

# Concept of universal ethical egoism in ayn rand's novel anthem

Literature



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## **Self-Interest in Morality**

Egoism is an idea in ethics in which people will act in the interest of themselves or of others depending on their ideas of how they should live their lives. In theory, people should always act in his or her own self-interest, regardless of the interest of others, unless their interests also serve his or hers. In terms of egoism, acting in one's own self interest is seen as selfishness and going against the idea of actions benefitting a large-scale group rather than just a few; this view is known as universal ethical egoism.

“ Universal ethical egoism is the version of the theory most commonly presented by egoists” (Thiroux & Krasemann), with universal ethical egoism being the ethical theory of a person acting in their own self-interest and doing only that. Acting in self-interest preserves one's independence and allows for more freedoms that ordinarily would not be had if one were to act in the interest of others continuously. This ideal “ encourages individual freedom and responsibility for [our] actions” (Thiroux & Krasemann). While one does what they feel is necessary to continue their own life without issues, they are responsible for any consequences that come from their actions. While these potential consequences have no harmful effects for the actor, but there are others that these consequences effect negatively; the only thing that matters is universal ethical egoism is what happens to the person taking care of themselves. So long as the intended individual benefits, their action “ is morally right” (Blank).

Overall, there are multiple takes on ethical egoism that encompass the idea of acting in self-interest, including the ideas of Ayn Rand. In her novel

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Anthem, Rand explores the idea of a couple defecting from their altruistic society and acting in their own self interests. When the man of the couple comes to the realization that there is no need to work in benefit of a group, but rather work for himself, the character says, " I am done with the monster of ' We', the word of serfdom, of plunder, of misery, falsehood and shame" (Rand). The society that Rand portrayed in Anthem was an almost completely accurate depiction of our current society. Our society now is entirely co-dependent on one another to ensure that the needs of the many are met before the needs of the individual; the society portrayed in Anthem was intended to be more of a socialist type of community that was centered directly on the idea of altruism. The main way for egoism to work properly would be if we "[lived] in self-sufficient communities" however " we live... in increasingly crowded communities where... moral interdependence is a fact of life" (Thiroux and Krasemann). Our interdependence on one another is the primary reason why universal ethical egoism would not work very well. Essentially, universal ethical egoism " is really not a moral system at all" (Thiroux & Krasemann) and only poses the question to people of why they need to be moral.

Even with the negative aspects known with universal ethical egoism, there are in fact some potential advantages to it. A primary advantage is that it becomes " much easier for individuals to know their own interests" (Thiroux & Krasemann). In knowing what we as individuals need allows for us to have a better position in judgment making based on what we personally need or want rather than what another person would need for themselves.

There is a chance that universal ethical egoism could work properly, but it would involve people living mostly in isolation. This slight isolation would allow for people to be independent up until the point of two or more individuals coming closer together and their interests conflicting with one another. Once again, this is where the ideas of Rand come back into play. With Rand's idea of rational egoism stating that the individual self-interests would never conflict, it holds so ideals of universal ethical egoism, but to a further extent in which no one will ever stop to think about the needs of others once coming into contact with them. Based on how our society works, there is no true way for someone to be able to act completely independent from other people in their actions unless "they don't tell people what they are doing" (Thiroux & Krasemann) as far as trying to follow universal ethical egoism completely.

While it has been acknowledged that, in theory, universal ethical egoism is the potential best actions that we as humans can take to benefit ourselves and potentially others, it is nearly impossible to completely achieve. It can only be hoped that we develop society to be more interdependent to allow universal ethical egoism to come to fruition and to one day allow we as members of society to act more selfishly without having to worry about the good of others first and foremost. For now, we need to think of being ethical in other ways outside of trying to find a way to what is best only for ourselves, while occasionally doing what is best for others at the same time.