

# What Is Ethical Egoism?

## Should I Always Pursue Only My Own Self-Interest?

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Ethical egoism is the view that each of us ought to pursue our own self-interest, and no-one has any obligation to promote anyone else's interests. It is thus a normative or prescriptive theory: it is concerned with how we ought to behave. In this respect, ethical egoism is quite different from [psychological egoism](#), the theory that all our actions are ultimately self-interested. Psychological egoism is a purely descriptive theory that purports to describe a basic fact about human nature.

### Arguments in support of ethical egoism

1. Everyone pursuing their own self-interest is the best way to promote the general good.

This argument was made famous by Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) in his poem *The Fable of the Bees*, and by [Adam Smith](#) (1723-1790) in his pioneering work on economics, *The Wealth of Nations*. In a famous passage Smith writes that when individuals single-mindedly pursue "the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires" they unintentionally, as if "led by an invisible hand," benefit society as a whole. This happy result comes about because people generally are the best judges of what is in their own interest, and they are much more motivated to work hard to benefit themselves than to achieve any other goal.

An obvious objection to this argument, though, is that [it doesn't really support ethical egoism](#). It assumes that [what really matters is the well-being of society as a whole, the general good](#).

It then claims that the best way to achieve this end is for everyone to look out for themselves. But [if it could be proved that this attitude did not](#), in fact, promote the general good, then those who advance this argument would presumably stop advocating egoism.

Another objection is that what the argument states is not always true.

Consider the prisoner's dilemma, for instance. This is a hypothetical situation described in [game theory](#). You and a comrade, (call him X) are being held in prison. You are both asked to confess. The terms of the deal you are offered are as follows:

If you confess and X doesn't, you get 6 months and he gets 10 years.

If X confesses and you don't, he gets 6 months and you get 10 years.

If you both confess, you both get 5 years.

If neither of you confess, you both get 2 years.

Now here's the problem. Regardless of what X does, [the best thing for you to do is confess](#). Because if he doesn't confess, you'll get a light sentence; and if he does confess, you'll at least avoid getting totally screwed! But the same reasoning holds for X as well. Now according to ethical egoism, you should both pursue your rational self-interest. But then the outcome is not the best one possible. You both get five years, whereas if both of you had put your self-interest on hold, you'd each only get two years.

The point of this is simple. [It isn't always in your best interest to pursue your own self-interest without concern for others](#).

2. [Sacrificing one's own interests](#) for the good of others [denies the fundamental value of one's own life](#) to oneself.

This seems to be the sort of argument put forward by Ayn Rand, the leading exponent of “objectivism” and the author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Her complaint is that the Judeo-Christian moral tradition, which includes, or has fed into, modern liberalism and socialism, pushes an ethic of altruism. Altruism means putting the interests of others before your own. This is something we are routinely praised for doing, encouraged to do, and in some circumstances even required to do (e.g. when we pay taxes to support the needy). But according to Rand, no-one has any right to expect or demand that I make any sacrifices for the sake of anyone other than myself.

A problem with this argument is that it seems to assume that there is generally a conflict between pursuing one’s own interests and helping others.

In fact, though, most people would say that these two goals are not necessarily opposed at all. Much of the time they compliment one another. For instance, one student may help a housemate with her homework, which is altruistic. But that student also has an interest in enjoying good relations with her housemates. She may not help anyone whatsoever in all circumstances; but she will help if the sacrifice involved is not too great. Most of us behave like this, seeking a balance between egoism and altruism.

## Objections to ethical egoism

Ethical egoism, it is fair to say, is not a very popular moral philosophy. This is because it goes against certain basic assumptions that most people have regarding what ethics involves. Two objections seem especially powerful.

1. Ethical egoism has no solutions to offer when a problem arises involving conflicts of interest.

Lots of ethical issues are of this sort. For example, a company wants to empty waste into a river; the people living downstream object. Ethical egoism just advises both parties to actively pursue what they want. It doesn’t suggest any sort of resolution or commonsense compromise.

2. Ethical egoism goes against the principle of impartiality.

A basic assumption made by many moral philosophers—and many other people, for that matter—is that we should not discriminate against people on arbitrary grounds such as race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or ethnic origin. But ethical egoism holds that we should not even try to be impartial.

Rather, we should distinguish between ourselves and everyone else, and give ourselves preferential treatment.

To many, this seems to contradict the very essence of morality. The “golden rule,” versions of which appear in Confucianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, says we should treat others as we would like to be treated. And one of the greatest moral philosophers of modern times, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), argues that the fundamental principle of morality (the “categorical imperative,” in his jargon) is that we should not make exceptions of ourselves. According to Kant, we shouldn’t perform an action if we couldn’t honestly wish that everyone would behave in a similar way in the same circumstances.

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