above professional ethics, and wantonly ignore the constraints and norms that should be strictly obeyed. They may abuse power for personal gain, trample on the principle of fair competition wantonly, and ignore the value of integrity. For example, teachers accept gifts and pay excessive attention to certain students; actors engage in tax evasion; members of different departments within a company fight and trip each other up, turning the workplace into a "palace battlefield". These behaviors not only seriously damage the fairness and harmony of the workplace environment, but also intensify the trust crisis among colleagues, making the whole working environment full of suspicion and hostility, and seriously affecting the cohesion and centripetal force of the organization.

2.3 Distortion of values

Values are an important part of the human spiritual world. The values a person holds determine his or her life. Healthy and correct values are a strong spiritual core for the all-round development of individuals and society. However, refined egoism has profoundly distorted individuals' outlook on life, worldview and moral values.

At the level of outlook on life, the prevalence of this ideology leads individuals to neglect care for others and social responsibility when pursuing personal achievements and satisfaction. It makes individuals short-sighted and extreme, turning them into refined egoists who only focus on immediate interests and pleasures while ignoring long-term life planning and the enrichment of the spiritual world. This biased value judgment restricts the all-round development of individual potential and makes interpersonal relationships cold and alienated.

In terms of world outlook, the self-centered concept of refined egoists makes it difficult for them to recognize the greatness of nature and the complexity of society. They blindly pursue self-interests, often ignore the balance and laws of nature, over-exploit resources and damage the environment, leading to an increasingly serious ecological crisis. At the same time, they ignore social fairness and justice, only care about their own gains and losses, and aggravate social inequality and contradictions. This world outlook undermines the harmonious coexistence between man and nature and threatens social stability and prosperity.

In terms of moral outlook, the conduct of refined egoists frequently transgresses the moral baseline. For personal interests, they don't hesitate to violate moral norms and even laws and regulations. Such distortion of moral outlook not only damages the social moral atmosphere, but also weakens its binding and guiding influence on human conduct. It makes people utilitarian and hypocritical, depriving them of the pursuit of and reverence for truth, goodness and beauty.

3 In-depth exploration: the causes of refined egoism

The essence of refined egoism is a concealed variant of egoism that employs sophisticated tactics to sever the dialectical unity of justice and interest for selfish desires. The rise of refined egoism stems not merely from external attention or focus, but is deeply rooted in people's daily life experiences and inner perceptions, thus arousing extensive resonance in moral cognition and emotional identity. Its emergence is neither accidental or abrupt, but an inevitable product of the interaction of multiple factors, including individual personality tendencies, the school moral education system and the overall edification of the social moral environment.

3.1 Insufficient individual moral cultivation

The prevalence of refined egoism is rooted in the lack of individual moral cultivation. Against the background of

rapid social changes, individuals without a solid foundation of moral cultivation find it difficult to make appropriate choices in a diversified and complex value system. This insufficiency of moral cultivation is not only reflected in the vague cognition of moral principles, but more deeply in the weak self-restraint ability in moral practice.

First, the weak moral discrimination ability is undoubtedly a fertile ground for the breeding and spread of refined egoism. In an era of multicultural integration and information explosion, negative values such as extreme individualism, utilitarianism, money worship and hedonism erode people's souls like hidden poisonous snakes. Centering on short-sightedness and selfishness, these negative values induce people to disregard overall social interests and place personal interests in the supreme position. They make people short-sighted and narrow-minded, only focusing on immediate gains and losses and personal honors and disgraces, while forgetting the due responsibilities and obligations as social members. This self-centered mode of thinking is the core of refined egoism, which makes people cold and selfish, devoid of compassion and care for others, as well as love and dedication to society. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the cultivation of moral discrimination ability and improve the ability to distinguish and judge various values to resist the erosion and temptation of these negative values.

Second, the weak self-restraint ability in moral practice deeply reflects the inherent moral defects and exerts extensive negative effects on individual behaviors and social morality. Specifically, refined egoists often completely ignore moral norms due to the excessive pursuit of personal interests. They hide their self-serving essence behind a pretense of upholding socialist core values and conforming to mainstream social ideology, while manipulating interpersonal interactions and making deliberate plans for personal ends, and even not hesitating to harm others' interests in exchange for their own temporary satisfaction [3]. Such disregard for moral norms directly leads them to ignore the social responsibilities as social members. More seriously, refined egoists also lack the necessary moral judgment and courage. Faced with complex moral situations, they often fail to make correct judgments, or even if they discern the correct moral direction, they lack sufficient courage to adhere to and practice it. The lack of such moral judgment and courage makes it difficult for them to effectively restrain themselves in behaviors, and easy to break through the moral baseline under the temptation of interests and act against conscience and moral principles.

3.2 Deficiencies in school moral education

School moral education is crucial, it carefully shapes students' characters, cultivates their social responsibilities, and guides them to establish correct value orientations, playing a vital role in individual growth, social harmony and cultural inheritance. Once deficiencies and shortcomings appear in school moral education, it will provide an opportunity for refined egoism.

