

EGOISM AND MORAL SKEPTICISM

Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu) | Ethics: Course Notes



In Book 2 of Plato's *Republic*, a character named Glaucon relates the story of the *Ring of Gyges*. It goes something like this: Gyges was a shepherd, and a pretty typical guy as far as acting morally goes. One day, however, he found a ring that allowed him to become invisible (ala *Lord of the Rings*). Once he did so, he went on a crime spree: he seduced the queen, murdered the king, and became very, very rich and powerful. Since people didn't know about his crimes, they loved and praised him, and (because of his large donations to the temples) even the gods liked him (so, he ended up in a pretty good afterlife.). In an effort to play the "Devil's Advocate," Glaucon claims the following (I've embellished the examples somewhat):

1. Every rational person would behave more-or-less as Gyges did, were they to be put in this situation. That is, once they knew they could *never* be caught, they would act in immoral ways in order to benefit themselves.
2. Every rational person *ought* to act as Gyges did. So, for example, it would be crazy to choose a life where one was really *ethical* but who was thought to be *unethical* (an innocent woman burned at the stake by her own children as a "witch", who then spends the rest of eternity in hell) than a person who was really *unethical* but was thought to be *ethical* (such as Gyges).

The first hypothesis is known as *psychological egoism*; the second hypothesis is known as *ethical egoism*. While Plato (via the character of Socrates) devotes the rest of the book to "disproving" these views, they have remained a challenge to any account of ethics that claims that people ought to act on behalf of *other* people, or to behave **altruistically**.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM

I am reminded of a story about Abraham Lincoln. According to the story, Lincoln was riding with a friend in a carriage on a rainy evening. As they rode, Lincoln told the friend that he believed in what economists would call the utility-maximizing theory of behavior, that people always act so as to maximize their own happiness, and for no other reason. Just then, the carriage crossed a bridge, and Lincoln saw a pig stuck in the muddy riverbank. Telling the carriage driver to stop, Lincoln struggled through the rain and mud, picked up the pig, and carried it to safety. When the muddy Lincoln returned to the carriage, his friend naturally pointed out that he had just disproved his own hypothesis by putting himself to great trouble and discomfort to save a pig. "Not at all," said Lincoln. "What I did is perfectly consistent with my theory. If I hadn't saved that pig, I would have felt terrible." (B. Bernanke)

Psychological egoism is the thesis that EVERY voluntary action of EVERY human is motivated by that human's own self-interest. In other words, everyone is inherently *selfish*, no matter how strongly they feel that this is not the case. Here is one common argument, which has appeared in various forms.

1. Premise: If a person makes a voluntary choice to do some action X, then he or she must *want* to do X more than anything else.
 - o For example, when Shari chose to share her ice cream cone with Owen, this shows that she *wanted* to share it more than she wanted to eat it herself.
2. Premise: If a person is acting only on his or her wants, then he or she is trying to maximize his or her own self-interest. This action is a *selfish* one.
 - o So, since Shari *wanted* to share with Owen, she was just trying to maximize her own interests, and this was inherently selfish.
3. Conclusion (psychological egoism): So, if a person makes a voluntary choice to do any action X, it must be because that action X is in his or her self-interest. All voluntary actions are selfish, and it is impossible to behave altruistically, or on behalf of others.

Problem with the above argument. This sort of argument is, as James Rachels notes, a pretty terrible one. (However, this hasn't stopped it from popping up regularly for thousands of years, in all sorts of different places and times).

1. The first premise claims that people ALWAYS do what they want. But this isn't true, at least in any ordinary sense of the word "want." People do things all the time (such as "keep their promises") that they don't want to do.
2. The second premise claims that doing what you want means *by definition* you are acting in self-interest AND that all self-interested actions are "selfish". Again, however, this makes nonsense of the very concepts of "self-interest" or "selfishness." A person may want to do something (a soldier wants to save his or her friends' lives) without being self-interested (he or she jumps on a grenade to do so). And there are many "self-interested" actions (such as drinking enough water to avoid death by dehydration) that are not "selfish." Again, this premise is only true if we adopt very different ideas of selfishness/self-interest than we usually do.
3. People sometimes try to "save" the argument for psychological egoism by offering new definitions for terms like *want*, *self-interest*, and *selfish*. But, once you do this, it's unclear why anyone should care about your argument. For example, let's suppose I want to write a paper arguing that abortion is murder, and I begin by noting "by *murder*, I mean causing the death of any being that is biologically human." On this definition, abortion is obviously murder, but since I mean something different by "murder" than the law does, my argument won't be convincing to anyone.

What has gone wrong? The appeal of psychological egoism appears to rest on a series of confusions. First, let's grant that "doing the right thing" often makes you feel good (in fact, many studies have found giving to charity is among the most cost-effective ways to increase

your *own* happiness). But this does NOT mean that your *motivation* for doing the right thing was that you wanted to be happy—in fact (perversely), people who continuously try to act in their own self-interest are often among the unhappiest people (the **paradox of hedonism**). Second, psychological egoism (falsely) assumes that actions are either “self-interested” or “altruistic,” but this isn’t true. There are lots of things that most of us do (overeat, smoke, fail to exercise) which are hardly self-interested (since we *know* these are not in our long-term best interest), but are not altruistic, either. And there are plenty of *other* actions (e.g., volunteering in order to help out the community AND to meet people) which are *both* self-interested and altruistic.

