

# Handout 5: Ethical Egoism

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## 1. Ethical Egoism

One common assumption is that the interests, needs, and happiness of *other* people **should** factor in our moral evaluation of things. If we accept this assumption, we think that our moral evaluation of an action involves balancing our self-interest against that of others. What is morally right or wrong depends not only on how some action impacts us, but also how it affects others.

**Ethical egoism** is the theory that this common assumption is false; each person *ought* to pursue his/her interests over and above the interests of others. In other words, **ethical egoism** states that (i) there are objective moral facts and (ii) an action is morally good if and only if it promotes my *personal happiness* and it is morally wrong if and only if that action hinders my personal happiness. For the egoist, happiness is regarded as *ultimate & intrinsically valuable* insofar as it is pursued for its own sake and not for the sake of something else.

**Misconception #1:** A person is **selfish** if and only if he/she pursues his/her own interests without regard to the interests of others. EE does not say to be selfish in this way. Furthering your own interests and happiness *often depends upon furthering the interests of others*. If you are an egoist, the happiness of other people matters but only insofar as it factors into promoting your own happiness, e.g. helping a friend so that your life is better.

**Misconception #2:** EE does not say that you should pursue only your basest, immediate, and most sensual wants and desires. Egoists claim that an action is good if and only if it promotes your **short-term** and **long-term happiness**. Sometimes this is referred to as *well-being* or living the “good” life. This requires you to consider not only immediate pleasures but also “higher” pleasures, e.g. enjoying artworks, and long-term pleasures, e.g. having a long and healthy life.

Egoism is a controversial moral theory because many people believe that *some acts of genuine altruism are morally good*, i.e. some actions are good not because they are done for our own happiness but because they benefit someone else, i.e. they promote **another's happiness**.

## 2. Psychological Egoism

Whereas ethical egoism says that each person *ought* to pursue his/her own happiness, **psychological egoism** is the claim that each person, *in fact*, pursues his/her own happiness. **Ethical egoism** is a claim about **what is morally good or bad**, whereas psychological egoism is a claim about human psychology. Psychological egoism is a controversial claim as it implies that human beings are not capable of genuine altruism. That is, they are not capable of doing something that *solely to promote the happiness (to further interests) of another*. Psychological egoism is controversial because there appear to be a lot of cases where people actions are done *not* to promote our own happiness at all, but to promote the happiness of others.

- saving someone's life by risking your own
- donating money

- donating blood, organs, etc.
- volunteer activities

If one wishes to be a psychological egoist, then one needs to explain why people do certain actions that appear to be genuine acts of altruism.

**Argument #1: Everyone Does What They Want**

P1: Everyone does what they want to do

P2: What we want to do is always in our self-interest.

C: Therefore, we always do what is in our own self interest (i.e., psychological Egoism is true).

In the case of giving money to charity, the psychological egoist says (P1) when we give money, it is what we want to do (it is not forced). And, we give that money to promote our own interest somehow, e.g. to get recognition or to promote a cause that will ultimately help us.

**Argument #2: Everyone Does What Makes Them Feel Good**

P1: People are always motivated to do actions that make them feel good.

P2: If people are always motivated to do actions that make them feel good, then you only ever aim to do what is in your own self-interest (i.e. psychological egoism is true).

C: Therefore, psychological egoism is true.

P1 says whenever we act, we have always have in mind the goal of trying to make ourselves feel good in some way. If we give to the poor, we do this because we think that giving makes us feel good. If we say hello to a neighbor, that is because we want to feel good about being friendly. P2 says that because this goal of feeling good always motivates our actions, we only ever aim to do things that promote our own self-interest. We may make mistakes in trying to feel good, but our whole lives are directed to creating a state of affairs that will get us what we want.

### 3. Objections to Psychological Egoism

*Against Argument #1*

**Objection to P1 of Argument #1: I do it because I have to, not because I want to.**

P1 is false. There are some actions that we do *not because we want to do them* but because *we feel we ought to do them*. For example, suppose I borrow your notebook for class and see your notes are much better than mine. I might not want to return your notebook (I want to keep it), but I return it anyway because I feel as though I ought to return it.<sup>1</sup>

**Objection to P2 of Argument #1: I want to do x, but x does not benefit me.**

P2 is false. Take a soldier who risks his life for his country. He might say “I *want* to risk my life for my country” but it is not clear how it benefits him in any way.

