

Ethical Egoism

1. What is Ethical Egoism?: Let's turn to another theory about the nature of morality: Ethical Egoism.

Ethical Egoism: The morally right action is the one that best promotes the agent's own interests (where "agent" refers to the individual performing the action)

Before we can understand this view, though, we will need to discuss another: psychological egoism. Let's take an aside to discuss that view.

2. Psychological Egoism: There is another view that is often confused with ethical egoism. Adding to this confusion is the fact that ethical egoists often *BASE ethical egoism* on the fact that *psychological* egoism is true.

Psychological Egoism: By nature, human beings do, as a matter of fact, tend to behave in whatever way they perceive as best promoting their own self-interest.

Basically, this theory says we are "hard-wired" to be selfish. People do in fact ALWAYS act in ways that are self-serving. In short, **altruism**—or, selfless action—is impossible.

Psychological vs. Ethical Egoism: So, whereas *ethical* egoism says that we OUGHT to be selfish, *psychological* egoism says only that we ARE in fact selfish.

Psychological Egoism Supports Ethical Egoism: Ethical egoists use *psychological* egoism to support their ethical view. How so? Well, if psychological egoism is true, then people CAN'T HELP but be selfish. Typically, however, we consider people as only having a moral obligation to do something (or not do something) if it is possible for them to do it (or avoid doing it). We say that "**ought**" implies "**can**". But if we CAN'T be motivated to look out for the interests of others, then clearly it is not the case that we OUGHT to do so.

So, the question becomes, **CAN we act in any way other than selfishly?**

Objection #1: Altruism Seems Possible: To most of us, it seems that we CAN act selflessly. All the time, we hear about people volunteering at hospitals, or

donating money to charities, or sacrificing their own life to save the lives of others. Surely these acts are not selfish ones?

Reply: We only do what we DESIRE to do: Psychological egoists typically reply to this by pointing out that people ONLY ever do what they DESIRE to do. No one has ever done something that they did not want to do—and this proves that psychological egoism is correct.

Objection #2: Desire-based actions are not necessarily self-interested: The idea that we only ever do what we desire to do seems false, however. For instance, if I am convinced that morality demands that I donate large portions of my money to charities (say to impoverished children), I might do this, even though I do not want to. My strongest desire might be to keep the money for myself, but I give it to the children anyway, out of a sense of duty. I WANT to keep the money, but I do not.

Egoists might reply, “But, really, you must have WANTED to donate the money. Otherwise, you would not have done it.” Put this way, maybe it IS the case that no one ever does something they don’t WANT to do—but is this really so bad? Maybe what makes an act selfish is not THAT you want to do it, but rather WHAT you want to do. If I want to help starving children, this act is NOT selfish—even though it is something I desire. If I want to trick children into giving me a quarter in exchange for a nickel, this act IS selfish—but not because it stems from my desire, rather because it is an action that serves myself at the expense of others.

Reply: We only do what makes us FEEL GOOD: The egoist may reply at this point that actions that SEEM to be for the sake of others (e.g., donating to the impoverished kids), they actually are NOT. For instance, someone who helps needy children only does so because helping children makes them FEEL GOOD. You can imagine someone saying, “Helping others gives me such a deep sense of satisfaction.” The egoist’s claim is that it is this satisfaction that makes people do altruistic things—NOT the fact that it makes OTHERS better off. Similarly, the only reason an egoist might refrain from lying, stealing, or killing is because doing so would make them FEEL BAD (e.g., because they will probably go to jail).

If you promote the happiness of others ONLY because of the happiness it will bring you (or because of the suffering it will help you avoid), then you are not really motivated by altruism. You are motivated by selfishness. So, psychological egoism is true after all.

Objection #3: Pleasure-based actions are not necessarily self-interested: But, DO we only do nice things for other people because it makes us feel good? Is that the ONLY reason? Surely not. If I see a drowning child, I do not stop to think, “Will saving this child make me feel good?” before jumping in to save them. My primary motive is MERELY to save the child. Sure, doing good things for other people DOES as a matter of fact often make us feel good about ourselves—but this does not really seem to be the primary motive.

3. Ethical Egoism: Now that we have undermined the primary motive for ethical egoism, the question remains: Is there ANY good reason to think that ethical egoism is true? That is, is there ANY reason to think that we have a MORAL obligation to do whatever best suits our own interests?

Reason #1: Altruism does not respect individuality: You may have heard of Ayn Rand. She is the author who wrote *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. She was a proponent of ethical egoism. Her reason for endorsing the moral duty of selfishness was that it is the best way to preserve our individuality.¹

Rand claimed that altruism is the act of some individual **giving up** or **forfeiting** the things that are really important to them (such as life projects, and goals, and other things that are good to have). But, this disrespects the **individual** that each person is. By requiring that individuals give up what is important to them for the sake of others, we are basically requiring that they give up everything that makes that person the distinct individual that they are. In short, altruism does not respect each person’s right to be an **individual** who pursues **their own** interests. Egoism, by respecting each person’s life as their own to do with as they please, is the only moral theory that truly respects the individual.

