

Egoism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will be looking at the role of self-interest in explaining and evaluating human action, before thinking about the relationship between what is good for individuals and what is good for society. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. [Introduction to Egoism](#)
2. [Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism](#)
3. [Recognizing the Individual without Egoism](#)

1. Introduction to Egoism

To begin with, recall that all ethical theories are either objectivist or relativist. This means that all ethical theories must be committed to one of two things: either they say that there are some ethical evaluations that everyone must recognize as true, or they reject this and say there are no ethical evaluations that everyone must recognize as true. **Egoism** belongs to the latter.

Egoism is a specific type of relativist ethical theory called subjectivism. It is called this because it makes ethics relative to the individual. It should be noted that there are different views about the self-interested actions of humans.

→ **EXAMPLE** You could think that we should act out of self-interest because that's the best way for everyone to be happy; or you might say that we should be self-interested because nobody should be obliged to help anyone else.

Both views expressed in the above example would belong to egoism, despite their differences. For this reason, egoism is a family of ethical theories.

TERM TO KNOW

Egoism

A relativist theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are relative to self-interest.

2. Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism

Before we go any further, we need to distinguish two approaches to the issue of self-interest. The first only describes human action as self-interested, without saying if it is good or bad. Consider the following example of a debate about the nature of human action.

DESCRIPTIVE CLAIMS ABOUT SELF-INTEREST



When someone says that their description of people as self-interested is true (e.g. the person on the left in the above illustration), they are giving a theory that is sometimes called psychological egoism.

By contrast, ethical egoism isn't about trying to give the best description of the way people are. Instead, it is trying to say how people ought to be. We call this a normative account because it is asking about the norms or standards we should be using to guide our actions.

The following illustration shows a debate between an ethical egoist (on the left) and someone against this position (on the right).

NORMATIVE CLAIMS ABOUT SELF-INTEREST



As you can see, this debate is different from the first. This time they are arguing about what we ought to be doing, not what we actually do. To make this point a bit clearer, an ethical egoist can accept that people actually do act in other people's interest, but argue that they shouldn't.

 BIG IDEA

Psychological egoism is a descriptive theory that says people are self-interested, whereas ethical egoism is a normative theory that says people ought to be self-interested.

3. Recognizing the Individual without Egoism

It's important to keep in mind that you can recognize that certain things are good for individuals, without being an ethical egoist. In other words, you don't have to think that what is good for the individual is the most important ethical consideration.

→ EXAMPLE You might say some individuals prefer to be lazy and drop their litter anywhere. For them it is good to leave trash all over the place, but this is bad for society.

You can even admit that there are some things that are good for yourself, but you decide not to do them because you think that it is more ethical to consider others, as well as yourself.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you want nothing to do with politics. Most of the time you find it boring. But you might still take part in some political discussions and vote in elections if you thought that society is better off when all, or most, of its citizens get involved.

Not only can you recognize that some things are good for individuals, you can also recognize that what is good for an individual can vary from person to person, without being an Ethical Egoist. For instance, you might think that we need to find a way to balance everyone's different interests in order to have a good society.

 BIG IDEA

Ethical egoism is the only ethical theory that says what is good is the same as what meets the self-interest of individuals.

SUMMARY

We started this tutorial with an **introduction to egoism**, specifying it as a subjectivist form of relativism. We then distinguished **psychological egoism and ethical egoism** in terms of the types of claims they make. The first makes descriptive claims about human self-interest, and the second makes normative claims about human self-interest. Finally, we saw that there are ways of **recognizing the individual without Egoism**, focusing on the difference between what is good for individuals and what is good for society.

Source: Woman silhouette, public domain, <http://bit.ly/2bzZxkR>; Man silhouette, public domain, <http://bit.ly/2beapBM>

TERMS TO KNOW

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