

# *Egoism*

*on ethics and selfishness*



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2020

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- Are people inherently selfish and only kept in check by fear of getting caught?

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These are related but different ways of pointing out the limitations of ethics, as either *unrealistic* or *counter-productive*.

# *Psychological Egoism*



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- Claims that ethics is *impossible* since there is no such thing as a "selfless good deed."
- Presents itself as a realistic alternative to sentimental idealism about human beings.

# *Deflating altruism*



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- How is this not just a cynical dismissal of generosity and instead a theory to be taken seriously?
- Let's consider the arguments...

*Is PE true?*

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*My choices are mine...*

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This means all decisions of mine have personal motives.

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- But perhaps there is a subtle shift of meaning here: does it follow that all motives are *for my sake alone* just because they are *my motives*?

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*The argument from hidden motives*

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- Good theories need evidence to back them up.
- PE has *unlimited evidence* to back it up, since *any* action that seems altruistic can be dismissed as the result of hidden selfish motives, so it's a great theory, right?

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- The problem here is a logical problem: this argument is **INVALID**.

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- This argument is **VALID**, and shows our explanation of the cause of autism to be a bad explanation.

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Is there really always a selfish motive behind everything we do? Maybe, maybe not, but PE simply *assumes* it must be there.

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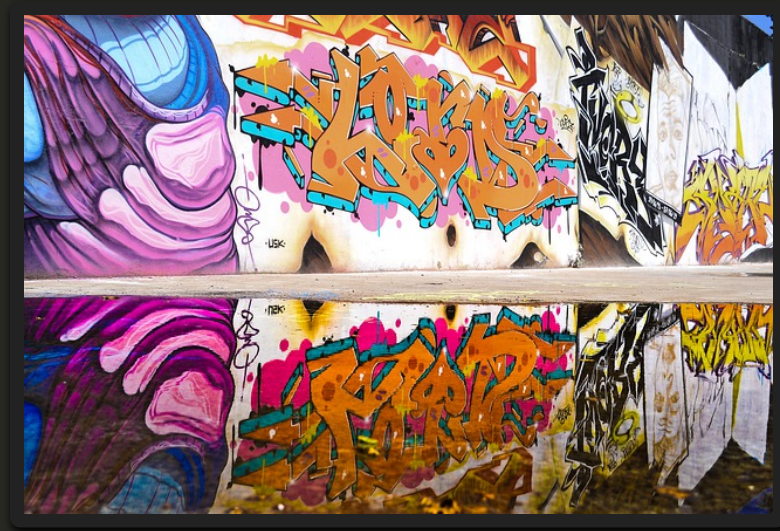
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Let's see why someone might argue this way.

