

EGOISM APPROACH

(Ethical Egoism)

“HOW DOES THIS AFFECT ME?”

What’s right is only to look out for yourself. We should only look out for ourselves. Others matter only if they can help improve results for me.

QUESTIONS?

AN ETHICAL EGOIST MAY ASK:

How will this benefit me
(regardless of how it affects others)?

What do I want
(regardless of what others may want)?

SAYINGS

ASSOCIATED WITH THIS APPROACH:

“It’s a dog-eat-dog world”

“You gotta get yours”

“Look out for number one”

PROS +

STANDING UP FOR ONESELF. Life is not only about giving up what we want or need. We do have some responsibility to look out for ourselves and we may know what will benefit us better than others will. We may need to stand up for ourselves or even protect our own lives sometimes. However, there can be many cons if our own interests are ALL we consider.

CONS -

WICKED ACTIONS ENDORSED. Ethical Egoism seems to support doing some terrible things as long as they benefit the self.

Your friend is interning with a pharmacist and decides to secretly water down cancer medication. He sells it to cancer patients so he can sell the extra and make money for himself. He never gets caught, but others are harmed. Ethical Egoism doesn't condemn this as long as your friend benefits.

ARBITRARY. Why am I more important than someone else? What is the morally relevant difference? Don't we all have the capacity to experience happiness as well as suffering? Ethical egoism gives unwarranted preference to my own interests at a possible cost to others without a good and relevant reason. Consider racism, something that most reasonable people consider unethical. Why does one race deserve preference over another? In much the same way, why does one individual deserve preference over another?

You visit an area where some children are suffering because they are extremely hungry. Should your hunger matter more than theirs? Does hunger affect them less than it does you? What's the relevant difference between your hunger and their hunger?

DOESN'T HANDLE CONFLICTS. Ethical Egoism does not provide solutions for conflicts between people.

Two people (Ali and Beck) are running for president and both really want to win. We could argue that it would be in Ali's interest to sabotage Beck's campaign (as long as Ali wouldn't get caught). We could argue the same for Beck. It is also in each of their interests to prevent the other person from sabotaging their campaign. Ethical Egoism provides no way to resolve this conflict. If what's right is only to look out for oneself, wouldn't it be "right" for both of them to work to sabotage the other's campaign and "right" for both of them to work to prevent the other person from sabotaging them? Note: This con assumes that we think it's important for a theory to help us resolve conflicts.

CONCLUSION

"It is this realization- that we are on par with one another- that is the deepest reason why our morality must include some recognition of the needs of others, and why, ultimately, Ethical Egoism fails as a moral theory" (Rachels, 5th edition, p. 88). Egoism can be seen as a type of Consequence approach that only focuses on results for the self. To be ethical we must look beyond ourselves and consider other approaches when deciding what is right.