At present, the education model of some schools has a significant short-sighted tendency. An overemphasis on the idea of "learning for employment" reduces students to mere tools for achieving financial independence, thus ignoring the core goal of education in promoting the all-round development of people. In this model, school education overemphasizes competition, scores and honors, leading to a single and utilitarian education environment. In this context, school moral education practice is deeply constrained by "scores first, education marginalized" and can't give full play to its effectiveness. Therefore, when students face setbacks, dilemmas or confusion in values, especially when their cognition goes astray in handling the relationship between personal and collective interests, between the individual self and the greater self, and without receiving timely and effective guidance, they are easily influenced by the thought of refined egoism in social life, thus weakening the actual effect of ideological and political education and posing a potential threat to the shaping and dissemination of mainstream social values [3].

Another aspect of the deficiencies in school moral education is the simplification of education methods. The core of

this problem is that the subjectivity of the educated is often ignored in the education process, failing to fully take into account individual differences and diversified needs of students. Although moral education methods have been innovated in recent years, they still generally tend to the traditional mode of rigid indoctrination. Educators often position themselves as leaders of moral education, with classroom education as the main teaching mode, simply equating moral education with the imparting of moral knowledge, neglecting the cultivation of moral character, especially public morality, and taking academic grades as the sole evaluation standard. This single and rigid education method not only restricts students' moral thinking and innovative potential, fails to increase life wisdom in school education, but may also inadvertently promote the formation of refined egoism. In the process of passively accepting moral knowledge, if students lack opportunities for subjective moral practice and self-education in diverse environments such as family and society, they may be more inclined to prioritize personal interests and ignore the importance of social responsibility and collective interests.

3.3 Low social moral requirements

Low social moral requirements have become an important cause of the formation of refined egoism, which involves complex social and psychological mechanisms behind this phenomenon.

From a broad social perspective, if the rights and interests of moral contributors are not fully protected, and their spirit of selfless dedication doesn't win due recognition and feedback, it will undoubtedly erode the moral foundation of society. For example, people who donate blood selflessly can't get blood when in urgent need, or moral models cannot receive strong legal support when facing unfair treatment. These scenarios undoubtedly cast a shadow over the moral glory of society. Once the society lacks positive encouragement for moral behaviors and effective regulation for moral deficiencies, individuals are more inclined to make choices more beneficial to themselves, and the trend of refined egoism gradually rises in this atmosphere. In this context, people may excessively focus on personal gains and losses while ignoring compassion for others and the overall well-being of society, which will undoubtedly further accelerate the decline of moral standards.

From a psychological analysis, when the society generally neglects the lofty value of moral conduct, individuals find it difficult to form a profound identification with social responsibility and collective interests on the road of moral growth. This environment is easy to induce people to fall into the misunderstanding of self-centered thinking, excessively pursue personal interests, and ignore contributions to society and care for others. In such a psychological atmosphere, refined egoists gradually develop the characteristics of understanding human nature and being sophisticated in dealing with the world, exploiting institutional loopholes, pursuing short-term gains, and even sacrificing the overall interests of others and society in exchange for so-called "absolute freedom". The root of this mentality lies in the wrong understanding of the relationship between individuals and society, as well as the distorted cognition of the relationship between self-realization and others' interests. Such cognitive deviation further aggravates the breeding and spread of refined egoism.

4 Solution: countermeasures against refined egoism

The values and behavioral patterns of refined egoism have exerted a huge impact on social harmony and individual development. To effectively address this problem, we need to integrate traditional Chinese ethics, socialist core values and the Marxist view of justice and interest, and adopt effective measures to jointly curb the spread of refined egoism, so as to maintain social harmony and stability and promote the all-round development of individuals.

4.1 Promote benevolence and abandon refined egoism

In an in-depth exploration on how to constrain refined egoism with the benevolent spirit of traditional Chinese ethics, we need to carefully analyze its core values and practical paths.

Benevolence, as the core of Confucian ethics, emphasizes taking loving others as the foundation and advocates that

individuals take the well-being of others into their own considerations, forming a value orientation of "benevolence" and "altruism". In response to the prevalence of refined egoism, the primary task is to reshape individual values, guide them to break free from the narrow confines of self-centeredness and embrace the broad mind of "establish others as you establish yourself; help others succeed as you attain your own success". Starting with education, we should deeply integrate the doctrine of benevolence into daily teaching and practice. In curriculum design, targeted teaching on benevolence and altruism ought to be incorporated. Vivid materials such as historical stories and biographies of famous people can be adopted to make individuals deeply understand that true success and happiness stem not only from personal satisfaction and achievements, but also from promoting social harmony and enhancing others' well-being. Meanwhile, social practice, voluntary services and other activities enable individuals personally experience the happiness and sense of accomplishment brought by helping others, so as to cultivate their moral consciousness that transcends self-interest.

