

Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism is a part of ethics that involves an individual making decisions that yield greater good than evil for them. (Frankena, 1973, 15)

If a situation involved others along with the individual, as an ethical egoist, it is the individual's role to determine what is in his best interest in the situation. It would be wrong for him not to consider his own welfare. This thinking might be considered selfish, as it does not embrace concern for others. However, in the context of the founding principles of the United States, ethical egoism is more of the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. It could be as much self-interest as it could be selfishness. The purpose of ethical egoism is not to identify character traits, but rather is a theory devised to understand decision-making for oneself. It is possible for an individual to consider her own interests and remain unselfish. For instance, if she has to make a decision about her children, certainly it is in her own best interest to consider her children's welfare. Ethical egoists have either been recognized as hedonists or non-hedonists. Hedonistic ethical egoists focus on the greatest good in terms of pleasure, while non-hedonistic ethical egoists are more interested in furthering the greatest good in terms of ideals and principles. However, some ethical egoists suggested that it is possible to combine the hedonistic and non-hedonistic sides of ethical egoism, or "what Plato called the mixed life of pleasure, knowledge, and other good things." (Frankena, 1973, 18)

With ethical egoism, the focus is on self and pursuing one's own happiness. Individuals may have their own principles, but unless they promote their code of ethics, they are not truly moral principles. If others respect an individual's code of ethics, then the individual can be true to his own

standard of ethics at all times. This perspective of ethics allows that certain segments of the code remain private, depending on the situation. In reality, ethical egoism causes people to be competitive. Why would one individual attempt to live by the ethics of another individual? If both individuals are attempting to achieve their own greatest good, it's possible that their paths conflict. In this manner, the individuals could be competitive or violent if they both want the same end-goal. If their respective self-interests complement one another, then the concept of ethical egoism can work well. If the greatest good for the two individuals is completely separate from one another, then ethical egoism can work for both individuals without conflict.

Case #3 of the Warner case studies offers an example of ethical egoism. The individual wants to die on their own terms rather than living through undesirable conditions. They have consciously decided that their own greatest good would be to die in a manner decided by them. If the individual's family member did not cooperate with the individual's request, then they would be violating the situation ethically. It could also be said that the individual's self-interest is in choosing when they want to die. The argument in this situation is whether the individual is acting in hedonistic or non-hedonistic manner. Clearly, death is not pleasure, which eliminates the hedonism argument. By default, this situation should be non-hedonistic. The problem with this argument is that the individual is not reaching for any higher values. They are simply making decisions about their own life.

Among the Warner case studies, Case #4 sticks out as an obvious instance of ethical egoism. John, the soldier has the choice of giving others some or all of the water or keeping the water to himself. According to ethical egoism, it might seem that John should keep the water to himself,

as he would get all of it. However, if he shared the water, would that not make the others indebted to him? The greatest good for John is not obvious. Certainly, giving all of the water to the other soldiers leaves John without any water. If John did share the water, would the other soldiers return the favor or assist him in some other way? This much is not clear either. Ultimately, ethical egoism holds that John should decide for himself what the greatest good is.

Arguably, Case #5 of the Warner case studies presents an ethical egoism dilemma. The attorney could be honest and present the evidence that would exonerate the bad guy. From an ethical egoism standpoint, this decision would not generate the greatest good for the attorney. The attorney's goal is to win the case, and considering the accusations, this offender should be behind bars. The choice in this case is obvious for the attorney in terms of ethical egoism. Choosing to reveal the evidence would not be in the attorney's greatest good.

Ethical egoism contrasts with both deontological theory and teleological theory. With ethical egoism, it neither has to have the greatest good in its outcome nor the greatest good in its intentions. It contends that the greatest good is derived from what the individual gets out of a decision. The outcome may be poor for others; it may contain poor intentions for others. However, the outcome can be considered ethical within the framework of ethical egoism if a single individual benefits from it.

References

- Warner, Douglas W. The Basis for Ethical Conduct/Ethics for Decision-Making Case Studies. 5th ed. 1984.
- Frankena, William K. Ethics. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.