

Lesson 7

Ethical Egoism

What is the duty to help the starving? Each year, millions of people die from health problems brought on by malnutrition. Often, those who die are children. Every day, around 18,000 children under the age of 5 die, almost always from preventable causes. That comes to over 6.5 million deaths each year. Even if this estimate is too high, the number who die unnecessarily is staggering. Poverty poses an acute problem for many of us who are not poor. We spend money on ourselves, not only on necessities but also on luxuries-jewelry, concert tickets, iPads, etc. In America, even people with modest incomes often enjoy such things. But we could forgo our luxuries and give the money to famine relief instead. The fact is that we don't suggest that we regard our luxuries as more important than the lives of the starving. Why do we let people starve when we could save them? Few of us actually believe our luxuries are that important. If asked directly, most of us would probably feel embarrassed, and we might say we should do more to help. We don't do more because we rarely think about the problem. Living our own comfortable lives, we are insulated from it. The starving people are dying at some distance from us; we do not see them, and we can avoid thinking about them. When we think of them, it is only abstractly, as statistics. Unfortunately for the hungry, statistics have little power to move us.

We respond differently when there is a "crisis," like when Hurricane Maria devastated the island of Puerto Rico in 2017, killing over 3,000 and leaving hundreds of thousands without food or water, or when a 7.2 major earthquake hit Haiti in 2021. Then the crisis is big news, and relief efforts are mobilized. But when the needy are scattered, the situation does not seem so pressing. The 6.5 million children who die every year would probably be saved if they were all gathered in

a city like New York. But leaving aside the question of why we behave as we do, what is our duty? What should we do? Common sense might tell us to balance our interests against others'. It is understandable, of course, that we look out for ourselves, and no one can be blamed for attending to her own basic needs. But at the same time, the needs of others are important, and when we can help others-especially at little cost to ourselves- we should do so. So, if you have an extra \$10, and giving it to charity would help save a child's life, then common sense would say you should do so. This way of thinking assumes that we have duties to others simply because they could be helped or harmed by what we do. If a certain action would benefit or harm other people, then that is a reason why we should or should not perform that action. The commonsense assumption is that other people's interests count from a moral point of view. But one person's common sense is another person's naive platitude. Some people believe that we have no duties to others. In their view, known as Ethical Egoism, each person ought to pursue his or her self-interest exclusively. This is the morality of selfishness. It holds that our only duty is to do what is best for ourselves, and other people matter only if they can benefit us.¹

When we hear the word ego or egotist, we think of an arrogant or self-centered person.

Egotistical behavior is not in one's best self-interest because it tends to alienate others and limit opportunities for happiness. But ethical egoism states that every person should do what is exclusively in his or her best self-interest. Remember from Lesson 4 that ethical subjectivism is about only what feels right, but in ethical egoism, we are concerned with rational self-interest. There are three types of ethical egoism: individual ethical egoism, personal ethical egoism, and universal ethical egoism.

¹ James Rachel, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 8th ed. pg. 64-65

1. **Individual Ethical Egoism**-states that everyone ought to act in their own best self-interest. To put it simply, every person should do what is good for me. The best illustration would be to think of a king and his kingdom, and every person is to do what is best for the king. We could also think about a dictator over a country.
2. **Personal Ethical Egoism** states that I ought to act in my own self-interest but makes no claims about what anyone else ought to do. If that wording sounds familiar, it is very similar to ethical subjectivism, but it tries to state that this is what everyone should do.
3. **Universal Ethical Egoism** states that everyone should always act in his or her best self-interest, regardless of others' interests, unless those interests also serve his or hers. As it says, this is a universal theory that applies to all people because it does not state only what the individual should do, but rather what all human beings should do if they want to be moral.

