

CHAPTER 5

Ethical Egoism

There is something in consequentialist moral theories that we find appealing, something simple and commonsensical that jibes with everyday moral experience. This attractive core is the notion that right actions must produce the best balance of good over evil. Never mind (for now) how *good* and *evil* are defined. The essential concern is how much good can result from actions performed. In this chapter, we examine the plausibility of this consequentialist maxim and explore how it is worked out in one of its most debated theories: ethical egoism. In the next chapter we will conduct the same kind of examination of the most influential consequentialist theory: utilitarianism.

Ethical egoism is the theory that the right action is the one that advances one's own best interests. It is a provocative doctrine, in part because it forces us to consider two opposing attitudes in ourselves. On the one hand, we tend to view selfish or flagrantly self-interested behavior as wicked, or at least troubling. Self-love is bad love. We frown on people who trample others in life to get ahead. On the other hand, sometimes we want to look out for number one, to give priority to our own needs and desires. We think, If we do not help ourselves, who will? Self-love is good love.

Ethical egoism says that one's only moral duty is to promote the most favorable balance of good over evil for oneself. Each person must put his or her own welfare first. Advancing the interests of others is part of this moral equation only if it helps promote one's own good. Yet this extreme self-interest is not necessarily selfishness. Selfish acts advance

one's own interests regardless of how others are affected. Self-interested acts promote one's own interests but not necessarily to the detriment of others. To further your own interests you may actually find yourself helping others. To gain some advantage, you may perform actions that are decidedly unselfish.

Just as we cannot equate ethical egoism with selfishness, neither can we assume it is synonymous with self-indulgence or recklessness. An ethical egoist does not necessarily do whatever she desires to do or whatever gives her the most immediate pleasure. She does what is in her best interests, and instant gratification may not be in her best interests. She may want to spend all of her money at the casino or work eighteen hours a day, but over the long haul doing so may be disastrous for her. Even ethical egoists have to consider the long-term effects of their actions. They also have to take into account their interactions with others. At least most of the time, egoists are probably better off if they cooperate with others, develop reciprocal relationships, and avoid actions that antagonize people in their community or society.

Ethical egoism comes in two forms: one applies the doctrine to individual *acts* and one to relevant *rules*. **Act-egoism** says that to determine right action, you must apply the egoistic principle to individual acts. Act A is preferable to act B because it promotes your self-interest better. **Rule-egoism** says that to determine right action, you must see if an act falls under a rule that if consistently followed would maximize your self-interest. Act A is preferable to act B because it falls under a rule that maximizes your self-interest better than any other relevant rule applying to act B. An ethical egoist can define self-interest in various ways. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.), a famous ethical egoist from whose name we derive the words *epicure* and *epicurean*, gave a hedonist answer: The greatest good is pleasure, and the greatest evil, pain. The duty of a good ethical egoist is to maximize pleasure for oneself. (Contrary to legend, Epicurus thought that wanton overindulgence in the delights of the senses was not in one's best interests. He insisted that the best pleasures were those of the contemplative life and that extravagant pleasures such as drunkenness and gluttony eventually lead to misery.) Other egoistic notions of the greatest good include self-actualization (fulfilling one's potential), security and material success, satisfaction of desires, acquisition of power, and the experience of happiness.

To many people, ethical egoism may sound alien, especially if they have heard all their lives about the noble virtue of altruism and the

evils of self-centeredness. But consider that self-interest is a pillar on which the economic system of capitalism is built. In a capitalist system, self-interest is supposed to drive people to seek advantages for themselves in the marketplace, compelling them to compete against each other to build a better mousetrap at a lower price. Economists argue that the result of this clash of self-interests is a better, more prosperous society.

