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Ethical Egoism

Author: Nathan Nobis

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Selfishness is often considered a vice and selfish actions are often judged to be wrong. But sometimes we ought to do what's best for ourselves: in a sense, we sometimes *should* be selfish.

The ethical theory known as *ethical egoism* states that we are always morally required to do what's in our own self-interest. The view isn't that we *are* selfish—this is *psychological egoism*^[1]—but that we *ought* to be.

This essay explores ethical egoism and the main arguments for and against it.

1. Understanding Egoism

Selfish people often have nasty dispositions towards other people, but ethical egoism generally discourages that: such selfishness is rarely to our advantage, especially in the long run. And egoism does not suggest that we never help others: egoists might be quite generous.

Egoism does entail, however, that what *makes* acting like this right, when it is right, is that it's for our own benefit: it makes us better off. So, if you *must* help someone else, this is *only because* doing so would be good for you; and if you should refrain from harming someone that's also *only because* doing so is for your benefit.

2. Why Egoism?

2.1. Individuals Know Themselves Best

Some egoists argue that, since we each know our own wants and needs best, everyone should focus on themselves: people meddling in other people's lives tend to go badly.

2.2. The Unique Value of Your Own Life

Also, some claim that egoism uniquely recognizes the value of individuals' lives and goals. Other ethical theories can require altruistic sacrifices of your interests for the sake of other people or abstract standards, whereas egoists maintain that each person has their own life to live *for themselves*, not anyone or anything else.^[2]

2.3. Egoism's Explanation of Right and Wrong

Finally, some egoists argue that their theory best explains what *makes* wrong actions wrong and right actions right. Kantians say it's whether anyone is used as a "mere means"; consequentialists say it's an action's consequences; egoists say it's really how someone's actions impact their self-interest.^[3]

Let's respond to these arguments by reviewing some objections.

3. Why Not Egoism?

3.1. Egoism and What's Good for Everyone

First, in response to the claim that egoism is desirable because everyone adopting it would be good for all, we should notice that this isn't an *egoistic* argument since the motivating concern is *everyone's* interests, which aren't important if egoism is true: only *you* should matter to you.

And are we really *always* "meddling" with people when we help them—say by trying to help feed people who are starving to death or are living in dire poverty—as some egoists say we are?

3.2. Egoism and Contradictions

One objection assumes that ethical theories should help resolve conflicts: e.g., for consequentialists, who should win a presidential election? Whoever will produce the best consequences as president. Egoists,

however, say that each candidate should do what's in their best self-interest, which is winning the election. But, critics argue, they can't both win, so egoism requires the impossible, so it can't be correct.^[4]

Egoists might respond that not everyone can do what's right: if you win, you do what's right; if you lose, you've done wrong.

They can also use this objection to refine egoism: you must *try* to do what's best for you, not necessarily achieve that. Actual success is often difficult, but everyone can try.

3.3. Egoism and Wronging Others for Your Own Gain

Another objection takes us to the heart of the matter. Imagine this:

Your credit card bill is due tonight, but you won't be able to pay the full amount until next month, so you will be charged interest and a late fee.

You just saw someone, however, accidentally leave their wallet on a park bench with *a lot* of cash hanging out of it. You saw where they went, but you could take the cash to pay the bill and *nobody* would ever know.

Also, you know of an elderly person who always carries a lot of cash on their evening walk. You know you could rob them, pay your bill, *certainly* never get caught and then buy dinner at a fancy restaurant.

If ethical egoism is true, not only *can* you permissibly take the wallet and rob someone, you *must*: *not* doing so would be wrong, since these crimes are in your self-interest. (If you'd feel guilty doing this, egoists respond that you shouldn't since you've done nothing wrong on their view.)

Many believe that, since actions like these are clearly wrong, this shows that egoism is false and the argument at 2.3 fails: egoism does *not* best explain our moral obligations *even if* we sometimes must do what's best for ourselves.

An egoist might respond that we are just *assuming* their theory is false: they don't agree

that we shouldn't steal the wallet and refrain from assault.^[5]

But we aren't "assuming" anything: we just have better reason to believe that *assault for personal gain is wrong* than that *egoism is true*. Recall that racists and sexists do not agree that their forms of discrimination are wrong either, but this doesn't *justify* racism or sexism. People sometimes hold false moral views; this might be true of egoists.

