

Definition of ethical egoism: People ought to do what is in their own self-interest.

Normative agent-focused ethic based on self-interest as opposed to altruism; ethical theory that matches the moral agents psychological state (psychological egoism); concentration on long term self-interests rather than short term interests; Max Stirner, self-interest as the root cause of every human action even if it appears altruistic; rejection of egoism for material gain; union of egoists.

Challenges: destruction of a community ethos; social injustices could occur as individuals put their own interests first; a form of bigotry (why is one moral agent more important than any other?).

Quotes

“We know of only one principle, that men always act from self-interest.” - Lord Macaulay

“No man gives but with intention of good to himself; because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts the object to every man is his own pleasure.” - Thomas Hobbes

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest”. - Adam Smith

“The achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose”. - Ayn Rand

Ethical Egoism

Normative egoists argue that an individual ought to pursue his or her own interest. Why?

I am in the best position to know my interests. Moreover, to have a lot of people all maximising their own interests is the best way to guarantee the interests of everyone is served (Adam Smith’s argument in the Wealth of Nations, 1776).

Finally, this may be the most reasonable course of action to allow individuals the freedom to decide their own destiny.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) put this in an extreme way when he argued:

“What is strong wins. That is the universal law”.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) argued that human nature is basically self-interested. Even my desire to help other people comes from selfish motives: for example, the hope that they will help me in return.

If we live in the ‘state of nature’, he argues, life will be ‘nasty, brutish and short’. I will be nervous and uncertain, anarchy will reign and I will be in constant fear of violence. It will be a picture of apocalyptic awfulness as depicted in films like Mad Max.

However, this anarchy and state of violence is in no-one’s interest. Rational self-interest, Hobbes argued, requires some code of rules and a state to enforce them. Hence he argues for an absolute ruler – an enlightened despot like Napoleon Buonaparte, who presides over a **Leviathan** (the name of his book – meaning a monstrous, strong state).

Psychological Egoism

Psychological egoism is the view that I always promote my own self-interest because that is a common feature of human psychology – how our minds work. Altruism, the view that we can and do act in the interests of others, is psychologically impossible.

Louis Pojman ask us to consider the following argument:

“Everyone is an egoist, for everyone always tries to do what will bring him or her satisfaction”. But suppose we get satisfaction out of helping people? Or suppose we believe we have a duty to relieve human suffering. Although the result is the same (if I am a psychological egoist I might do it just to get my own selfish satisfaction), yet the motive is entirely different.” (Pojman, 2006:83)

Pojman goes on to conclude that the premise that we always seek to maximise our own self-interest is empirically false. Sometimes we do put other people's interests ahead of our own, as in the example of the surgeon who saves a drowning stranger off a Cornish beach in 2013, but tragically drowns himself.

The Selfish Hypothesis

Hume's arguments against

In the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Appendix II—Of Self Love), David Hume (1711-1776) offers a number of arguments against what he calls the "selfish hypothesis," a form of psychological egoism.

First, Hume argues that self-interest opposes moral feelings which cause us to be **altruistic** and so show concern for others, and, may motivate one's actions in helping others. These moral sentiments include love, friendship, compassion and gratitude.

Second, psychological egoism attempts to reduce human motivation to a single cause, which is a 'fruitless' task—the "love of simplicity...has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy," Hume adds.

Third, animals act benevolently towards one another, and, if we accept animals can act altruistically, then how can we deny it is also a feature of human behaviour?

Fourth, the concepts we use to describe benevolent behaviour cannot be meaningless; we may not have a personal interest in the fortune of another, yet wish them well.

Fifth, Hume asserts that we have prior motivations to self-interest; we may have, for example, a predisposition towards vanity, fame, or vengeance that transcends any benefit to myself. We can be conditioned to behave like this.

Hume concludes that it is ultimately futile to create an imaginary self-interest, as the psychological egoist tries to do.

Max Stirner

In 1845 Max Stirner (1806-1856) published a little noticed book, *The Ego and Its Own*. He writes: “God and mankind have concerned themselves for nothing, for nothing but themselves. Let me then likewise concern myself for myself.” (1845:5) He describes the stages of an individual life in which each stage negates the previous one.

Stirner offers a radical critique of the effects of the Protestant Reformation, where the individual’s thoughts and indeed their moral conscience are brought under the all-encompassing control of religion. In this control the place of sensuous passions gets lost and an inner conflict is set up within the human psyche between our natural impulses and religion, echoing what St Paul writes in **Romans 7**. It is as if the secret police has successfully sought to dominate us and limit our freedom, he argues. In the quest for freedom human beings go through stages of development.

Stage 1: The **realistic stage** of childhood, in which our behaviour is controlled by outside forces such as our parents. Freedom from these external constraints is achieved with what Stirner calls ‘the self-discovery of mind’, as children use will power and cunning to outwit our parents.

Stage 2: The **idealistic stage** of youth, however, contains new internal sources of constraint, as individuals once more become enslaved, this time to the forces of conscience and reason.

Stage 3: The **egoistic stage** of adulthood. Only with egoism do individuals escape both material (external) and spiritual (internal) constraints, learning to value their personal satisfaction above everything.

The only moral good according to Stirner is what he calls ‘ownness’ – a state of **autonomy** in which we are free not just from external constraints (such as our parents or our church) but also the internal constraints of conscience and guilt. True freedom is only found when we are neither dragged along by forces not of our own making, nor are we limited by fear and doubt.

“I am my own”, Stirner writes, “only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered by anything else” (1845:153). This self-mastery is a form of autonomy.

It is in our social experience as members of society we experience the ‘state of nature’, rather than in the chaos and violence of Hobbes’ account of egoism. The relationship between the individual and society is likened to the relationship between a mother and her child.

As the individual (the child) develops a mature preference for freedom and autonomy, so we must throw off the claims of society (the mother) which seeks to maintain us in a position of subordination.

Thus Stirner’s conclusion is that we must move from social to egoistic relationships in order to escape a form of slavery. His egoism can be seen as the egoism of self-realisation and self-mastery.

Sources

David Leopold, Max Stirner, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Daniel Castellano Stirner v Morality (2013)

<http://www.arcaneknowledge.org/philtheo/stirner.htm>