

Advantages and Shortcomings of Egoism

by John Lumsden



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will evaluate the egoist position by thinking about how self-interest can be used in ethical situations. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Self-Interest and Human Action

To begin with, recall that egoism is a relativist theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are relative to self-interest. Making self-interest the sole source of ethical value might seem a bit strange. After all, don't we turn to ethics to understand how we should treat other people?



THINK ABOUT IT

If you're faced with the decision about whether or not to keep a loved one on life support, wouldn't you want an ethic to help you think about what is good for your loved one as much as what is good for you? An egoist might try to sidestep this worry by saying that humans act out of self-interest anyway. If we only ever act out of self-interest, then we're fooling ourselves about the importance of obligations to other people.

The problem with this is that, for every example of people naturally acting out of self-interest (e.g. securing their own survival by eating), there is an example of people naturally caring about others (e.g. having empathy for other people's suffering).

If we do naturally act in both ways, then the egoist might still say that we are more likely to follow an ethic that we decide on ourselves than an ethic that's forced on us.

IN CONTEXT

Most of us can remember being told what we should or shouldn't do when we were kids. What did we do when our parents or teachers laid down the law like this? A lot of the time we would rebel.

Even in adulthood we often resent being told what to do. So it makes sense that we are more likely to do something that we've decided on ourselves.

You should be careful with this argument. Making up our own minds doesn't have to mean making up our minds to be selfish. Think of it this way: it's true that you probably won't give to charity just because someone else says so, but you could decide for yourself that you want to give to charity. As you can see, you can be

2. Review of Self-Interest and Society

Another reason an egoist might give for being self-interested is that it's good for society. In particular, they might point to historical or social development brought about by self-interested action.

➞ EXAMPLE Power-hungry leaders have helped to spread developments across the world. The Roman Empire, for instance, brought new technologies to the places they invaded.

They might also say that working in other people's interests actually brings about bad results.

➞ EXAMPLE Communist states made people work in the interest of their country rather than in their own interests. This brought about oppressive conditions.

But you might worry that examples such as this are cherry-picked. Sure, you can point to times where self-interested action worked out well and other-interested action turned out badly. But perhaps we can also find counter-examples.

➞ EXAMPLE People doing what they like in areas of finance didn't bring about progress in recent years. In fact, it brought about the 2008 economic crisis. By contrast, countries such as Finland and Canada, with stronger regulation and more policies to help others, come out on top of lists measuring social progress.

As you can see, it's difficult to determine which kind of action really does bring about the best result. We would need some extremely broad and extensive empirical research to help us figure out which kind of action is best at promoting progress.

3. Intuitiveness of Egoism

Like many ethical theories, egoism will sometimes give you evaluations that make sense to you, and sometimes ones that don't. In other words, sometimes it will give intuitive results, and sometimes it will give counterintuitive results.

➞ EXAMPLE It makes sense to fulfill your basic needs (such as eating). But it's strange to think that you ought to commit any crime for your own benefit, as long as you can get away with it.

Egoism is also counterintuitive in that it says that we can only decide on what's good relative to the person making the judgment. If something is good for me, then you can't complain that it's bad for someone else. In a similar way, if something is good for you, but bad for me, I can't tell you not to do it.

➞ EXAMPLE If a parent is hitting their child in the interest of making the child do what the parent wants, then an egoist can't complain about it.

This is troubling because most of us would want to say that things such as this shouldn't happen and that we have good reasons to believe this (i.e. it's not just an expression of our opinion, but ethically true).



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of self-interest and human action**, showing the ways that an egoist might argue for their ethics by pointing to the centrality of self-interest in our actions. Then a

review of self-interest and society looked at the ways social progress could be influenced by acting in your own interest or other people's interest. Finally, we considered the **intuitiveness of egoism**, focusing on the way that evaluating actions in terms of self-interest results in the counterintuitive limiting of our judgment of other people.

Source: For ranking of countries on social progress see the "social progress index" <http://bit.ly/2bE9Upl>