APPLYING THE THEORY

Suppose Rosa is a successful executive at a large media corporation, and she has her eye on a vice president's position, which has just become vacant. Vincent, another successful executive in the company, also wants the VP job. Management wants to fill the vacancy as soon as possible, and they are trying to decide between the two most qualified candidates—Rosa and Vincent. One day Rosa discovers some documents left near a photocopier and quickly realizes that they belong to Vincent. One of them is an old memo from the president of a company where Vincent used to work. In it, the president lambastes Vincent for botching an important company project. Rosa knows that despite the content of the memo, Vincent has had an exemplary professional career in which he has managed most of his projects extremely well. In fact, she believes that the two of them are about equal in professional skills and accomplishments. She also knows that if management saw the memo, they would almost certainly choose her over Vincent for the VP position. She figures that Vincent probably left the documents there by mistake and would soon return to retrieve them. Impulsively, she makes a copy of the memo for herself.

Now she is confronted with a moral choice. Let us suppose that she has only three options. First, she can destroy her copy of the memo and forget about the whole incident. Second, she can discredit Vincent by showing it to management, thereby securing the VP slot for herself. Third, she can achieve the same result by discrediting Vincent surreptitiously: she can simply leave a copy where management is sure to discover it. Let us also assume that she is an act-egoist who defines her self-interest as self-actualization. Self-actualization for her means developing into the most powerful, most highly respected executive in her profession while maximizing the virtues of loyalty and honesty.

So by the lights of her act-egoism what should Rosa do? Which choice is in her best interests? Option one is neutral regarding her self-interest. If she destroys her copy of the memo, she will neither gain nor lose an advantage for herself. Option two is more complicated. If she overtly discredits Vincent, she will probably land the VP spot—a feat that fits nicely with her desire to become a powerful executive. But such a barefaced sabotaging of someone else's career would likely trouble management, and their loss of some respect for Rosa would impede future advancement in her career. They may also come to distrust her. Rosa's backstabbing would also probably erode the trust and respect of her subordinates (those who report to her). If so, their performance may suffer, and any deficiencies in Rosa's subordinates would reflect on her leadership skills. Over time, she may be able to regain the respect and trust of others may be much harder to regain. Option two involves the unauthorized, deceitful use of personal information against another person—not an action that encourages the virtue of honesty in Rosa. In fact, her dishonesty may weaken her moral resolve and make similar acts of deceit more probable.

Like option two, option three would likely secure the VP job for Rosa. But because the deed is surreptitious, it would probably not diminish the respect and trust of others. There is a probability, however, that Rosa's secret would eventually be uncovered—especially if Vincent suspects Rosa, which is likely. If she is found out, the damage done to her reputation (and possibly her career) might be greater than that caused by the more up-front tack of option two. Also like option two, option three might weaken the virtue of honesty in Rosa's character.

Given this situation and Rosa's brand of act-egoism, she should probably go with option three—but only if the risk of being found out is extremely low. Option three promotes her self-interest dramatically by securing the coveted job at a relatively low cost (a possible erosion of virtue). Option two would also land the job but at very high cost—a loss of other people's trust and respect, a possible decrease in her chances for career advancement, damage to her professional reputation, and a likely lessening of a virtue critical to Rosa's self-actualization (honesty).

If Rosa believes that the risks to her career and character involved in options two and three are too high, she should probably choose option one. This choice would not promote her best interests, but it would not diminish them either.

Would Rosa's action be any different if judged from the perspective of rule-egoism? Suppose Rosa, like many other ethical egoists, thinks that her actions should be guided by this rule (or something like it): "People should be honest in their dealings with others—that is, except in insignificant matters (white lies), they should not lie to others or mislead them." She believes that adhering to this prohibition against dishonesty is in her best interests. The rule, however, would disallow both options two and three, for they involve significant deception. Only option one would be left. But if obeying the rule would lead to a major setback for her interests, Rosa might decide to ignore it in this case (or reject it altogether as contrary to the spirit of ethical egoism). If so, she might have to fall back to act-egoism and decide in favor of option three.

EVALUATING THE THEORY

Is ethical egoism a plausible moral theory? Let us find out by examining arguments in its favor and applying the moral criteria of adequacy.

The primary argument for ethical egoism depends heavily on a scientific theory known as **psychological egoism**, the view that the motive for all our actions is self-interest. Whatever we do, we do because we want to promote our own welfare. Psychological egoism, we are told, is simply a description of the true nature of our motivations. We are, in short, born to look out for number one.