*Against Argument #2*

**Objection to P1 of Argument #2: Against the reduction of motives**

Argument #2 assumes that just because we have a self-interested motive, **all** of our actions are determined by this (and only this) motive. But this is not true since we can have actions

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<sup>1</sup> The psychological egoist can say “you *want* to do what you *ought* to do” to which the objector might respond, “no, I’d rather do something different, but I am doing what I ought to do because I ought to do it.”

determined by multiple motives: a self-interested motive (one aimed to make us feel good) **and** a motive to do something benevolent (one aimed at making others feel good). For example, suppose we see a child drowning in a pond and we are debating whether or not to save the child. We have two motives:

Motive #1: I have a motive to save that child because if I didn't, I would not be able to sleep at night; also, if I do save the child, I might get some public praise.

Motive #2: I have a motive to save the child because I realize that his life is important and there are those that would be sad if he were dead.

Notice that it is possible to have a self-interested motive (motive #1) and also have a benevolent motive (motive #2).

### **Objection to P1 to Argument #2: Genuine Altruism**

It appears that there are some actions that are completely benevolent and not motivated by an attempt to feel good. For example, people do not sacrifice their lives (or undergoes extreme pain) to save someone else's life because it will make them feel good; they do it to fulfill some cause or because they are committed to something or someone.

### **Objection #3 to Argument #2**

It is not clear that individuals do an action **because** they want to *feel good* OR that *feeling good* accompanies every good action. When you do an action **because** you want to feel good, your action is *motivated* by the goal of feeling good. But, sometimes you do an action because you think it is the right thing to do, or because you are committed to a cause, or just to try it out, and later realize that doing that action comes with the added benefit of feeling good. In this second case, we don't do the action **because it makes us feel good** (we would do it even if it made us feel bad), but feeling good happens to accompany the action we are doing.

## **3. Arguments for Ethical Egoism**

If psychological egoism is false, ethical egoism can still be true. This is because ethical egoism does not say that every action you do is to promote your own happiness. Rather, it states that if you do something simply to promote the well-being of others, then you have done something morally wrong. If you do something to promote your own well-being, then you have done something morally right.

### **Argument #1: The Best Altruism is a Kind of Egoism.**

P1: If we want to help others, the best way to do so is by pursuing own interests (by being egoists): (1) we know our own wants and needs better than someone else, and (2) trying to help others often comes across as intrusive.

P2: Altruists want to help others.

IC: Therefore, the best altruism is a kind of egoism.

P3: If the best altruism is a kind of egoism, then altruists should be egoists.

C: Therefore, we should pursue our own self-interests exclusively.

**CDQ:** Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen wrote: “there is no way you can benefit society more than by coining the metal you know is yourself.” What do you think he meant by this?<sup>2</sup> And, do you agree?

### **Objection #1: This Gets Things Backward**

P1 is false. For suppose that it is true that the best way to help other people is by helping yourself. Even if this is true, this is not a reason for altruists to be *ethical egoists*. Ethical egoism says:

Claim #1: What makes an action *morally good* or *morally bad* is whether it is in your best interest.

Claim #2: You should do an action *because it is in your best interest*.

But notice that in the above argument, egoistic actions are **not** done *because they are in your best interest*. Rather, egoistic actions are done *because they are in the best interest of others*. This seems to violate Claim #1 which says that what makes an action right or wrong is whether it promotes your own interests.

### **Argument #2: Ayn Rand’s Argument**

P1: Any theory that asks an individual to “sacrifice” his or her own life does not take the individual’s life to be fundamentally important.

P2: Genuine altruism requires that individuals “sacrifice” their lives by giving up (even if only partially) their goals, interests, or needs for the sake of another’s goals, interests, or needs.

IC1: Therefore, non-ethical egoist theories do not take the individual’s life to be fundamentally important.

P3: Every theory *ought* to take an individual’s life to be fundamentally important.

C: Therefore, non-ethical egoist theories are all false.

