

Ethical Egoism

Rachels



Theories about Human Motivations

- **Psychological egoism:** every human action is motivated by self-interest
- **Psychological altruism:** every human action is motivated by concern for others
 - Both are descriptive claims: claims about what is the case
- **Ethical Egoism:** one ought to pursue one's own self-interest
 - Ethical Egoism is a normative claim about what ought to be the case

Ethical Egoism

- Ethical Egoism \neq Psychological Egoism
 - Even if PE is true, it does not necessarily mean that one ought to pursue one's self-interests
- According to Rachels, Ethical Egoism is the claim that one's **ONLY** moral duty is to further one's own self-interests
 - What makes an action right is that it furthers one's own self-interests
 - Ethical Egoism conflicts with Ethical Altruism (that one ought to pursue other's interests)

What Is Meant by "Self-Interest"?

- What actions, consequences, or states of being are in "one's self-interest"?
- How are we to define *self-interest*?
- How does Rachels define "self-interest"?
 - Rachels is not very clear by what he means when using this term
 - It's not simply short-term pleasure, nor necessarily connected with one's immediate wants or needs
 - At one point, he seems to connect protecting one's "basic needs" with one's self-interest
 - Is this all that is generally understood as "self-interest"?

Two General Notions Self-Interest

1. Self-interest refers to one's desires and preferences
 - Seeking one's self-interest is equated with satisfying one's desires or preferences
 - These desires or preferences are one's own (or self-regarding) and not those of another (other-regarding)
 - What are one's self-regarding preferences?
2. Self-interest refers to states that are valued independently of them being desired--there is some fact of the matter about what is in one's self-interest regardless of whether one desires it
 - Virtue and knowledge are examples of objective states of one's self-interest

What About Dual Benefits

- What if your actions serve both your interests and the interests of others? What should you do?
- Is there a problem if one's interests coincide with someone else's or with some groups?
- If an action serves one's interests and just so happens to serve another's self-interest, then there is no prohibition against that action.

Three Arguments for Ethical Egoism

1. Altruism is Self-defeating
2. Rand's Individualism
3. Ethical Egoism is Compatible with Commonsense

1. Altruism is Self-defeating

- We should not attend to the needs of others because we do not really know what those needs are. Any attempt we make to help others will likely show disrespect, invade their privacy, or do more harm than good. So, altruism is self-defeating.

Rachels's version:

1. "We ought to do whatever will best promote everyone's interests.
 2. "The best way to promote everyone's interests is for each of us to adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.
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3. "Therefore, each of us should adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively."

Argument Supports Altruism

- Premise 1 of Rachels's formulation is really about helping others
- As such, Rachels argues that this argument does not really support Ethical Egoism
 - Instead, the argument is some version of altruism

Problem with Premise 1?

- Premise one claims that we ought to act in ways that promote everyone's self-interest
 - At the same time, Rachels claims that the Ethical Egoist cannot know what the interests of another are
 - If this is the case, then the Ethical Egoist could not knowingly promote the interests of others
 - So, Rachels formulation of premise 1 is not one the Ethical Egoist could fulfill. In fact, attributing premise 1 to the EE is attributing an appeal to ignorance fallacy to the EE.
- What kind of fallacy does Rachels's argument appear to commit?

2. Rand's Individualism

- Self-interest is the standard for morality and altruism is the deepest immorality
- Self-interest is to view oneself as an end in oneself
 - one's life and happiness are one's highest values
 - one is not a slave or servant to other's interests
 - the responsibility of sustaining and enhancing one's life is one's own
- Altruism denies the value of the individual
- Altruist people live off the efforts, products and energy of the Individual

Rand and Reason in Ethics

- The means of living one's life is reason
 - Capacity for reason is what allows one to survive and prosper
 - We learn what is good for us and how to achieve it--we are not born with this knowledge
 - Rational self-interest: one uses reason to identify what is or is not in one's self-interest
 - Using reason, one takes into account all the factors one can identify, considers the consequences of potential actions, and adopts principles for acting