Putting psychological egoism to good use, the ethical egoist reasons as follows: We can never be morally obligated to perform an action that we cannot possibly do. This is just an obvious fact about morality. Because we are *not able* to prevent a hurricane from blasting across a coastal city, we are *not morally obligated* to prevent it. Likewise, because we are not able to perform an action except out of self-interest (the claim of psychological egoism), we are not morally obligated to perform an action unless motivated by self-interest. That is, we are morally obligated to do only what our self-interest motivates us to do. Here is the argument stated more formally:

1. We are not able to perform an action except out of self-interest (psychological egoism).
2. We are not morally obligated to perform an action unless motivated by self-interest.

3. Therefore, we are morally obligated to do only what our self-interest motivates us to do.

Notice that even if psychological egoism is true, this argument does not establish that an action is right if and only if it promotes one's self-interest (the claim of ethical egoism). But it does demonstrate that an action cannot be right unless it at least promotes one's self-interest. To put it another way, an action that does not advance one's own welfare cannot be right.

Is psychological egoism true? Many people think it is and offer several arguments in its favor. One line of reasoning is that psychological egoism is true because experience shows that all our actions are in fact motivated by self-interest. All our actions—including seemingly altruistic ones—are performed to gain some benefit for ourselves. This argument, however, is far from conclusive. Sometimes people do perform altruistic acts because doing so is in their best interests. One person may contribute to charity because such generosity furthers his political ambitions. Another person may do volunteer work for the Red Cross because it looks good on her résumé. But people also seem to do things that are *not* motivated by self-interest. A person may risk his life by rushing into a burning building to rescue a complete stranger. Another may impair her health by donating a kidney to prevent one of her children from dying. Explanations that appeal to self-interest in such cases seem implausible. Moreover, people often have self-destructive habits (for example, drinking excessively and driving recklessly)—habits that are unlikely to be in anyone's best interests.

Some ethical egoists may argue in a slightly different vein: People get satisfaction (or happiness or pleasure) from what they do, including their so-called unselfish or altruistic acts. Therefore, they perform unselfish or altruistic actions because doing so gives them satisfaction. A man saves a child from a burning building because he wants the emotional satisfaction that comes from saving a life. Our actions, no matter how we characterize them, are all about self-interest.

This argument is based on a conceptual confusion. It says that we perform selfless acts to achieve satisfaction. Satisfaction is the object of the whole exercise. But if we experience satisfaction in performing an action, that does not show that our goal in performing the action is satisfaction. A much more plausible account is that we desire something other than satisfaction and then experience satisfaction as a result of getting what we desired. Consider, for example, our man who saves

the child from a fire. He rescues the child and feels satisfaction—but he could not have experienced that satisfaction unless he already had a desire to save the child or cared what happened to her. If he did not have such a desire or care about her, how could he have derived any satisfaction from his actions? To experience satisfaction he had to have a desire for something other than his own satisfaction. The moral of the story is that satisfaction is the result of getting what we want—not the object of our desires.

This view fits well with our own experience. Most often when we act according to some purpose, we are not focused on, or aware of, our satisfaction. We concentrate on obtaining the real object of our efforts, and when we succeed, we then feel satisfaction.

The philosopher Joel Feinberg makes a similar point about the pursuit of happiness. He asks us to imagine a person, Jones, who has no desire for much of anything—except happiness. Jones has no interest in knowledge for its own sake, the beauty of nature, art and literature, sports, crafts, or business. But Jones does have “an overwhelming passion for, a complete preoccupation with, his own happiness. The one desire of his life is to be happy.”¹ The irony is that using this approach, Jones will *not* find happiness. He cannot pursue happiness directly and expect to find it. To achieve happiness, he must pursue other aims whose pursuit yields happiness as a by-product. We must conclude that it is not the case that our only motivation for our actions is the desire for happiness (or satisfaction or pleasure).

