

# Are all human actions motivated by self-interest

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



The idea that all human actions are motivated by self-interest alone is known as the doctrine of Egoism. Egoism maintains that a person's only obligation is to themselves, and that each person should act in such a way that will maximize their own long-term well being. They have a duty to serve their self-interest. A person should only ever act in a given situation, iff<sup>1</sup> it promotes their long-term self-interest.

Egoism therefore holds that because a person should act only if it benefits them, and should therefore refrain from action when the act produces no benefits for them, and that therefore it is morally permissible for a person to allow harm to others in such situations. The important thing to remember about egoism, is that the egoist must act in accordance with his or her long-term self-interest. An egoist is therefore not just somebody who believes that you should always do what you like when you like, because acting in accordance with this maxim would not necessarily benefit a person in the long-term.

To explain this point in greater clarity, we will take the example of Epicurus. Epicurus was a hedonist, meaning that he believed that pleasure was the only thing which was worth seeking. However, he did not devote his life to indulgence and excess, in fact he believed that long-term pleasure could only be achieved through philosophy and art, with a virtual absence of physical pleasures. Being free from worry and distress. The more violent a pleasure is, according to Epicurus, the more likely and great will be the unpleasant after-effects.

So, from this we can make the distinction; between what Epicurus call an intrinsic good, and an instrumental good. An intrinsic good is something that is good in itself. It is worth having for its own sake. Something, which is instrumentally good is something you do in the hopes that it will eventually lead to something good. Epicurus believed that pleasure was the sole intrinsic good, and everything else was a possible instrumental good. Pleasure however is not always intrinsically good, because there are many cases in which immediate pleasure will lead to long-term displeasure.

Intrinsic goods, are often not instrumental goods. For example alcohol can be intrinsically good, as it causes a feeling of pleasure, but it is not instrumentally good, as the consequences are ultimately bad. On the other hand, amputation is not intrinsically good, yet it is instrumentally good.

There are two main forms of egoism to be considered; Psychological egoism, and Ethical egoism. Psychological egoism begins with an assumption that a person is psychologically incapable of doing anything that does not promote his or her own self-interest. It is not an ethical doctrine in itself, but more a theory of human motivation.

It tells us how we are constructed, not what we ought, or ought not to do. However, it still holds ethical connotations. When we say that a person ought to do something, we are also implying is that they are capable of doing it. " Ought implies can. " We cannot expect people to do things that they cannot do. If a child is drowning, and John cannot swim, then John is not physically capable of saving the child, and there is therefore no sense in our saying

that he ought to save the child. It is important to make one thing absolutely clear at this point.

Psychological egoism is not saying that all people behave selfishly. They would not deny that people help others, donate to charity or will give a kidney to somebody who will die if they didn't. What they are saying is that the motive behind such actions is always ultimately selfish. For example, a man who is in a position to save a persons life, may do so because everyone will look up to them, or because they would not be able to live with themselves if that person died, when they could have at least tried to save them. In other words, people can perform benevolent acts, but they cannot act benevolently.

Humans cannot help acting in their own self-interest, even when they are helping others. People can perform unselfish acts, but they cannot have unselfish desires. Psychological egoism was once almost universally accepted, but it is now almost universally condemned. The main problem is a classic in philosophy. The theory tells us what people are like, and how they act. This is an empirical claim. And as such is prone to the problem of induction<sup>2</sup>. To say that all humans act selfishly is a universal claim. But you cannot make such a universal claim without knowledge of every human action performed in past, present, and future.

As we cannot logically say that the future will conform to past observation then we cannot logically suggest that no human will ever perform an altruistic act. Of course, although this is seen as one of the most damning of the criticisms, I personally believe it to be unfair. We cannot place our trust

in science, but decide to disregard this theory on such grounds. If anybody truly believes that such things do not conform to past observation, then it is only these people who can ever be justified in discounting Psychological egoism with this argument - the rest of us must find another path.

