

Commitments of Egoism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will focus on the types of evaluations of actions that an egoist will give. You will also have a go at using this ethical theory by evaluating a situation yourself. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Review of Egoism

To begin with, recall that Egoism is a relativist theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are relative to self-interest.

Like any theory of ethics, this can help you evaluate actions. If you were to use this theory, then you would evaluate actions according to what best contributes to your self-interest.

In the next section we will look at the various ways an egoist can evaluate actions. But before doing so, let's remind ourselves of the terms that ethical theorists use to evaluate actions.

PERMISSIBLE

An action that is **not** wrong to perform

- **OBLIGATORY**
An action that must be performed (i.e. that is wrong not to perform)
- **NEUTRAL**
An action that is neither right nor wrong to perform
- **SUPEREROGATORY**
An action that morally exceeds what is obligatory

IMPERMISSIBLE An action that **is** wrong to perform

2. Permissibility and Impermissibility in Egoism

For an egoist, something is permissible if it does not go against the interests of the individual. This might lead you to think that a true egoist can only ever do things for themselves, and never do things for others. But it's a bit more complicated than that. That's because doing things for others could actually work in your favor.

➞ EXAMPLE If you help your new neighbors move in, then they will probably offer you a hand when you need it at some point in the future.

In the long run you might get more benefit from social cooperation than from isolating yourself from others. Such a beneficial cooperation would thus be an example of a permissible action for the egoist.

For an egoist, something is impermissible if it goes against the interests of the individual.

➞ EXAMPLE If the goal I care most about is becoming an athlete, then eating junk food and lazing around on the couch is against my interests and thus impermissible according to the egoist.

3. Types of Permissibility in Egoism

Now we will look at how an egoist would evaluate actions as either neutral, obligatory, or supererogatory. First of all, let's take the example of lying to find out what is obligatory for the egoist.

➞ EXAMPLE If you could pass off your colleague's work as your own to get a promotion, and there was no possibility of being caught, the egoist would say that you must do it because it would be in your own interest to do so.

Of course, if it was likely that you would get caught, then you could lose your job. In that case, it wouldn't be obligatory because being unemployed is against your interests.

For an egoist, a neutral action is one that neither works in favor of your interests, nor goes against them.

➞ EXAMPLE If you had half an hour to burn before meeting your friend, it would make no difference whether you order a tea or a coffee while waiting. Assuming you had no strong preference for one or the other, choosing either would be neutral according to the egoist.

When it comes to supererogatory actions, it isn't clear how the egoist will respond. If they say it's your duty to act in your own interests, what would it mean to do something over and above your duty? Perhaps it would mean an obsessive pursuit of self-interest, to the point where you force yourself to ignore any sympathy you may have for other people.

This could run into difficulties though. For instance, if pursuing self-interest is obligatory, why shouldn't obsessive pursuit of self-interest be obligatory anyway? It seems that the egoist must answer that it is obligatory, thus getting rid of supererogatory actions.

4. Application of Egoism

Now that you have seen how ethical evaluations can be based on self-interest, you can think about using this in a specific situation. Consider the example below and think about how you would evaluate each action if you were an egoist.



IMAGINE YOU DECIDE TO STUDY TO BECOME A DOCTOR

Let's say you
want to be a
cardiologist
because it pays
well and people
are impressed.



You didn't realize
how difficult the
training would be.
But you stick at it
because you think
we need more
doctors to help
sick people.

The actions would have been evaluated in the following way:

1. The act of becoming a doctor would be neutral according to the egoist, as long as it is neither more nor less beneficial to you than studying for another profession.
2. The act of choosing cardiology because of the pay and respect that comes with this position is obligatory for the egoist since it's in your self-interest to do so.
3. The act of carrying on your training for the benefit of others, even though you don't like it, is impermissible for the egoist because you would be acting against your self-interest.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with a **review of egoism** and the terms for evaluating actions. Then we saw some examples of **permissibility and impermissibility in egoism**, before looking in more detail at **the types of permissibility in egoism**, including examples of obligatory, neutral, and supererogatory actions. Finally, an **application of egoism** in a specific situation was considered, and the evaluation of the various actions given.

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