These reflections show that psychological egoism is a dubious theory, and if we construe self-interest as satisfaction, pleasure, or happiness, the theory seems false. Still, some may not give up the argument from experience (mentioned earlier), insisting that when properly interpreted, all our actions (including those that seem purely altruistic or unselfish) can be shown to be motivated by self-interest. All of the counterexamples that seem to suggest that psychological egoism is false actually are evidence that it is true. A donor’s contributions to a charity may seem altruistic, but he is really trying to impress a woman he would like to date. A volunteer’s work at the Red Cross may seem unselfish, but she is just trying to cultivate some business contacts. Every counterexample can be reinterpreted to support the theory.

Critics have been quick to charge that this way of defending psychological egoism is a mistake. It renders the theory untestable and useless. It ensures that no evidence could possibly count against it,

and therefore it does not tell us anything about self-interested actions. Anything we say about such actions would be consistent with the theory. Any theory that is so uninformative could not be used to support another theory—including ethical egoism.

So far we have found the arguments for ethical egoism ineffective. Now we can ask another question: Are there any good arguments *against* ethical egoism? This is where the moral criteria of adequacy come in.

Recall that an important first step in evaluating a moral theory (or any other kind of theory) is to determine if it meets the minimum requirement of coherence, or internal consistency. As it turns out, some critics of ethical egoism have brought the charge of logical or practical inconsistency against the theory. But in general these criticisms seem to fall short of a knockout blow to ethical egoism. Devising counterarguments that can undercut the criticisms seems to be a straightforward business. Let us assume, then, that ethical egoism is in fact eligible for evaluation using the criteria of adequacy.

We begin with Criterion 1, consistency with considered judgments. A major criticism of ethical egoism is that it is *not* consistent with many of our considered moral judgments—judgments that seem highly plausible and commonsensical. Specifically, ethical egoism seems to sanction actions that we would surely regard as abominable. Suppose a young man visits his elderly, bedridden father. When he sees that no one else is around, he uses a pillow to smother the old man in order to collect on his life insurance. Suppose also that the action is in the son’s best interests; it will cause not the least bit of unpleasant feelings in him; and the crime will remain his own terrible secret. According to ethical egoism, this heinous act is morally right. The son did his duty.

An ethical egoist might object to this line by saying that *refraining* from committing evil acts is actually endorsed by ethical egoism—one’s best interests are served by refraining. You should not murder or steal, for example, because it might encourage others to do the same to you, or it might undermine trust, security, or cooperation in society, which would not be in your best interests. For these reasons, you should obey the law or the rules of conventional morality (as the rule-egoist might do).

But following the rules is clearly not always in one’s best interests. Sometimes committing a wicked act really does promote one’s own welfare. In the case of the murdering son, no one will seek revenge for the

secret murder, cooperation and trust in society will not be affected, and the murderer will suffer no psychological torments. There seems to be no downside here—but the son's rewards for committing the deed will be great. Consistently looking out for one's own welfare sometimes requires rule violations and exceptions. In fact, some argue that the interests of ethical egoists may be best served when they urge everyone else to obey the rules while they themselves secretly break them.

If ethical egoism does conflict with our considered judgments, it is questionable at best. But it has been accused of another defect as well: it fails Criterion 2, consistency with our moral experiences.

One aspect of morality is so fundamental that we may plausibly view it as a basic fact of the moral life: moral impartiality, or treating equals equally. We know that in our dealings with the world, we are supposed to take into account the treatment of others as well as that of ourselves. The moral life is lived with the wider world in mind. We must give all persons their due and treat all equals equally, for in the moral sense we are all equals. Each person is presumed to have the same rights as everyone else—and to have interests that are just as important as everyone else's—unless we have good reason for thinking otherwise. If one person is qualified for a job, and another person is equally qualified, we would be guilty of discrimination if we hired one and not the other based solely on race, sex, skin color, or ancestry (this is so because these factors are not morally relevant). People who do treat equals unequally in such ways are known as racists, sexists, bigots, and the like. Probably the most serious charge against ethical egoism is that it discriminates against people in the same fashion. It arbitrarily treats the interests of some people (oneself) as more important than the interests of all others (the rest of the world)—even though there is no morally relevant difference between the two.

