

# Ethics: compare and contrast ethical egoism and psychological egoism



This essay is written in order to identify and describe the theories of psychological egoism and ethical egoism. The aim is also to reveal the fallacy of psychological egoism. Understanding the difference between these two theories will let us understand them better. And, of course some personal conclusions will be made at the end. The theory which tells us about psychological egoism describes it as a desire of a person to act in accordance to his/her own interests only.

It states that no matter what we do, and no matter how altruistic our actions can seem, we still act out of our self interest, finding some benefits for ourselves from everything we do. The benefits can not always be vividly seen, as they do not always consist of some materialistic objects. They can be viewed here as the feelings of pleasure or self admiration, or any other feelings of that kind, a person gets after completing an action. Such an explanation of the theory is very close to the view of Thomas Hobbes who claims that “ a thing is good, if it is “ the object of any man's appetite or desire.

He insisted that the term must be used in relation to a person—nothing is simply good in itself, independently of any person who may desire it” (Encyclop? dia Britannica, 2007, p. 23 ). So, the decision to do something always appears from the desire to do that. And the desire of any kind, as the theory states, always comes out of human’s egoistic nature, so can never be regarded as altruism. Ethical egoism is the type of normal ethical position, which makes individuals act in accordance to their own interests.

It differs from the theory of psychological egoism, as it does not state that all people act egoistically, but it emphasises the necessity of taking into  
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account your own interests when doing anything. There are three types of ethical egoism distinguished: individual, personal and universal. Individual ethical egoism is the type of egoism which presupposes an individual expecting all the people to act in accordance to his interests. Personal ethical egoist would claim that he can and will do only whatever is in his interests, but he would not claim what anyone else has a right to do.

And finally, a universal ethical egoist proves that all people ought to act in ways which correspond to their self interests. When criticising psychological egoism the fact that it can neither be proved nor disproved is often stated. To say it in the other words, those who claim that altruism is only demonstrated by people with the purpose to get a “good feeling” from what they do, can not really prove that the “good feeling” is experienced by the person every time he/she does something altruistic. There is no way to detect or to measure it. So as long as it can not be measured, the theory remains incomplete and unproved.

There are two versions of ethical egoism. There exist both, the strong and the weak versions. Strong ethical egoism version states, that “it is always right to aim at one’s own greatest good, and never right not to do so” (Baier, 1991, p. 201). The weak ethical egoism version says that “it is always right to aim at one’s own greatest good, but not necessarily never right not to do so” (Baier, 1991, p. 201). When discussing these two versions, it can be mentioned, that the strong version’s approach really represents egoism as it is, while the weak one still leaves some place for altruism.

And if these two versions were distinguished it becomes evident that there are cases when a person might feel the need to put somebody’s interests

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over his/her own. To make the conclusions from all mentioned above, we can state that the two types of egoism still have the differences in approaches. Psychological egoism is performed as something which really does not depend on the person's conscious decisions. According to the theory, people can not control or regulate it, while the ethical egoism appeals to the person's consciousness.

In the case of ethical egoism an individual has a choice as to how to act, can decide by his own whether to become egoistic or not. So, basically, psychological egoism seems to deal more with the person's selfishness, rather than with his/ her self-interests. The theory of ethical egoism seems to be more attractive, as it only says that doing something, an individual must not experience any discomfort or a feeling of the strong displeasure, otherwise none of the person's actions could be regarded as the altruistic ones, or truly desired to be done.