ETHICAL EGOISM, AND WHAT RATIONALITY REQUIRES

In contrast to psychological egoism, which claims that altruism is impossible (and that everyone is selfish), ethical egoism grants that you *could* behave altruistically, but that it would be *irrational* to do so. That is, **ethical egoism** claims that you have no obligation to act on behalf of *other* people, but instead should act only in your *own* self interest.

- Being an ethical egoist doesn’t require that you behave *stupidly*. For example, an ethical egoist might see nothing morally wrong with killing people to take their money. However, a smart ethical egoist would also realize that this would be unwise, since this sort of behavior would quickly lead to being arrested. In fact, a smart ethical egoist realizes the value of *appearing* to be ethical (so that other people like/trust you); they just don’t see the point of behaving well “when no one is looking.”
- Ethical egoists might still “love” their families/children (since this helps them carry on their legacy, or whatever). Depending on their religious beliefs, they may also think they have to follow certain rules to get to heaven or to being reincarnated in a decent next life. What distinguishes the egoist is the fact that all of this is, in the end, about their *own* well-being. Other people don’t matter *intrinsically*; they are simply “means to an end.”

Is Ethical Egoism Irrational? Some famous ethicists (such as **Immanuel Kant**) have claimed that ethical egoism is an *irrational* position. The argument is based by making an analogy between logical rules and ethical rules. So, for example, it seems pretty plausible to claim rational people have to obey certain *logical* rules (such as “you can’t simultaneously claim that *P* is true and *P* is false”), since violating these rules will make it impossible to understand or converse with them. Kant (and others) have said something similar holds for ethical laws: you can’t *simultaneously* have one ethical theory for yourself (“maximize my own well-being, and act like an ethical egoist”) and a *different* one for other people (“don’t be an ethical egoist”).

This argument doesn’t seem to work, however, since there is a pretty big difference between someone who violates logical rules (who can’t even be understood by other people) and who violates ethical rules (who other people tend to see as a jerk). Moreover, ethical egoists aren’t actually “contradicting” themselves in the way Kant seems to think: they aren’t trying to claim *everyone* should be an ethical egoist; rather, they think that *everyone* act in the way that benefits the egoist. In fact, ethical egoists *want* other people to act altruistically, since this benefits the egoist.

So What is Wrong With Egoism? What Does this Show About Morality? If the considerations above are correct, ethical egoists are perfectly rational, even if most people would find their actions (“burn down the school because it amuses me, and the cops will never catch me”) to be morally repugnant. This means that, if we want to persuade egoists NOT to behave in morally horrible ways, we’ll have to use methods other than arguments (that’s why we have police, courts, and jails, among other things). However, this does NOT mean that altruists (i.e., the rest of us!) are irrational for caring about morality. After all:

- Just as egoists **intrinsically** value only their own well-being and **instrumentally** value everyone else, altruists intrinsically value things *besides* their own well-being. That is, non-egoists can rationally respond to questions such as “What is wrong with child abuse?” by saying “It hurts children, which I hold to be intrinsically wrong.” For this same reason, altruists should care about moral *arguments*—i.e., it is *because* we care about other people that we should listen to what other have to say about abortion, euthanasia, animal rights, and so on. So, being moral (and studying ethics) is perfectly rational, at least if you start with the general idea that people besides you matter.
- While egoism may be rational in some minimal sense, we actually have good reason to believe that altruists are (in general) happier than their egoist counterparts. Studies have consistently found, for example, that highly altruistic people (who donate large amounts of time/money/etc.) generally find their lives to be more enjoyable and fulfilling.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. While it is impossible to clinically identify “ethical egoists,” we have gotten better at identifying people with high degrees of **psychopathy** who lack empathy and remorse (and who are unlikely to develop such things, since these are strongly determined by biology and early childhood environment). While psychopaths only make up less than 5% of the population, they commit a disproportionate share of crimes. A few questions:
 - a. Would it be morally OK for employers to use the results of “psychopathy” tests when hiring for jobs in education, nursing, or law enforcement *even if the person lacked a criminal background*? What about applications for adopting children?
 - b. Would it be morally OK to base decisions about sentencing or parole of *adults* on whether or not the person was a psychopath? (For example, should parole boards take account of psychopathy tests when determining who gets released early?)
 - c. Would it be morally OK to base decisions sentencing or parole decisions of *minors* based on psychopathy? (For example, should this play a role in determining whether to charge a 16-year-old as an adult?).

2. You have been asked to give a high school commencement addressing ethical egoism to a group of graduating high school seniors. Use what you've learned in this lesson to explain and critique ethical egoism (and make sure to give examples!).