The problem with the first two is that they only apply to one individual and cannot be laid down for humanity. But unlike ethical subjectivism, ethical egoism does not recommend mindlessly acting on our desires; instead, it rationally calculates which actions would most benefit us. What we feel is right for us is not always the same as what is right or, in fact, in our self-interest. In Lesson 4, Ted Bundy did what felt right and was not rationally calculated. Skipping class, cheating on your partner, or doing drugs may be things we want to do, but these activities, for the most part, are not in our rational self-interest. We must forgo the immediate desires to fulfill our long-term interests and achieve happiness. Ethical egoism makes three key claims:

1. **Individual happiness is the greatest moral good**
2. **People achieve happiness by pursuing their rational self-interests**

3. People ought to pursue their rational self-interests

Seeking our own interests does not necessarily ignore others' interests. In fact, our long-term interests might best be served by allowing others to pursue their self-interests. Helping others is often in our own self-interest because they will be more likely to help us when we need them. Sometimes the best way to get ahead is to do something for someone who can give us something we value in return. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle incorporated ethical egoism into their theories. But most moral philosophers like Socrates agree that personal happiness, while important, is only one of several goods by which to judge the morality of an action. Sometimes a comparison is made between ethical egoism and hedonism. Hedonism looks at pleasure as a standard of value. If something brings pleasure, it is good, and if it brings pain, it is bad. C.S. Lewis said, "We have had enough once and for all of Hedonism, that gloomy philosophy which says that pleasure is the only good."² The philosopher Epicurus in the 3rd century BC distinguished between the pleasures of hedonism and ethical egoism in that ethical egoism focuses on rational pleasures, not the pleasures of debauchery. Hedonism focuses on immediate pleasure, while ethical egoism accounts for both short-term and long-term consequences.

One theory that is often confused with ethical egoism is psychological egoism. Ethical egoism claims that each person *ought* to pursue his or her self-interest exclusively. On the other hand, psychological egoism states that each person *does* pursue his or her self-interest exclusively. These two theories are very different. It is one thing to say that people are self-interested, but it is another thing to say that people ought to be self-interested. Psychological egoism makes a claim about human nature or the way things are, but ethical egoism makes a claim about morality or

² C.S. Lewis, "Hedonics," *Times and Tide*, 1945

the way things should be. Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher, stated that people are basically selfish, aggressive, and quarrelsome. People live in society and agree to obey certain rules under a "social contract." In the classic book *Lord of the Flies*, a group of British schoolboys grows brutal and lawless after being stranded on a desert island, exemplifying Hobbes's view of human nature. The popular reality TV show *Survivor* shows us season after season that people come into this game to be honest and trustworthy, only to show the true nature of psychological egoism and what Hobbes would say is our true nature. Why have so many people been attracted to it if psychological egoism is so implausible? Some people like the theory's cynical view of human nature, and others like its simplicity. And it would be pleasing if a single factor could explain all human behavior. But human beings are too complicated for that. Psychological egoism is not a credible theory.

The popularity of ethical egoism in the 20th century is associated with the philosopher Ayn Rand. She was also a novelist and explored this theme in many of her novels. Rand was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1905 and immigrated to the US in 1931. Part of her philosophy grew out of her experience living under both the Soviet Communist system and the US system of government. She became disillusioned with the demoralizing efforts of the collective system of communism and concluded that ethical egoism exemplified the laissez-faire capitalism of the individual human. Rand regarded altruism as destructive to both society and the individual. She believed that altruism led to the denial and devaluing of the human individual. Rand wrote, "parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being-nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to their needs, demands and protections, a society that treats him like a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues to reward them

for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism."³ Ayn Rand believes that to demand that a person abandon his projects and give up his goods for others is to demand that he "sacrifice his life." If we take Rand's belief and apply it to the story about feeding the children, she would not stop you from helping, but she does not believe it is something everyone needs to undertake. She would answer, "If you want to help them, you will not be stopped." Her arguments can be part of a single argument that goes like this:

1. Each person has only one life to live. If we value the individual, we must agree that his life is of supreme importance. After all, it is all one has, and all one is.
2. The ethics of altruism regards the individual's life as something to be sacrificed for the good of others. Therefore, the ethics of altruism do not take the individual's value seriously.
3. Ethical egoism, which allows each person to view his or her life as having supreme value, does take the individual seriously-it and is, in fact, the only philosophy that does.
4. Thus, we should accept ethical egoism.

One problem with this argument is its assumption that we have only two options: either we follow altruism or ethical egoism. By doing so, we commit the fallacy of either/or (see Lesson 3). It also suggests that accepting altruism is something only an idiot would accept. But the commonsense view stands between the two extreme ends and accepts that there is a middle ground or, as the golden rule states: do unto others so that others will be more likely to do unto us.