Second, promoting the spirit of benevolence plays a core role in restraining refined egoism. To build an altruistic ethos, multi-pronged measures are required. On the one hand, establish a sound honor system to commend outstanding individuals who perform well in helping others and building social harmony, so as to set positive examples and stimulate social altruistic enthusiasm. On the other hand, strengthen institutional design, improve laws and regulations concerning acts that harm public interests and damage social harmony, clearly define their legal responsibilities, and enforce the law strictly to protect public interests by legal means. At the same time, strengthen supervision to ensure that the system does not become a mere formality and truly plays its role, forming a set of internal and external restraint mechanisms to jointly build a solid line of defense against refined egoism and promote the society to move towards a more harmonious and progressive direction.

4.2 Practice core values and resist refined egoism

Core values serve as the spiritual banner of a country and a nation. They condense the value pursuit and common ideal of all citizens, and are an important spiritual force leading social progress. They cover national-level value goals including prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony; social-level value orientations embodied by freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law; and individual-level civic norms comprising patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness.

From the national perspective based on socialist core values, resisting refined egoism needs to strengthen national responsibility and safeguard the common interests of society. The state needs to take the lead, leverage legal and judicial forces to clearly define and punish acts that infringe on public interests, and protect citizens' rights and interests from infringement. At the same time, deepen international cooperation, advocate the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind, demonstrate China's commitment as a responsible major country, and jointly address global challenges. The education system also needs to integrate national core values, strengthen citizens' patriotism and sense of responsibility, and cultivate their overall view beyond personal self-interest.

From the social level of socialist core values, resisting refined egoism requires strengthening social fairness and justice to foster a social atmosphere of unity and cooperation. It is essential to improve the social security system, protect citizens' basic rights, narrow the resource gap, and reduce the incentives for selfish conduct. We should also strengthen the cultivation of social morality, promote the spirit of integrity and friendliness, and guide people to consider and respect others' interests when pursuing personal well-being. And then, through social organizations and public welfare actions, citizens' enthusiasm for participation can be stimulated to jointly safeguard social public interests. This will consolidate strong social momentum to firmly resist refined egoism and advance social harmony and progress.

Starting from the individual dimension of socialist core values, individuals need to deepen moral cultivation, cultivate patriotism and a sense of responsibility to resist refined egoism. Individuals should uphold the principles of integrity and

friendliness, abide by the moral bottom line, and refrain from harming others for self-interest. Meanwhile, they ought to actively enhance social responsibility, participate in voluntary services and social public welfare, and contribute to social harmony and stability. In the face of interests, individuals should develop a holistic vision, transcend personal interests, place the overall social interests first, so as to effectively resist refined egoism in personal actions and promote the realization of social fairness and justice.

4.3 Balance interests and morality to surpass refined egoism

Based on "real individuals", the Marxist view of justice and interest neither advocates excessive "interest" nor partiality for absolute "justice"; the core connotation lies in the multi-dimensional unity of the relationship between "justice" and "interest".

First, uphold the dialectical unity of personal interests and collective interests. In the process of pursuing the coexistence of personal interests and collective interests, the key to resisting refined egoism is to accurately grasp the balance between the two. Individuals should deeply understand that the stability of collective interests is a prerequisite for the realization of personal interests, so when seeking personal well-being, they must ensure that they do not harm collective interests. Strengthen individuals' sense of social responsibility and collective belonging, encouraging them to actively participate in collective affairs and dedicate themselves to collective well-being. In addition, it is crucial to adhere to the principles of fairness and justice in collective decision-making, aiming to safeguard personal interests and create an atmosphere of "all for one, one for all" in the whole society.

Second, adhere to the dialectical unity of morality and interests. In the process of pursuing interests, individuals must stick to the moral bottom line and resolutely refrain from sacrificing the interests of others or society. They should consciously resist decadent ideologies such as refined egoism and extreme individualism. By continuously deepening moral awareness and establishing correct values, individuals can uphold moral principles and make correct choices when facing the temptation of interests. At the same time, the society should actively create an atmosphere of advocating morality and resisting selfishness and refined egoism. Through positive incentives and rigorous institutional constraints, we can guide individuals to take into account moral responsibilities while pursuing personal interests, so as to find a real balance between morality and interests.

5 Conclusion

In the journey of examining and criticizing refined egoism, what we engage in is not a superficial analysis of a single behavioral pattern, but a profound exploration touching the core of social ethics and the true meaning of human nature. With high concealment and intellectual disguise, people who uphold refined egoism attempt to weave an unrealistic "dream of balance" between morality and self-interest, which is actually an infringement on the legitimate rights and interests of others and a serious provocation to social justice. To this end, we urgently need the unity and cooperation of all sectors of society, strengthen moral education, promote the spirit of selflessness. At the same time, we should leverage the dual forces of law and morality to resolutely curb the spread of refined egoism. Only in this way can we jointly safeguard social fairness and justice, promote the healthy growth and all-round development of individuals, and jointly build a more harmonious and progressive social blueprint.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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