

## Part III

### Simple, Too Simple Answers



# Chapter 7

## Ethical Egoism

### 7.1 Homework

Readings – EMP 5

Study Questions –

1. What is the difference between Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism?
2. What is the main claim of Psychological Egoism? Can't you think of something you did in your life, which was not in your own interest? How is this a counter-argument against Psychological Egoism? What would be the Psychological Egoist's answer to that?
3. Can you argue against Psychological Egoism? Why? Why not?
4. What is Ethical Egoism? According to Ethical Egoism, is it right or wrong to help other people without any further consideration of one's own interest?
5. Explain why the argument that Altruism is self-defeating (p. 76) does not support Ethical Egoism.
6. What is Ann Rand's argument for Ethical Egoism? How can we object to it?
7. What are the best objections against Ethical Egoism?

### 7.2 Introduction

Ethical Egoism is the first of the theories which give simple answers to our question: is there any absolute moral values?

Our interest for Ethical Egoism comes from a tension between:

1. **A common view** – It seems that we ought to help others
2. **A simple fact** – We do not help as much as we could, and often times, it seems that we act egoistically

**3. A striking example** – Third world children: 1 child dies from *easily preventable causes* every 5 seconds. What do we do about it?

→ *Could it be that what we take as altruism is a mere illusion? Could it be that as human beings we seek only our own interest? Could it be that pursuing our own interest is actually what we ought to do?*

Ethical Egoism is precisely the view that we ought *\*not\** to help others. *The absolute value of morality is simply ourselves!* This means that not only it is *acceptable* that we don't help others, but *it would be wrong to help them*. On the contrary, according to the ethical egoist, *we ought to pursue solely our own interest*. Ethical Egoism, if true, would then give us a way to justify that we don't save the hungry. The main goal of the chapter is to see whether Ethical Egoism is tenable or not.

It is important to distinguish right away between *Ethical Egoism* and *Psychological Egoism*.

**Definition 18 – Psychological Egoism**

*Psychological Egoism is the view that each person does in fact pursue his or her own interest.*

**Definition 19 – Ethical Egoism**

*Ethical Egoism is the view that each person ought to pursue his or her interest.*

Psychological Egoism	Ethical Egoism
Descriptive	Normative
Psychology	Ethics
Claim about what human nature is	Claim about human morality ought to be

The difference should be clear with the following example: it is something to say that students typically study for their exams at the last minute, it is another something to say that student *ought* to do so!

Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism are really two different kinds of theories, answering to different questions, and belonging to different disciplines.

### 7.3 Psychological Egoism

Psychological egoism is *\*not\** a theory of morality: So, why would we care about it?

→ *It is crucial to assess Psychological egoism because if psychological egoism is true, that is, if it is true that we all pursue our self interest, then discussing morality seems pointless!*

**An ambiguity** – We need to distinguish between two possible claims for psychological egoism:

1. Everybody acts *selfishly* – motives – no care for the others
2. Everybody acts *in his or her own interest* – consequences – positive outcomes for oneself

- Example of a selfish act which is *\*not\** to one's own interest: "I don't care" attitude in teenagers

- Example of an act which is (ultimately) to one's own interest but is *\*not\** necessarily selfish: charity

**Consequence-Psychological Egoism is easily falsifiable** – There are simply many actions that we do which are *not* to our own interest.

Think about the movie: all these people took the risk to be killed (and forgotten in the future)

**Motive-Psychological Egoism seems untenable** – It is simply not the case that we always act *only* selfishly.

Counter-examples:

- Great cases of altruism
- You, the blind old lady and the people around

**An answer to the argument against Motive-Psychological Egoism** – Dig further!

Now, the usual answer is: these are cases of *unconscious selfishness*: what really people look for is self satisfaction and / or peer recognition.

There are 2 problems with this answer:

**Problem 1** – Confusion between the motive and bi-products of the action

*It is not because one gets something back from doing a good deed that one necessarily did the good deed in order to get something back.*

Example: You, the sick little girl and the waiting room

**Problem 2** – Defending Motive-Psychological along these lines makes it *untestable*

Theory	Thesis
Psychological Egoism	Every human action is motivated by self-interest.
Mental Hospital Theory	All the patients in here are mentally ill.
Cheese-centric Theory	Everything in the world is made of cheese.

Let see ways in which we can defend a theory:

Theory	Mental Hospital Theory
Thesis	All the patients in here are mentally ill.
Proposed Counterexample	Alan: Heres a guy in this hospital, Mike, who seems pretty healthy. He wakes up feeling all right, has an appetite for a good breakfast, spends some time reading and doing chores and talking with the other patients, has a good lunch, plays some Ms. Pac-Man in the hospitals somewhat-outdated video-game room, plays some basketball outside, has a good dinner, watches some TV, goes to bed, and sleeps soundly.
Answer Type A	Brianna: O.k., I see what you mean. Maybe not all the patients in here are mentally ill. Id like to do some further examination, but unless some evidence of mental illness shows up in my further examination of Mike, then Ill have to concede that not all the patients in here are mentally ill.
Answer Type B	Chris: Actually, Mikes behavior is perfectly consistent with the claim that all the patients in here are mentally ill. Mikes behavior exhibits what I call denial of reality. Mike is actually mentally ill, but hes trying to deny it by behaving as if hes not. I see this all the time and always chalk it up to denial of reality.

Which type of answer makes the theory untestable?