Even the problem of induction itself has its own problems, and philosophical discussion since Hume founded the inductive problem, has revealed many ways to get around the problem, even if non of these will ever completely eradicate the issues brought to bear by this problem. But to start reciting these arguments now, would be to become weighed down in dogma, so I will move on. It is just important that we remember that such a critique cannot be so damning, if it is damnable itself. Another problem comes from the problem of other minds.

If we take the example of a doctor who risks his life running a leper colony, we may be able to say that he is doing it because he couldn't live with himself if he denied his Hippocratic oath, but how can we be certain? After all, we have no special insight into his own mind greater than that which he has himself - and he himself claims to be acting with no self-interest. We simply cannot see into other minds and know how why they are motivated as they are. We may only say that we are motivated by self-interest (Freudian issues aside), but we cannot make any legitimate claim about the motivation of other people.

If we could nobody would ever be able to dupe us. This possibility itself may be enough to refute psychological egoism, but what if we could see into the minds of others. Or at least see what motivates them. The work done by

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Richard Dawkins, developing the theory of evolution, in his book: *The selfish gene*, suggests that we are not motivated in such cases by any faculty of the mind. The selfish gene theory presented originally by Richard Dawkins suggests that because genes are potentially immortal (i. e. they can be passed from generation to generation, forever), then like all things, they will therefore strive for this immortality.

That is to say that our genes are 'selfish', which at the genetic level is good, while altruism is bad would be evolutionarily hazardous. An altruistic gene would not survive whereas a selfish gene would endow its possessor with the qualities needed to survive. This does not only include physical qualities, like legs so we can escape a predator, but also with what we refer to as a selfish attitude. As opposed to saying we are psychologically incapable of altruism, it suggests that we are genetically incapable of altruism.

We will not use our resources and energies to help somebody else, unless by doing so we help ourselves. Likewise, we will put our life on the line only if we think that, it will cause somebody else to put there lives on the line for us, perhaps by inspiring a Hobbesian society, as taking this approach enables us to advocate the social contract theories of Hobbes And Rousseau, whereby we form societies, so as to avoid the dangerous Hobbesian state of nature. In this way we are, genetically predisposed to form a social contract. Ethical egoism on the other hand is concerned with the motives that people ought to have.

It states that the strength of egoism lies in its ethical form, and therefore suggests that each person ought to act is such a way as serves their own

self-interest. This view acknowledges that people act altruistically, but condemns such actions when they happen. This view is based on the premise that such a doctrine would produce a better world; if greater happiness comes to those who pursue their interest, then the more people who do this the better. Such actions as stealing, and helping others, are acceptable only because they are instrumentally good, not because they have any intrinsic worth.

If you help others, they will help you. This classic view can be found in the teachings of Epicurus, whereby the sole standard of right action is the avoidance of pain, and is most famously found to be the basis of any social contract theory. Hobbes for example, writes that; " Good and evil are names that signify our appetites and aversions. 3" When the person places himself under an obligation to the law, they are also placing themselves under the protection of the law, therefore the forming of a social contract is not intrinsically good, it is instrumentally good.

However, the idea of ethical egoism contains an inner contradiction. By following this way of thinking, then situations occur where you must claim that all people should look after themselves, even if this results in the person not looking after themselves. I will explain further: if John and I both have a fatal disease, which can be treated, only with a vaccine, of which there exists only enough for one dose, then I must not only attempt to get the vaccine for myself, but also recommend, should I be asked, that John do the same.

However, if I complied with the later action I would clearly not be serving my best interests if I did this. Kurt Baier developed this critique of ethical

egoism, concluding that ethical egoism cannot decide in cases of conflicting interests, and such cases are what any ethical system seeks to decide, as, when there is no conflict of interests ethical discussion becomes arbitrary. Ethical egoism is therefore invalid as an ethical system. "... morality is designed to apply... here interests conflict. "

Having a system of morality that is based on self-interest cannot provide any consistency, as morality would fluctuate from person to person, and as such, ethical egoism is at the very least a tenuous and incomplete moral system. And as such I would have to say that the theory of psychological egoism, although not accepted by the greater body of modern philosophers, and although its premises seem intuitively repugnant, is the more accurate view of human morality.