

Egoism

on ethics and selfishness



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The Ring of Gyges

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- If you had such power, would you be able to resist the temptation to act on your selfish desires?
- Are people inherently selfish and only kept in check by fear of getting caught?

The philosophy of selfishness

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psychological egoism

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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 are is such thing as "selfless good deeds."
- Presents itself as a realistic alternative to sentimental idealism about human beings.

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

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- This seems like common sense psychology.
- 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 *mine*?

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And yet all of these can be explained away as the result of hidden selfish motives.

So psychological egoism is true.

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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?

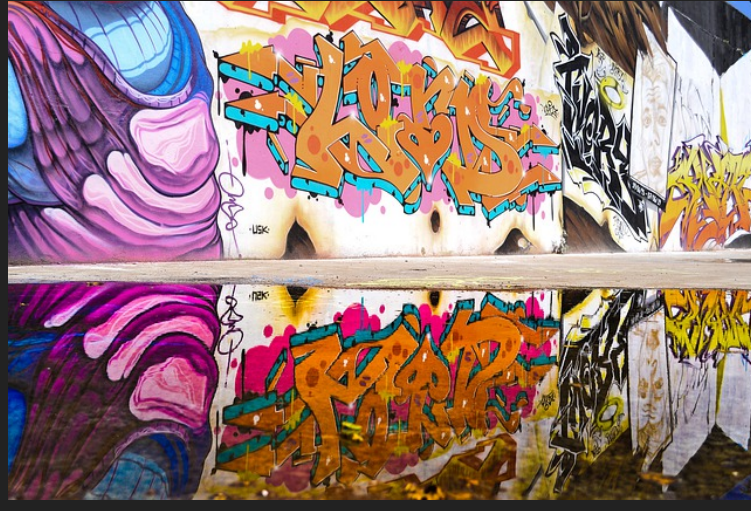
Theories, evidence and testing

- A theory is an attempt to explain something.

Ethical Egoism

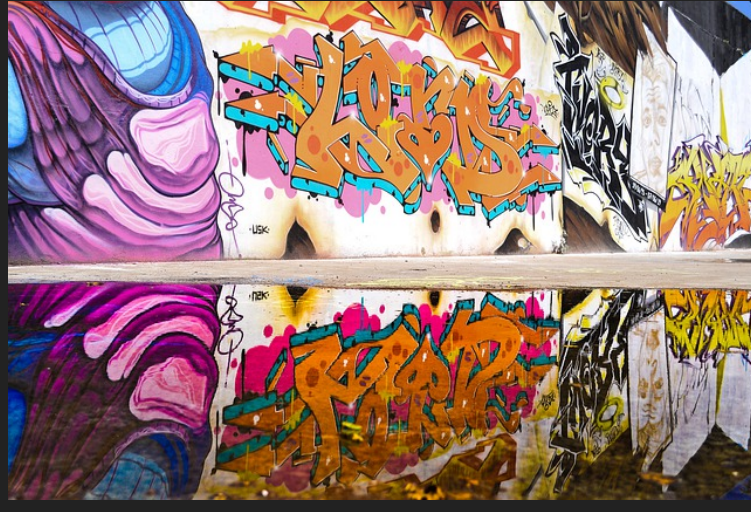


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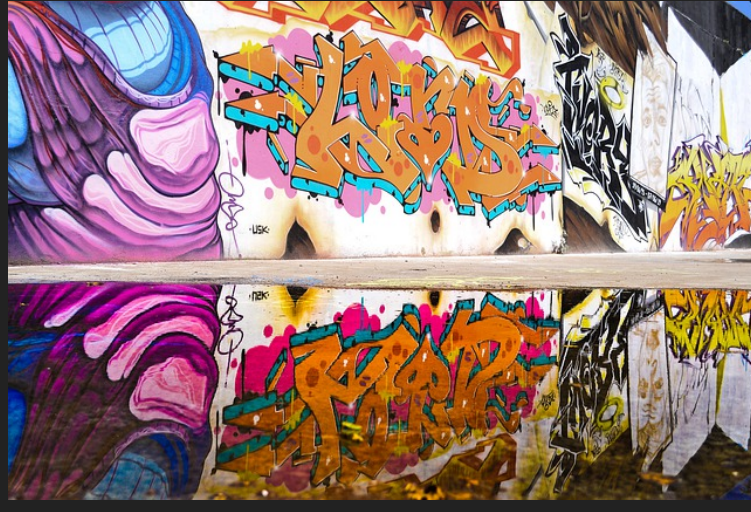
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- Claims that ethics is *self-defeating* since acting for the sake of others ultimately leads to a worse outcome, for *all of us*.
- Often used in political and economic arguments about capitalism and socialism.



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