

Ethical Egoism

Speaker: David Massey

There are generally two types of egoism that are discussed by moral philosophers: *psychological* egoism and *ethical* egoism.

Psychological egoism is the belief that human beings always act in what they perceive to be their own, individual, best interest. This means that as human beings we are unable to act in a way that we don't believe will ultimately benefit us in some way.

Someone might argue that this doesn't account for the many instances when people do things to help others. However, the psychological egoist would argue that when a person does something to help someone else, she always believes it will also help herself in some way. Perhaps she believes the other person will return the favor, or others will think more highly of her for her seemingly selfless actions.

So, the psychological egoist believes there is no such thing as a truly **altruistic act** – a completely selfless act performed for the benefit of someone else. For the psychological egoist, **altruism** simply doesn't exist.

But what about those actions performed on behalf of others that no one else ever knows about or when there is apparently no chance of the person benefitting ever being able to repay the person helping them? To this the psychological egoist responds that the person performing the altruistic action feels satisfaction or pleasure in the act of helping another person, and that this is their ultimate or deepest motivation, even if they are unaware of it. Thus, they are still being motivated by self-interest.

Ethical egoism is the belief that human beings *should* always act in what they perceive to be their own, individual, best interest.

Notice the difference between the two. Psychological egoism says we can't help but always act from self-interest, while ethical egoism says we *should* always do so. The first is *descriptive* – describing what is already the case, with no judgment, while the second is *prescriptive* – telling us how we ought to act. This is an important distinction.

Ethical egoism is also usually understood as a hedonistic ethical view, because "the Good" or goal of ethical life is understood as pleasure or happiness.

If psychological egoism is true, then ethical egoism would seem to be the logical choice, when it comes to ethical models, because in order to say we *ought* to do something, we must be *able* to do it. If we are not able to perform altruistic acts, then it makes no sense to say we must perform them – we can't.

However, psychological egoism has its weaknesses, as you'll see in your assigned reading. So, ethical egoism needs a more solid footing, if it's to be convincing.

Challenges to Ethical Egoism

There are a number of challenges to ethical egoism.

The first is the **inconsistent outcomes argument**. If you are an ethical egoist, then you believe that you are morally obligated to always make decisions based on your own self-interest. However, you also believe that Stuart, Janet, and everyone else in the world are morally obligated to seek to further *their* own self-interests. Clearly, these views conflict, because if everyone else is seeking to further their own interests, then it makes it more difficult for you to achieve *your* goals.

The **publicity argument** against ethical egoism is similar. It basically says that moral theories should be publicized, or made known to anyone who will listen, because they're about living a good life. However, the ethical egoist will do much better in the accomplishment of his goal (fulfilling his own interests), if he keeps this a secret and allows others to continue acting altruistically. In fact, he would do even better if he actively promoted other altruistically-oriented ethical theories. The more he convinces others to do selfless things on behalf of himself and others, the better off he will be in achieving his own self-interests. So ethical egoism is best applied by attempting to deceive others.

Since the purpose of ethical egoism is personal happiness or pleasure, and one way that most people gain pleasure is from healthy relationships with others, it would seem that friendship and family would be goals for an ethical egoist. However, deep friendships and loving family relationships require performing selfless acts on behalf of friends and family. Can a person who is always concerned only with her own interests and never with others, ever have truly deep friendships? This is called the **paradox of ethical egoism**.

A fourth challenge to ethical egoism is called the **argument from counterintuitive consequences**. In short, ethical egoism doesn't just allow self-interested behavior it *demand*s it. Thus, if the ethical egoist believes she would ultimately benefit in some way from the death of someone else, she is obligated to kill that person. The same is true if there are numerous people. Intuitively, we know this is morally wrong, but this is what ethical egoism would require.

Finally, ethical egoism does not allow us to act to the benefit of posterity or future generations. The **problem of future generations** is that, since their prosperity does nothing to benefit you, ethical egoism dictates that you act in ways now that will help yourself, but may harm them. For example, destroying the environment for your short-term gain over the course of a lifetime is a moral obligation if you are an ethical egoist. If everyone behaved this way, it would result in the quick destruction of the human race.

Keep in mind, however, that ethical egoism requires us to act in our own best interests. That does not necessarily mean our *immediate* best interests. For example, while you would benefit immediately by spending all of your paycheck, you would benefit more in the long term by saving or investing some of your money. So, ethical egoism is about long-term benefit, as well.

What do you think about this? Are we programmed to only behave in ways that we think benefit ourselves over others, as psychological egoism says? Are we *morally obligated* to behave that way?