Theory	Cheese-centric Theory
Thesis	Everything is ultimately made of cheese.
Proposed Counterexample	Diane: Heres this book, Fun With Hypnosis: The Complete How-To Guide, and Ive examined it pretty closely. It has pretty thin pages, and Im pretty sure none of them is made of cheese. Ive also dissolved the covers in an acid bath in my basement, and Im pretty sure they were cheese-less, too.
Answer Type A	Fiona: Hmm . . . well, o.k., so maybe not everything in the world is made of cheese. Id like to get a copy of the book and examine it for myself, but you just might be onto something. This might be a thing that is not, in fact, made of cheese.
Answer Type B	Ernie: Well, you may have done your best to find the cheese of which the book is ultimately made, but you just didnt break the book down into its smallest parts. When certain kinds of cheese are made into paper, the presence of cheese cant be detected with the naked eye. If you dont find cheese in a physical object such as a book, thats because you havent looked hard enough, not because its not there.

Which type of answer makes the theory untestable?

→ *To defend a theory so that the theory becomes untestable is not acceptable. You must take counter evidence seriously.*

**Conclusion** – Psychological egoism is:

1. Very tempting (especially with nihilist teenagers)
2. Falsified: many counterexamples and logical flaws

SO:

1. It is a fact that selfish considerations are an undeniable part of our moral life
2. Hence: any theory of human behavior and any theory of ethics should take this fact into account
3. That said, from the fact that selfish considerations are *part* of our moral life, *it does not follow* that that's the all story!
4. Hence: no theory of human behavior and no theory of ethics should take *only* this fact into account

## 7.4 Ethical Egoism

**What Ethical Egoism really amounts to** – Ethical Egoism is not the trivial idea that our own interest is one of many considerations for moral action. Rather Ethical Egoism is the view that each person ought to pursue *only* his or her own interest

*What is right = to only pursue your own interest*

**Important Consequences** –

1. If I help others, and get something out of it, *the reason why this is morally right is that I get something out of it*
2. *It is morally wrong* to help others, if I don't get anything out of it

→ *Even if the view seemed attractive at first sight, the consequences are far from intuitive.*

### 7.4.1 Arguments in favor of Ethical Egoism: Not Convincing

**Argument that altruism is self-defeating** – The argument is:

1. To be altruist is to try to help other people in intervening in their lives
2. Intervening in other people's lives most often does not help them
3. So: to be altruist is self-defeating, and a better way to help people is to mind your own business.

**The problem with this argument is that:**

- it may be a criticism of altruism (and even this is highly debatable but it is not necessary to discuss this here)

- but it is not an argument in favor of egoism! The argument only “shows”, if anything, that *if we want to help people*, then we should act egoistically. Note that, in this case, it is prescribed to make our moral decisions by considering how we can help other, which is contradictory with what egoism says !

Indeed:

- The Ethical Egoist holds that what is right is to pursue only one's own interest.

- So: If you do something for any other reason than your own interest, you are doing something morally wrong

- So: If you do not intrude into other's lives *because it is the way best way to make them some good*, you are doing something wrong by the Ethical Egoist's standard !

→ *Again, this argument shows only, if anything that altruism is problematic, but not the Ethical Egoism is true.*



**Ayn Rand's argument** – the absolute value of the individual person

The argument:

P1. We have an alternative: EITHER we take Ethical Egoism (in which the individual person is an absolute value) OR we take Ethical Altruism (in which the best life is a life of sacrifice)

P2. Ethical Altruism is unacceptable: impose sacrifices on the person

CC: So: Ethical Egoism is the way to go

The argument is valid, but not sound: the first premise is a *false dilemma*: the two extreme views of Ethical Egoism and Ethical Altruism are not the only options! We can consider a view in which *both* points of view of the individual and the others are taken into account !

→ *This is bad argument because it relies on a false alternative between sheer egoism and radical altruism.*

**Moderate Egoism** – One retreat is to say that Ethical Egoism is not the radical view described above, but rather gives a general motivation for all moral norms and rules.

**Advantages** of this option:

- it can recover a good deal of our moral life
- it recognizes the importance of self-development, but still makes sense of moral actions

**Problem** with this option: it does not account for true cases of altruism

Example: would you not help the blind guy if there was nobody around?

## 7.4.2 Arguments Against Ethical Egoism

We will insist only on the counter-arguments that seem convincing – see the book for the others

**Ethical Egoism is at odds with our moral intuitions** – and our most profound ones: if it is in your own interest, then to kidnap and sexually abuse a child is *right* under the theory!

**Ethical Egoism has an arbitrary basis** –

P1: A requirement for any theory of ethic for being acceptable is that it satisfies the Principle of Equal Treatment: ie. that “*We should treat people in the same way unless there is a relevant difference between them*”

P2: There is no relevant difference between myself and the others

P3: Ethical Egoism violates the Principle of Equal Treatment

CC: Ethical Egoism is unacceptable

It seems to me that Rachels begs the question in appealing to this argument. P2 would be denied by the Ethical Egoist: the heart of the problem is precisely to decide whether there are relevant differences between the other and myself that legitimate a difference of treatment.

—→ *At the end of the day, the most important objections we can make to Ethical Egoism is that (1) it fails to account and explain why we take true cases of altruism as “right”, and (2) it conflicts with some of our most profound conviction that no everything which is in one’s interest is the right thing to do.*

## **7.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have:

1. Distinguished between Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism
2. Showed that Psychological Egoism fails as a theory of human psychology and human behavior
3. Showed that Ethical Egoism fails as a theory of morality and moral action