

Applying Egoism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will look at the relationship between our everyday ethical views and our self-interest, before considering how egoism can be applied to certain ethical issues. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Agreement with Everyday Morality

To begin with, recall that egoism is a relativist theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are relative to self-interest. If you were to use this ethical theory to help you decide how to act, it might guide you to do what you would do anyway. In other words, it will sometimes give you intuitive instruction.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When you're in the supermarket you wouldn't pay for everyone else's groceries, as well as your own. In this case, your intuitive actions agree with egoism since the egoist will tell you that paying for everyone's groceries goes against your self-interest, and therefore is impermissible.

In fact, egoism will accept most of your daily actions. This is simply because you need to do things every day to stay alive. For example, you need to eat, drink, and sleep. These things are in your own interest, and so the egoist will say you must do them.

It's worth noting that almost no ethical theory would say it's wrong to act in your own interests, where these actions are needed for survival (e.g. eating).

2. Disagreement with Everyday Morality

There are many instances where egoism will give evaluations or guidance that makes no sense to you. In other words, egoism can provide counterintuitive results.

➞ **EXAMPLE** It would be permissible for a cheating husband to kill his mistress, as long as he doesn't get caught and go to jail. This is because it's in his interests to avoid an expensive divorce.

There are many similar cases where an egoist will say that you should do things that benefit you, even if this means damaging other people's interests.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you're going to be in a race and you really want to win, but you're sure that someone else is faster than you. If you could get away with it, the egoist would say it's fine to injure your competition to make sure you win.

For most of us, it's counterintuitive to think that hurting your competition is the morally right thing to do.

3. Some Uncertain Cases

We have seen some examples of where egoism gives intuitive and counterintuitive results. But sometimes egoism doesn't give very clear instructions, and so you can't be sure whether or not it fits with your everyday views about right and wrong. For instance, this can happen when you have competing interests.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you want to be an architect then you might need to study for a long time and take unpaid apprenticeships. But you might also need money now to pay rent and bills.

It isn't clear if the egoist will tell you to work in order to survive or to follow your goals and ambitions. Both are in your own interest, but you can do only one of them. There are many other cases where it isn't clear which of your interests you should follow.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine you have two groups of friends, one that you really enjoy hanging out with, and one that you don't enjoy hanging out with. The second group can help you get a job you want. Which interest should you follow: having a good time with people you like, or getting help improving your career? It isn't clear which way egoism will tell you to go.

4. Topics in Applied Ethics

Philosophers working in ethics often try to apply ethical theories to controversial ethical issues. Let's consider how an egoist might apply their ethics to the following issues.

1. The moral permissibility of damaging the environment
2. The moral permissibility of abortion
3. The moral permissibility of torture

Here are the positions that egoists take on these issues.

Egoism and Applied Ethics	
Issue	Position
Environment	If damaging the environment harmed your own living conditions, then it is wrong. But if it doesn't, then it is fine.
Abortion	If having a child works against your interests, then you should have an abortion, according to the egoist.

Torture	If you get pleasure from torturing other people, then an egoist would say it's your duty to do so because it benefits your self-interests.
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If you disagree with these ethical judgments, then you may not think Egoism is the best framework for deciding which actions are right and wrong.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by seeing how egoism can be in **agreement with everyday morality**, and then how it can be in **disagreement with everyday morality**. We saw how working for our own interests sometimes fits with our common judgments, and sometimes doesn't.

Then we looked at **some uncertain cases** where it wasn't clear whether there was complete agreement between self-interested action and our usual ethical judgments. Finally, some **topics in applied ethics** were considered from the perspective of egoism.