

Problems with Egoism

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial we will consider some of the problems egoism faces. In particular, the issue of our empathy and concern for others will be shown to undermine some of egoism's claims. Our discussion will break down like this:

1. The Naturalness of Helping Others

To begin with, recall that egoism is a relativist theory of ethics that maintains that right and wrong are relative to self-interest. One problem egoism faces is that we naturally act in ways contrary to how egoists think we should. More specifically, we are often motivated by our feelings of empathy for others, including animals.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you saw a stranger in pain or suffering greatly, you would most likely feel bad for them. For instance, if you see someone undergoing a painful medical treatment, you would most likely want to turn away—assuming you're not a doctor, of course.

What's more, you may even be motivated to try to help people in need, if you were able to do so.

➞ **EXAMPLE** There have been many instances where people have saved strangers from accidents (such as drowning or car crashes) without a second thought about their own safety.

These kinds of examples show that we don't just act self-interestedly. If the egoist wants to support their position by appeal to the supposedly natural selfishness of people, this is a problem.

But if the egoist doesn't do this, then they could say that peoples' selfless acts don't hurt their theory. They could point out that they care about what we *should* be doing, not what we *actually do*.

2. Ethics and Self-Interest

Another potential problem for egoism is that it seems to be missing out on a major part of our ethical experience. At some point in your life you've probably been concerned about what obligations you have to other people—assuming you're not a sociopath, that is.

We turn to ethical theories to try and make sense of these concerns. But it would seem that we would come away empty handed if we turned to egoism in this case. That's because there are only obligations to ourselves for the egoist, and none to other people.

You can see the problems this causes for egoism by looking at the strange evaluations it makes regarding the

fate of other people.

➤ **EXAMPLE** If someone gets great pleasure from torturing innocent people (without getting caught), then the egoist would not only say it's okay, but would actually say that they *should* do it.

Recall that an action is obligatory for an egoist if it benefits the agent's self-interest. As this shows, the feelings or rights of other people don't come into it. This gets even more extreme when you consider where this line of thought ends.

IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you're elected leader of your country. An egoist will say that all your actions should be done in your own interests. This would include anything from invading countries for your own financial benefit to electoral fraud to ensure your reelection.

Now, many people think politicians often put their own interests before the interests of the people they're supposed to serve. But we think that if this is all they did, then they wouldn't be the best person for the job.



SUMMARY

We started this tutorial by thinking about the challenge that **the naturalness of helping others** poses for the egoist. We saw that the fact people act in others' interests can damage the egoist if they want to say their theory is supported by peoples' selfish actions.

We then saw that egoism struggles to make sense of our ethical experience by looking at how **ethics and self-interest** pull in different directions. Namely, that an ethic needs to say something significant about our obligations to other people, but egoism doesn't do so.