

Ethical Egoism

Here are three questions (of course there are others) we might want an ethical theory to answer for us:

- i) Which acts are right and which are wrong? Which acts *ought* we to perform (understanding the "ought" as a moral "ought")?
- ii) What makes a particular action right or wrong? What is it about the action that determines its moral status?
- iii) How do we know what is right and wrong?

Remember that according to relativism, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the cultural context in which it is performed. So, e.g., lying to my friend is wrong iff the moral code of my society says that it is wrong. Let me clarify in case there was any confusion about this from last time (note that 'iff_{df}' means: if and only if *by definition*):

Action X is morally wrong for agent A, who is a member of society S iff_{df} the moral code--*accepted in S*--entails that A should not do X.

In contrast, according to objectivism, whether an action is right or wrong does not depend on the moral code of one's culture. But what does it depend on? Objectivists suggest a variety of different answers. Here's one:

Ethical Egoism A person ought to do (and ought only to do) what is in his or her best interests over the long run.

On this view, a person's only duty is to promote her own interests, to do what is to her own advantage. Of course, it will sometimes be in one's interest to help others, and then doing so is fine. But if not, there's no reason at all, from a moral perspective, for helping others. Ethical egoism must be distinguished from a different view sometimes confused with it:

Psychological egoism: all human actions are motivated by selfish desires; the only thing ultimately driving human action is self-interest.

The idea is that although we do sometimes desire good for others, we do so only as a means to our own happiness. There are no purely altruistic/benevolent actions. Are there compelling arguments supporting psychological egoism (see also J. Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism" in text, pp.547ff)? Here's one common argument:

Any action I perform is prompted by **my** motives, **my** desires; and if my action is successful as intended, I will gain satisfaction. So all action is motivated by self-interest.

However:

i From the fact that I am always motivated by **my** desires, **my** motives, it doesn't follow that I am always motivated by **selfish** or **self-interested** desires:

--what makes a desire/motive mine? The *origin/source* of the desire is in me.

--what makes a desire/motive selfish? The *object* of the desire is my good.

It is plausibly a tautology that I am always motivated by my desires, but the question is whether my motivating desires have a particular content, e.g., my self-interest. The reasoning given seems to confuse voluntariness with selfishness.

i Even if we always get satisfaction from an action it doesn't follow that our satisfaction was the object or goal (an airplane burns fuel in crossing the ocean, but burning fuel is not the goal or objective or purpose of the flight.). Some things are simply side-effects of what we do, not their object.

i Not all successful actions bring us satisfaction: remember the saying: "be careful what you wish for, you may get it!". Dissatisfaction is common even when you get what you want.

Return, then, to **ethical egoism**: Are there compelling arguments to support the idea that **a person ought to do (and ought only to do) what is in his or her best interests over the long run?**

Pragmatic Argument: It will work out best for everyone if everyone pursues their own self-interest. Why? Because everyone knows their own needs best; or because people are more motivated when they're looking out for number one; or because charity is degrading to the recipient.

However: Apart from the implausibility of the premise, this is not really an argument for ethical egoism at all. It suggests that we ought to behave the same way an egoist would recommend; but the ultimate source of justification is the *general* welfare, the betterment of *everyone's* condition. In other words, the view underlying this argument would answer our original question (i) by giving a list of the same actions as the egoist, but would differ on (ii). This suggests we should make a slight revision to our characterization of ethical egoism to capture this:

Ethical egoism (more explicit version): A person ought to do (and ought only to do) what is in his or her best interests over the long run; and whether or not something is in one's best interests over the long run is what makes it the morally right or wrong thing for one to do.

Individualist Argument: Moral views other than ethical egoism do not respect the value of the individual:

- 1) One's own life is of supreme importance.
- 2) A morality of altruism requires one to sacrifice one's life/values to help others.
- 3) Therefore, a morality of altruism does not appropriately value the individual.

However: this argument presents only extreme options: either one gives one's own interests *no* weight, or absolute weight. But isn't there a plausible middle ground? Even if it is wrong to entirely sacrifice oneself for others, this doesn't support the other extreme of ethical egoism.

Explanatory Argument : Ethical egoism provides the best explanation of our actual moral practices and ordinary judgments about what is right and wrong. On this approach ethical egoism is not a challenge to commonsense morality, but an attempted explanation and systematization of it. The reason there are rules against harming others is not that this in itself is wrong; it's that if we harm others, they're more likely to harm us. It's thus to our own advantage to avoid harming them—and so on for other seemingly altruistic rules.

However: First, it is unclear that ethical egoism provides a better account than other moral theories (more on this to come...). Second, ethical egoism doesn't actually square with moral practice very well. For example, normally lying/cheating/torture is considered wrong even if it has good consequences for ourselves.

Motivational Argument: Ethical egoism provides the best motivation for our actual moral practices. Granted that it's morally right to care about others, why should we care? Answer: Because it's in our own self-interest. The reason we should obey the rule against harming others is that that rule protects us too.

However: This doesn't explain why we shouldn't happily break the rules in cases when no one else is going to find out. (On this issue, one might want to consider the story of Gyges from Plato's *Republic*, in *Reason and Responsibility*, p. 568.) Could the egoist respond that no view can fully motivate our moral practices? Perhaps, but there's a strong intuition that (morally speaking) we ought to care about others regardless of whether this is in our self-interest.

Rachels' Objection to Ethical Egoism:

Non-arbitrariness Principle: I am justified in treating people differently only if I can point to some factual difference between them that (morally) legitimates the differential treatment.

This seems to be what's at issue in arguments against nepotism (giving preference to your relatives in jobs or admissions, etc.), racism, virulent nationalism, sexism. Can someone who engages in nepotism point to something special about his relatives beyond the fact that they're his relatives? Can the racist point to any morally relevant differences between, say, white people, black people, Asian people, and so on that would make it appropriate to give some greater freedoms or privileges than the others? Racists have tried but the differences they point to tend to fall into one of two categories: either they're based on racial stereotypes and so factually incorrect, or though correct they don't legitimate the differential treatment.

So the objection is that ethical egoism is an arbitrary moral doctrine:

- (1) Ethical egoism would have each person assign greater weight to his/her own interests.
- (2) There is no general difference between oneself and others to justify this differential treatment.
- (3) So ethical egoism is unacceptably arbitrary.

Questions to consider:

ï Why can't the difference between oneself and others count as morally relevant? Aren't I justified in responding differently to threats against myself than to threats against others? (etcÖ.)

ï Does every difference in our treatment of others have to be grounded in a moral difference? I treat my own children differently than I treat the neighbor's children. And I treat the neighbor's children differently than the children of strangers. Is this morally objectionable? Isn't the fact that someone is a relative or neighbor a basis for special treatment?

ï More generally, what counts as a "morally relevant difference" between people?