### **Objection to P3: The life of an individual is not of fundamental importance**

If *any* deviation from pursuing our own self interest means our life is not of fundamental importance, then P3 is false. There are some things that are more important than the interests of single individuals, e.g. the good of the whole.

### **Argument #3: Ethical Egoism Explains the Various Principles of Common Sense Morality**

P1: There is a stock of beliefs that we intuitively take to be our moral beliefs.

P2: The specific beliefs we have in this set are very diverse and so need to be explained, e.g. do not harm others, do not lie, etc.

P3: Ethical egoism is the theory that can best explain all of these beliefs as it says they all of these beliefs stem from one basic principle: the principle that it is in our best interest to follow them (i.e. egoism). For example, we think *it is wrong to harm others* because if we did harm others, then others would harm us (against our interest) and *it is wrong to break your promise* because if we did, then others would break promises with us.

C: Therefore, ethical egoism is true.

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<sup>2</sup> Partially taken from Judith A. Boss’s *Ethics for Life: A Text with Readings*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. p.262.

### **Objection #1 to Argument #3: Problematic Exceptions**

Argument #3 says it is in our best interest to follow these rules. This is only true, part of the time. Sometimes, it might be in our best interest to brutally murder someone (if we can get away with it) or lie to a friend (if we know that we can get away with it). This is counterintuitive.

## **4. Arguments Against Ethical Egoism**

### **Argument #1: Ethical Egoism Allows for Wicked Actions**

P1: Assume ethical egoism is true.

P2: If ethical egoism is true, then individuals should do evil things (cheating, killing, etc.) as long as it benefits them.

P3: Any theory that says individuals should do evil things is false.

C: Therefore, ethical egoism is false.

### **Objection to Argument #1**

P2 is false since it assumes that something is evil when the egoist says it is not evil.

### **Argument #2: EE makes sinners saints and saints sinners!**

*Version #1: Making Sinners Saints!*

P1: If EE is true, then it seems that the most capitalistic and self-interested of individuals would be the **most** moral and EE would justify their exploitation of the poor and disabled.

P2: The most capitalistic and self-interested of individuals are not the most moral.

P3: Therefore, EE is false.

*Version #2: Making Saints Sinners!*

P1: If EE is true, then the most altruistic and self-abnegating individuals would be the **least** moral.

P2: The most altruistic and self-abnegating individuals are not the **least** moral.

P3: Therefore, EE is false.

### **Argument #3: Ethical Egoism is Arbitrary**

P1: The **principle of equal treatment** is the principle that we should treat people in the same way unless there is a compelling reason not to do so.

P2: Everyone accepts the principle of equal treatment.

P3: Any theory that rejects the principle of equal treatment is wrong.

P4: Ethical egoism rejects the principle of equal treatment as it says we should not treat ourselves in the same way we treat others. In fact, it says we should exclusively pursue our own interests.

C: Therefore, ethical egoism is false.

### **Argument #4: Ethical Egoism is Inconsistent\***

P1: Assume ethical egoism is true.

P2: If ethical egoism is true, then contradictions are true. For suppose A's doing x would be in A's self-interest and therefore "A's doing x is good" is true. But suppose doing *not-x* would be in B's self-interest and therefore "A's doing x would not be good" is true.

P3: Contradictions cannot be true. A's doing x cannot be both good and not good.

C: Therefore, the assumption P1 is false, and therefore ethical egoism is false.

#### **Objection to Argument #4**

We might object to P2 and say that EE is an ethical theory that **does not say that something is good or bad for everyone**. Rather, it says that individuals should do what is in his or her self-interest. And so, we should translate "A's doing x is good" to "A ought to do x" and "A's doing x would not be good" to "B ought to stop A from doing x". These two claims, while in conflict with each other, are not inconsistent.

### **5. Some Points to Consider**

**There are perhaps some important truths to EE.**

1. Happiness, depending on how it is defined, is one of the goals of the individual.
2. We think our own goals are very important and any ethical theory that would ask us to give this up entirely (or without a good reason) is unacceptable.

#### **READING QUESTIONS**

1. What is psychological egoism?
2. What is ethical egoism?
3. What is one argument for psychological egoism?
4. What is one argument for ethical egoism?