# *Ethical Egoism*

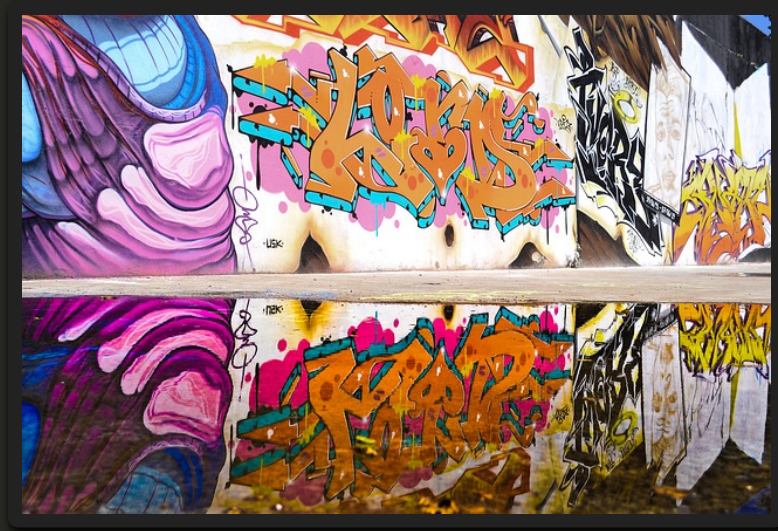


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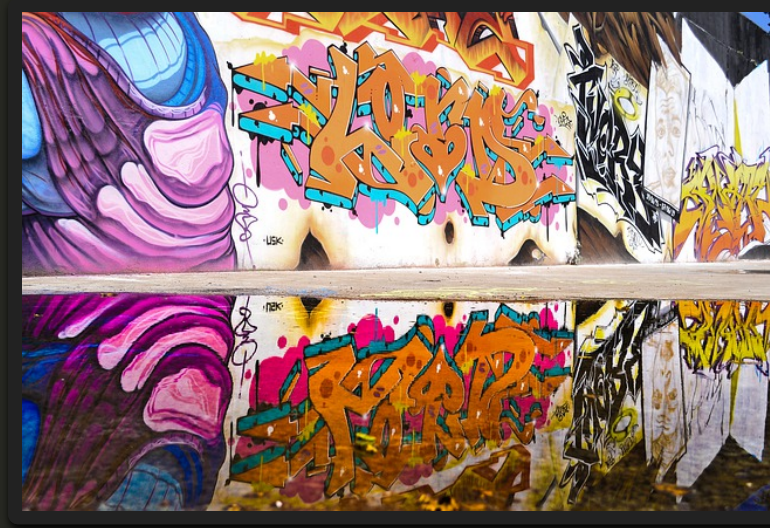
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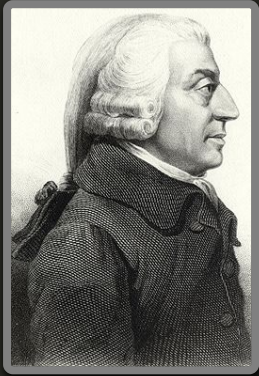
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- It claims that ethics is *self-defeating* since acting for the sake of others ultimately leads to a worse outcome, for *all of us*.
- Often used in political and economic arguments about capitalism and socialism.



# *Adam Smith's "invisible hand"*



Adam Smith  
1723-1790



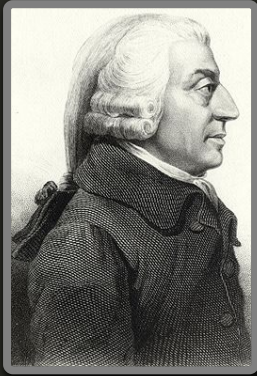
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- For Smith we need only allow people to pursue private gain in the marketplace and "the invisible hand" of supply and demand will ensure a socially optimal outcome -- fair prices, innovation, economic efficiency.

# *Rand on the virtue of selfishness*



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- She was deeply anti-communist and advocated an extreme form of individualism according to which it is simply *wrong* to ever put someone else's interests ahead of one's own.
- Among her fans are Ronald Reagan, Alan Greenspan, Rand Paul and Donald Trump.

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Competition leads to the best social outcomes: greater productivity, innovation, performance, etc.

The best way to encourage competition is by appealing to our individual desires for rewards, our selfish desire to get ahead.

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- According to this argument, helping others hinders competition and undermines the benefits of competition.

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- So they must be broken up, and likewise in sports -- the winning teams in get the *worst* draft picks to ensure *fair* competition in future seasons.
- The capitalist's argument has a deeper problem: Why would selfish people even *care* about the good of all? Is it still a defense of *Egoism* if we all do care?

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- But doesn't cooperation help us *all* out more than always going it alone?

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*The next big question is thus...*

Is there a rational basis for the rules governing our lives together in society? Or are we stuck with appealing to custom, authority and our shifting alliances with others to maintain social order?

## *Find out more*

**Egoism:** a comprehensive account from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

**What's in it for me?**, Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao, in *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics*. This chapter covers Egoism as well as our next theory, Social Contract Theory.

**Inequality in The USA:** a great video on what Americans want in terms of wealth distribution, our perception of what it is, and the reality. It turns out to be different than you might think.

**The New Age of Ayn Rand:** decades after her death her fiction continues to have an outsized influence on American public life. Read more in this article from the British news site *The Guardian*.



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