3.4. Egoism and Discrimination

Finally, racists and sexists think that people of their group are entitled to special benefits and are even justified in harming people not of their group. Egoists think something similar, but about *themselves*: harms they allow for and inflict on other people just don't matter.

But is there anything *about* one's race or sex or oneself that justifies treating others badly? No, so egoism is a form of prejudice, in favor of your own group of one, *you*.^[6] This objection agrees with the argument at 2.2, that everyone *does* have their own life, but corrects it with the fact that *everyone's* life matters, not just the egoist's.

4. Conclusion

Doing what's right *is* sometimes in our self-interest. If the above discussion is correct, though, that an action benefits us is never the sole reason it is right. And, more importantly, if an action is *not* in our own self-interest, we might be obligated to do it, nevertheless.^[7]

There are other arguments about egoism. Reviewing them might be in our self-interest. Should we?

Notes

[1] Psychological egoism presents itself as an empirical, scientific, observational, or descriptive claim about our motives: *everything we do is an attempt to make ourselves better off*.

The problem though is that there is no good scientific evidence for this claim. We are *sometimes* selfish, or seek our own best interest, but what kind of observations could show that we are *always* selfish?

Our many motives have never been adequately examined to conclude anything like that: furthermore, it's often hard to conclusively determine what anyone's motives are, especially since motives are often mixed.

Advocates of psychological egoism simply don't have any such evidence, and perhaps couldn't have such evidence, so the view is usually proposed as a kind of dogma or unsupported hypothesis, and so should not be accepted.

It's worthwhile, however, to note that if *psychological* egoism were true (and we always did what we believe to be in our own interest), *and* ethical egoism were true (and so we must do what's in our best self-interest, or try), then we would always do what's right and could do no wrong we would always do what's in our best self-interest. Since it seems clear that we don't always do what's right, or even try, at least one of these theories is false, if not both.

Also, if psychological egoism were true, then, since most other ethical theories require some altruism (that is, actions that benefit others, for their own sake), these other theories demand the impossible. And since some of us sometimes seem to be altruistic, psychological egoism seems to be false.

Furthermore, since ethical egoists advise making choices that benefit ourselves, that acknowledges that we might fail at doing that, and not even try, which suggests that even ethical egoists recognize that psychological egoism is false.

[2] For a presentation of this and related concerns, see Rand (1964).

[3] For an introduction to these theories, see [Deontology: Kantian Ethics](#) by Andrew Chapman and [Consequentialism](#) by Shane Gronholz

[4] For a presentation of this and related arguments, see Baier (1973).

[5] Egoists might consider this a "question-begging" response to their theory. To "beg the question" is to offer an argument that in some way assumes the conclusion of the argument as a premise: it's a type of circular reasoning. So here the charge is that this response *assumes* that egoism is false in arguing that

egoism is false. In the main text of this essay, I respond to this charge and explain why this argument against egoism is not question-begging.

[6] This argument was developed by [James Rachels](#) (1941-2003). For its most recent presentation, see Rachels and Rachels (2019).

[7] Related, but more subtle ethical questions, beyond the egoism-inspired question of whether others' interests must be given *any* moral consideration or moral weight, are whether, and to what extent, we can ever be justifiably "partial" to anyone's interests: e.g., can I permissibly act in ways that favor the interests of my family and loved ones, over the interests of, say, strangers? For an introduction to these questions, see [\(Im\)partiality](#) by Shane Gronholz.

References

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Rachels, James and Rachels, Stuart. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 9th Edition (1986, 1st edition). Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2019.

For Further Reading

Shaver, Robert, "Egoism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

Moseley, Alexander, "Egoism," *the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Related Essays

[Deontology: Kantian Ethics](#) by Andrew Chapman

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About the Author

Nathan Nobis, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA. He is the author of *Animals & Ethics 101*, co-author of *Thinking Critically About Abortion*, a co-author of *Chimpanzee Rights* and author or co-author of many other articles, chapters, and reviews in philosophy and ethics. www.NathanNobis.com

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