Objection: Common-sense morality, which endorses altruism, does not claim that each person GIVE UP their entire life for the sake of others. The claim is only that other people MATTER. Surely there is some balance between the idea that each person has a right to do what they want with their life AND the idea that other people are human beings who MATTER, morally—and that we ought to treat these other individuals with compassion and respect. Requiring that everyone treat others with compassion and respect is a long way from requiring each individual to give up their lives for the sake of others.

¹ Incidentally, you may have heard Ayn Rand’s name come up in the most recent election as well—Paul Ryan, Mitt Romney’s running mate for vice president, was said to have endorsed the philosophical views of Ayn Rand. See: www.cnn.com/2012/08/14/opinion/weiss-ryan-rand/index.html

Reason #2: Egoism is not at odds with "ordinary morality": Another reason in favor of egoism is that it "explains" our ordinary intuitions about morality. It seems to most people that things like killing, stealing, lying, etc., are morally wrong. According to egoism, this is because the best way to serve your own interests is to get along with others.

As it turns out, those who hurt others often have very miserable lives—your textbook calls this the "paradox of hedonism" though it is probably better called the "paradox of selfishness." If your ONLY concern is to make YOURSELF as well off as possible, the best thing for you to do will probably involve some amount of being nice to others, cooperating with, and helping them, etc.

Businesses too must be "good" to some extent, or else they will fail. For instance, no one would frequent a business whose employees punched all of their customers in the face, or who repeatedly sold defective items, etc. Nevertheless, there are a number of things they can do which are probably immoral and yet never lose customers (e.g., engage in false advertising, discriminate based on race or gender, pollute the environment, etc.). We'll look at some of these this semester.

Objection: Stating that, in general, helping others also serves to help yourself is a far cry from the view which says our ONLY moral obligations are to help ourselves. Even if this WERE the case, as we will see below, ethical egoism would still endorse hurting others provided that nothing bad for you would ever come of it—for instance, murdering someone when you are sure that no one will ever find out, or raping a comatose patient, etc. So, egoism does NOT really line up with our ordinary conception of morality.

4. Objections to Ethical Egoism: There are several reasons to think that ethical egoism is false.

- (1) *Psychological Egoism seems false:* As we saw above, the psychological view which ethical egoism is built upon is probably false.
- (2) *Morality vs. Selfishness:* For many, one of the central features of morality is that it serves to restrain our selfish desires. But, if the morally right action JUST IS whatever best serves our selfish desires, then morality no longer has this central feature. So, egoism runs counter to our intuitions about what role morality plays in our lives.

- (3) *Some things seem just plain wrong:* According to egoism, there is no particular action that is just plain wrong. On egoism, as long as an action serves to promote your own interests, then it is the morally right thing to do. But, then, there will be situations where murder, rape, lying, and stealing will be the right thing to do, since there will be many situations where these actions are the best means of promoting your own interests. This is abhorrent. Surely, such actions are just plain wrong, regardless of whether performing them would benefit me.
- (4) *Other people matter, morally:* Common sense tells us that other people's interests COUNT, morally. When I think of someone in pain, it is apparent that their pain MATTERS. Just because it is happening to someone else does not make it no concern of mine. Almost everyone has a strong intuition that, when others are in a great deal of pain, and we are in a position to stop it, we are OBLIGATED to do so. Egoism denies this basic principle, claiming instead that no one's interests matter but your own.
- (5) *Egoism draws an arbitrary distinction:* There are many kinds of beliefs which draw an arbitrary distinction between one group of people and another, and then claim that the interests of the people in one group are MORE IMPORTANT than the interests of the people in the other group. For instance, white racists draw a distinction between whites and everyone else, and then claim that the interests of whites are far more important than everyone else's. But, in order to draw a moral distinction between one group and another, there must be a morally relevant REASON for doing so. Racists DO generally try to provide such reasons—claiming for instance that other races are INFERIOR—but their reasons are groundless. Therefore, the distinction between which races matter and which races do not is not justified. Egoism does something similar—only, egoism draws the line between YOU and EVERYONE ELSE. But, in order for YOU to count more than everyone else, there must be some morally relevant DIFFERENCE between you and everyone else. However, there does not seem to be any such reason. Are you better? Are you smarter? Are you somehow more valuable? It does not seem so. In the absence of such a reason, the distinction that egoism draws between ourselves and everyone else is (like racism) morally unjustified.

Topic Suggestion: Egoism #1: Consider Case 1.1 in your textbook (pgs. 37-39). It describes several companies “dumping” dangerous products on other countries (such as cancer-causing baby pajamas or pesticides). Though it is illegal to sell these products in the U.S., it is not illegal to sell them to places like Mexico. Ask: (1) What reason does a company have for “dumping” dangerous items on other countries? (2) Is it morally permissible to do this? (3) What do your answers to these first two questions indicate about the relationship between self-interest and morality?

Topic Suggestion: Egoism #2: Consider the claims of psychological egoism, which states that we only ever do things because we **desire** to do them, or else because of the **good feeling** we will get from doing it. Do you think this argument is persuasive? Does it seem to you that human beings are truly capable of acting selflessly, or is this appearance of selflessness merely an illusion? If you would like, give an example from your own life to illustrate your stance on this issue.

Note: Please complete “Reading Quiz for Week 2” at this time if you have not already done so.