³ "The Objectivist Ethics," Ayn Rand, University of Wisconsin Symposium on "Ethics in Our Time," February 9, 1961.

Arguments For Ethical Egoism

There are at least three arguments in support of ethical egoism:

1. **Altruism is self-defeating**-As already discussed in our understanding of Ayn Rand, ethical egoists see that altruism is self-defeating. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that altruism is self-defeating because it means an individual is saying that someone else is more important than themselves. Nietzsche saw altruism as denigrating oneself, putting oneself down by valuing oneself less than the other. This is the heart of altruism, and it is demeaning in Nietzsche's eyes.
2. **Acting selfishly creates a better world**-Ethical egoists maintain that if each person took care of himself/herself, the overall effect would be to make the world a better place for everyone. From an epistemological (moral knowledge) understanding, each of us is best suited to know what his or her own needs and interests are. Moreover, each of us is uniquely placed to pursue those wants and needs effectively. At the same time, we understand other people only imperfectly, and we are not well placed to advance their interests. If we try to be "our brother's keeper," we will often bungle the job and do more harm than good. At the same time, the policy of "looking out for others" is an offensive intrusion into other people's privacy. It is essentially a policy of minding other people's business. According to ethical egoists, making other people the object of one's "charity" is degrading to them. From a moral standpoint, helping others makes them dependent, which ultimately harms them.
3. **Ethical egoism doesn't result in such a different world after all**- this argument presupposes the people, in fact, already act selfishly (psychological egoism) and are just pretending to be altruistic. So if psychological egoism is true, then we should admit its truth and get rid of our hypocrisy.

Criticisms of Ethical Egoism

1. **Cannot be consistently universalized**-Can we state that everyone will follow the tenets of ethical egoism? It seems to be in one's self-interest to be selfish and yet get everyone else to act altruistically, especially if they act for your benefit. The problem is that we cannot consistently universalize ethical egoism in sports.
2. **Ethical egoism: a philosophy for a world of strangers and a lack of friendship**-following ethical egoism would create a world of living with strangers that you do not care about. Friendship involves, among other things, being concerned about other people for their own sake; this seems beyond the reach of the egoist. Ethical egoists can help their friends if they believe there is a long-term payoff. It would be hard to imagine marriage in the same light.
3. **Ethical egoism and moral sensitivity**-Can the ethical egoist be sensitive to the suffering of others? Such sensitivity seems to presuppose caring about other people for their own sake. Moral sensitivity presupposes that the suffering of others exerts a moral "pull" on the individual-something that the ethical egoist does not recognize.

The Principle of Equal Treatment states that we should treat people the same way unless there is a good reason not to. The Principle of Equal Treatment requires fairness in our dealings with others. We can apply this principle to racism. If ethical egoism were true, then treating people differently would be justified. But, of course, they are not true. There are no such differences between races. Thus, racism is an arbitrary doctrine because it advocates treating people differently even though there are no good reasons to do so. Ethical egoism is a moral theory of the same type. It advocates dividing the world into two categories of people, ourselves and everyone else. It urges us to regard the interests of those in the first group as more important than those in the second group. But each of us can ask: what is the difference between me and

everyone else that justifies placing myself in this special category? Am I more intelligent? Are my accomplishments greater? Do I enjoy life more? Are my needs and abilities different from the needs and the abilities of others? In short, what makes me so special?

Failing an answer, it turns out that ethical egoism is an arbitrary doctrine. In the same way, racism is arbitrary. Both doctrines violate the Principle of Equal Treatment. Thus, we should care about other people's interests because their needs and desires are comparable to our own.

Consider, one last time, the starving children we could feed by giving up some of our luxuries.

Why should we care about them? We care about ourselves. Of course, if we were starving, we would do almost anything to get food. But what is the difference between them and us? Does hunger affect them any less? Are they less deserving than we are? If we can find no relevant difference between them and us, then we must admit that if our needs should be met, so should theirs. This realization that we are on a par with one another is the deepest reason why our morality must recognize the needs of others. And that is why, ultimately, ethical egoism fails as a moral theory.⁴

⁴ James Rachel, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 8th ed. pg. 64-65