

Example of essay on morality and self-interest

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The best arguments I would give to my colleague for sharing the vaccine with others would be one of either the thought of the repercussions of not doing so would be more distressing weighed against the possibility of contracting the deadly disease. Psychologists call this punishment-reward. When faced with a situation where behavior is both detrimental and gratifying to one, the course of action is determined by the measure of how gratifying the positive consequences would be, versus how harmful the negative consequences would be. Naturally pain is avoided, and gratification is sought.

Since, as is the assumption, no one will ever know that we (my colleague and I) were in a position to possibly save the lives of others, but acted in a manner society would deem selfish, there is no possibility of negative reputation and other forms of social punishment such as public humiliation. Assuming that no form of emotional bonding has occurred between me and the rest of the team, there would be no emotional distress at their loss. Assuming that my behavior is not guided by (indoctrinated) religious or other ideological virtue, there would be no negative consequences in taking all of the vaccines ourselves.

On the other hand, there might be a reward in risking death and attempting to save one or members of the team. Such a reward would be, for example, saving someone in the team who has come up with a possibly very profitable innovation, idea or concept. I would, in such a case, attempt to give this as an argument to my ethical egoist colleague. This would not be “completely irrational” since it is simply a question of whether the material gain would be worth a 10% risk of death. It would, however, be irrational to share the

vaccine on the basis of societal norms and virtues. Logically, a ninety percent chance of survival is viable.

If the two villagers on the team do not have any value that would motivate us to try to save their lives, (and thereby risk ours), then there would be no need to risk our lives, and I would not delay taking the vaccine any further. However, this is not how “normal” people would act, because of indoctrination and socialization. Humans rarely base their behavior on pure logic. Reason is affected by emotion, socialization, and even outright senseless. On the other hand, empathy might compel one to consider the two villagers at least and perhaps their children and family.

The position that all human behavior is motivated by self-interest, called psychological egoism, espouses that all humans (and indeed all organisms) seek to relieve tension by avoiding pain and discomfort, and relieving needs (Pojman). For example, a person making a decision based purely on following societal norms and living up to societal virtues would not be doing so altruistically, but only to relieve the discomfort felt by not adhering to societal norms. Richard Dawkins, in “The Selfish Gene” espouses a radical view of altruism by proposing that genes are the force behind all behavior, organisms being only vehicles of achieving self-preservation and prosperity (Dawkins). A young man helping an old man to cross a road would not be doing it altruistically, but merely to relieve the distress caused by feeling ashamed for not helping, and perhaps to gain an “ego boost”, to perceive himself more favorably. In the end, it boils down to a choice between punishment and reward. “Choice” does not imply free will, however, since, as a specific form of psychological egoism proposes, all organisms ultimately

seek to avoid pain and satisfy needs.

The ethical position that moral agents should do what is in their own self-interest, called ethical egoism, is different from psychological egoism because it implies free will (not in the wider sense opposed to cosmic determinism), while psychological egoism implies that humans cannot do what is not in their own self-interest (Henman). Ethical egoism is opposed to ethical altruism, which is a position espousing that moral agents have an obligation to help others.

My argument to my ethical egoist colleague accepts my colleague's ethical theory, because, self-referentially, that would be in my best interest. Ethical altruism is illogical, while ethical egoism is based on the observation that people are always motivated by self-interest, hence a position proposing that a person should do what is best for them is natural and logical. This seems to me, in the end, to be a better system than that based on pure ideology.

From an ethical egoist point of view, I try to show the colleague why we should share the vaccine with the others. The only reason we should take the others into consideration is when saving the others would be beneficial or resourceful to us and not saving them would be detrimental or distressing to us.

Ethical egoism is not necessarily better, merely logical. If I were to place myself in the position of the two villagers, then ethical altruism would seem very appealing. The old concept of doing treating others as one would want oneself treated though it may contrast with the idea of ethical egoism altruism at times, is very appealing. Taking others into consideration and acting purely based on one's self-interest are quite different ideas. Further,

ethical egoism seems more of an ideology than a theory (Giersson and Holgrem).

Taking others into consideration and acting purely based on one's self-interest are not mutually exclusive, and in situations less dramatic than one where the individual is faced with the risk of contracting a deadly disease, may be applied quite fittingly together. Trying to picture a man watching in fascination, or perhaps languid interest, as a child drowns in the sea is rather hard. Nothing obliges the man to rescue the child, but then again nothing forbids him from rescuing the child. Unless there is a famine in progress, and the man needs to save every ounce of energy he has left, I think empathy would compel him to rescue the child. Empathy could itself be inhibited; in which case it is no longer hard to picture the man watching in mild interest as the child struggles and drowns, then stretching fully to enjoy the sunlight. If I tried to undermine ethical egoism, then I would argue it is no different than ethical altruism, it is merely an ideology that tries to tell one how to act, and is not based on reason alone. The ethical altruist feels compelled to help others, and the ethical egoist feels compelled to do what is best for himself. No one comes by moral decision by pure reason alone; it is always driven by emotion. It would be difficult to explain why one came by the doctrine of ethical egoism, and why one subscribes to it and not, say ethical altruism. One would have first to develop criteria for identifying "good" and "bad" moral ideologies, and therein lays the problem. Moral ideologies are subjective and non-scientific-one cannot conclude that one is better than the other, simply because there are no objective criteria for judgment. Another problem is that there are two conflicting parties in ethical ideologies: the self

and others. In situations where the two conflict, how should we pick which party is to be considered above the other? The ethical egoist advocates putting the self above others, the ethical altruist advocates putting others above oneself. The doctrine of treating others as one would want themselves treated seems to solve all these problems, as the choice is left to the individual.

Works Cited

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