The failure of ethical egoism to treat equals equally seems a serious defect in the theory. It conflicts with a major component of our moral existence. For many critics, this single defect is enough reason to reject the theory.

Recall that Criterion 3 is usefulness in moral problem solving. Some philosophers argue that ethical egoism fails this standard because the theory seems to lead to contradictory advice or conflicting actions. If real, this problem would constitute a significant failing of the theory. But these criticisms depend on controversial assumptions about ethical egoism or morality in general, so we will not dwell on them here.

Our analysis of ethical egoism's problems using the first two criteria should be sufficient to raise serious doubts about the theory.

KEYWORDS

act-egoism—The theory that to determine right action, you must apply the egoistic principle to individual acts.

psychological egoism—The scientific view that the motive for all our actions is self-interest.

rule-egoism—The theory that to determine right action, you must see if an act falls under a rule that if consistently followed would maximize your self-interest.

EXERCISES

Review Questions

1. What is the difference between act-egoism and rule-egoism?
2. If psychological egoism were true, would this fact show that ethical egoism must be true?
3. What is the psychological egoist argument for ethical egoism?
4. Is psychological egoism true? Why or why not?
5. In what way is ethical egoism not consistent with our considered moral judgments?
6. Why do critics regard ethical egoism as an inadequate moral theory?
7. How does ethical egoism seem to conflict with the principle of impartiality?
8. Does ethical egoism imply an unrestrained pursuit of pleasure?
9. What is the difference between self-interest and selfishness?
10. How does self-interest operate in capitalist economies?

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Explain how ethical egoism (act-egoism or rule-egoism) could be applied in the following scenarios to determine the proper course of action.

1. Your best friend is on trial for murder, and only your testimony can show that she is innocent. But if you testify, you will incriminate yourself, and incriminating yourself will likely lead to a lifetime prison sentence for you. If you say nothing, you will avoid prison and any other legal punishment. Your friend, however, will almost certainly get the death penalty. Should you testify?

2. You are a person of modest means who has been asked to contribute \$1,000 to help feed the poor and hungry in Africa. Giving less than that will accomplish nothing. If you contribute that much money, thirty hungry people will survive for a full year, but you will not be able to afford dental work to alleviate the severe pain in your teeth. Giving or not giving the money are the only options. What should you do?
3. Your grandfather is dying. While he is in this diminished state, you can easily persuade him to sign some legal documents that would give you sole rights to his large fortune upon his death. If he were fully coherent, he would never sign over his fortune to you. No one would ever learn of your deathbed swindle. Should you take the old man's money?

Endnote

1. Joel Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," in *Moral Philosophy: Selected Readings*, ed. George Sher (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 11–12.

CHAPTER 6

Utilitarianism

Are you a utilitarian? To find out, consider the following scenario: After years of research, a medical scientist—Dr. X—realizes that she is just one step away from developing a cure for all known forms of heart disease. Such a breakthrough would save hundreds of thousands of lives—perhaps millions. The world could finally be rid of heart attacks, strokes, heart failure, and the like, a feat as monumental as the eradication of deadly smallpox. That one last step in her research, however, is technologically feasible but morally problematic. It involves the killing of a single healthy human being to microscopically examine the person's heart tissue just seconds after the heart stops beating. The crucial piece of information needed to perfect the cure can be acquired only as just described; it cannot be extracted from the heart of a cadaver, an accident victim, someone suffering from a disease, or a person who has been dead for more than sixty seconds. Dr. X decides that the benefits to humanity from the cure are just too great to ignore. She locates a suitable candidate for the operation: a homeless man with no living relatives and no friends—someone who would not be missed. Through some elaborate subterfuge she manages to secretly do what needs to be done, killing the man and successfully performing the operation. She formulates the cure and saves countless lives. No one ever discovers how she obtained the last bit of information she needed to devise the cure, and she feels not the slightest guilt for her actions.