Rand's Self-interested Virtues

- Virtues are the principles for acting; they are acquired character traits which reflect and promote one's self-interests
 - Rationality: acting in accordance with reason
 - Productiveness: producing what one needs for survival and life
 - Honesty: commitment to an awareness of facts
 - Independence: one must think and act on one's own
 - Integrity: commitment to thinking and acting on one's own and according to one's own principles
 - Justice: judging people, and oneself, according to their values and acting according to these judgments; it is unjust to give to people more or less than what they deserve

Rachels's Version of Rand's Argument

1. "A person has only one life to live. If we value the individual--that is, if the individual has moral worth--then we must agree that this life is of supreme importance...."
 2. "The ethics of altruism regards the life of the individual as something one must be ready to sacrifice for the good of others."
 3. "Therefore, the ethics of altruism does not take seriously the value of the human individual."
 4. "Ethical Egoism, which allows each person to view his or her own life as being of ultimate value, does take the individual seriously...."
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5. "Thus, Ethical Egoism is the philosophy that ought to be accepted."

Rachels's Argument Against Rand

- Rachels criticizes Rand's characterization of altruism
 - If altruism really entails that one sacrifice oneself for others or that one's life has no value, then Ethical Egoism is attractive
 - Why think altruism does make such a claim? If there is no reason, then Rand's argument has either established a false dichotomy or mischaracterized altruism (based on a misunderstanding of individual virtues)
 - Rachels argues that even if one should reject the "ethics of altruism," this does not entail that one must accept the opposite extreme of Ethical Egoism
 - Perhaps one should accept some middle ground position?

3. Ethical Egoism is Compatible with Commonsense

- Ethical Egoist observes that morality tends to offer a set of rules; e.g., don't lie, don't kill, etc.
- Is there some common thread that exists underneath all these rules?
- EE says that the fundamental principle underlying all moral duties is self-interest.

Commonsense Explanations for Moral Duties

- Duty not to harm others
 - Benefit to self: benefits us not to harm others because we are treated well by others, we'll have friends, and we are not likely to go to jail
- Duty not to lie
 - Benefit to self: benefits us to tell the truth because we'll gain other's trust, build relationships, and maintain a good reputation
- Hobbes argued that Ethical Egoism leads to the Golden Rule: do unto others because if you do then they will do likewise to you

Problems with the Commonsense Approach

- Hobbes argument is not strong enough:
 - As a general rule it may be in one's best interests to not harm others
 - But, that is not to say that it is *always* in our self-interest not to harm another--there might be cases where one gains from harming another
 - So, Ethical Egoism fails to explain all moral obligations
- Serving one's interests may not be the fundamental reason for not harming others--one may think harming others is just a bad thing
- Argument doesn't show that the only reason to not harm others or to tell the truth is to serve one's self-interest

Three Arguments Against Ethical Egoism

1. Cannot Handle Conflicts of Interest
2. Logically Inconsistent
3. Unacceptably Arbitrary

Rachels's Unacceptably Arbitrary Argument Against Ethical Egoism

- Rachels: EE divides the world into two groups—oneself and all others
 - What makes oneself more special than everyone else?
 - Is there a relevant difference between oneself and everyone else that would justify treating oneself differently than the way one would treat others?
 - If so, then EE is not arbitrary. If not, then EE is arbitrary.
 - Is there a factual difference that justifies difference in treatment?
 - Are the interests of others similar to one's own interests?

Another Problem with Ethical Egoism

- Ethical Egoism is a malleable theory about how one ought to act
- It is malleable because what counts as one's self-interest is very general and unspecific
 - Sidgwick: "Egoism, if we merely understand by it a method that aims at Self-realisation, seems to be a form into which almost any ethical system may be thrown, without modifying its essential characteristics." (*Methods*, 95)
- If Sidgwick is right, then Ethical Egoism seems to be consistent with and capable of being incorporated by most ethical theories. If that is the case, then EE is not really a distinct ethical theory as much as a certain interpretation of some respective theory.