

and the car. It is the same with helping others. Our desire to help others often comes first; the good feelings we get may merely be a by-product.

Conclusion about Psychological Egoism. If Psychological Egoism is so implausible, why have so many intelligent people been attracted to it? Some people like the theory's cynical view of human nature. Others may like its simplicity. And, indeed, it would be pleasing if a single factor could explain all human behavior. But human beings seem too complicated for that. Psychological Egoism is not a credible theory.

Thus, morality has nothing to fear from Psychological Egoism. Given that we *can* be moved by regard for our neighbors, it is not pointless to talk about whether we *should* help them. Moral theorizing need not be a naïve endeavor, based on an unrealistic view of human nature.

5.3. Three Arguments for Ethical Egoism

Ethical Egoism, again, is the doctrine that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. This is not the commonsense view that one should promote one's own interests *in addition to* the interests of others. Ethical Egoism is the radical idea that the principle of self-interest accounts for *all* of one's obligations.

However, Ethical Egoism does not tell you to *avoid* helping others. Sometimes your interests will coincide with the well-being of others, so you'll help yourself by helping them. For example, if you can convince your teacher to cancel the assignment, this will benefit you *and* your classmates. Ethical Egoism does not forbid such actions; in fact, it may recommend them. The theory insists only that the benefit to others is not what makes the act right. Rather, the act is right because it benefits you.

Nor does Ethical Egoism imply that in pursuing your interests, you should always do what you want to, or what offers you the most short-term pleasure. Someone may want to smoke cigarettes, or bet all his money at the racetrack, or set up a meth lab in his basement. Ethical Egoism would frown on all of these actions, despite their

possible short-term benefits. Ethical Egoism says that a person ought to do what really is in his or her own best interests, over the long run. It endorses selfishness, not foolishness.

Now let's discuss the three main arguments for Ethical Egoism.

The Argument That Altruism Is Self-Defeating. The first argument has several variations:

- Everyone is aware of his or her own wants and needs. Moreover, each of us is uniquely placed to pursue those wants and needs effectively. At the same time, we understand other people only imperfectly, and we are not well placed to advance their interests. For these reasons, if we try to be "our brother's keeper," we will often bungle the job and do more harm than good.
- At the same time, the policy of "looking out for others" is an offensive intrusion into other people's privacy; it is essentially a policy of minding other people's business.
- Making other people the object of one's "charity" is degrading to them: it robs them of their dignity and self-respect, and it says to them, in effect, that they are not competent to care for themselves. Moreover, such a policy is self-fulfilling: those who are "helped" cease to be self-reliant and become passively dependent on others. That is why the recipients of charity are often resentful rather than appreciative.

In each case, the policy of "looking out for others" is said to be self-defeating. If we want to do what is best for people, we should not adopt so-called altruistic policies. On the contrary, if each person looks after his or her own interests, everyone will be better off.

It is possible to object to this argument on a number of grounds. Of course, no one favors bungling, butting in, or depriving people of their self-respect. But is that really what's going on when we feed hungry children? Is the starving child in Somalia really harmed when we "intrude" into "her business" by giving her food? It hardly seems likely. Yet we can set this point aside, for this way of thinking has an even more serious defect.

ethics of altruism, or we accept Ethical Egoism. The choice is then made to look obvious by depicting altruism as an idea that only an idiot would accept. The ethics of altruism is said to be the view that one's own interests have *no* value and that we must be ready to sacrifice ourselves *totally* whenever *anybody* asks us to. If this is altruism, then any other view, including Ethical Egoism, will look good by comparison.

But that is hardly a fair picture of the options. What we called the commonsense view stands between the two extremes. It says that one's own interests *and* the interests of others are important, and so we must strike a balance between them. Sometimes, one should act for the sake of others; at other times, one should look after oneself. Even if we reject the extreme ethics of altruism, we needn't embrace the extreme of Ethical Egoism. There is a middle ground.

Ethical Egoism as Compatible with Commonsense Morality. The third argument takes a different approach. Ethical Egoism is usually presented as challenging common sense. It is possible, however, to interpret it as *supporting* our commonsense moral view.

This interpretation goes as follows: Ordinary morality consists in obeying certain rules. We must speak the truth, keep our promises, avoid harming others, and so on. At first, these duties seem to have nothing in common—they are just a bunch of discrete rules. Yet there may be a unity to them. Ethical Egoists would say that all these duties spring from the one fundamental principle of self-interest.

Understood in this way, Ethical Egoism is not such a radical doctrine. It does not challenge ordinary morality; it only tries to explain and systematize it. And it does a surprisingly good job. It can provide plausible explanations of the duties mentioned above, and more:

- *The duty not to harm others:* If we do things that harm other people, other people won't mind harming us. We won't have friends; we will be shunned and despised; and we won't get help when we need it. If our offenses are serious enough, we might wind up in jail. Thus, it benefits us not to harm others.
- *The duty not to lie:* If we lie to other people, we will suffer all the ill effects of a bad reputation. People will distrust us

and avoid doing business with us. People will be dishonest with us once they realize that we have been dishonest with them. Thus, we benefit from being truthful.

- *The duty to keep our promises:* It is to our own advantage to enter into mutually beneficial arrangements with other people. To benefit from those arrangements, we need to be able to rely on others to keep their word. But we can hardly expect them to do that if we do not keep our promises to them. Therefore, from the point of view of self-interest, we should keep our promises.

Pursuing this line of reasoning, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) suggested that the principle of Ethical Egoism leads to nothing less than the Golden Rule: We should "do unto others" so that others will be more likely to "do unto us."

Does this argument succeed in establishing Ethical Egoism as a viable theory of morality? It may be the best try. However, there are two serious problems with it. First, the argument does not prove as much as it needs to. It shows only that it is *usually* to one's advantage to tell the truth, to keep one's promises, and to avoid harming others. But a situation might arise in which you could profit from doing something horrible, like killing someone. In such a case, Ethical Egoism cannot explain why you shouldn't do the horrible thing. Thus, it looks like some of our moral obligations cannot be derived from self-interest.

Second, suppose that giving money to famine relief is somehow to one's own advantage. It doesn't follow that this is the *only* reason to do so. Another reason might be *to help the starving people*. Ethical Egoism says that self-interest is the only reason to help others, but nothing in the present argument really supports that.

5.4. Two Arguments against Ethical Egoism

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Endorses Wickedness. Consider these wicked actions, taken from various news stories: To make more money, a pharmacist filled prescriptions for cancer patients using watered-down drugs. A paramedic gave emergency patients injections of sterile water rather than morphine, so he could sell the

arbitrary to admit one but not the other. However, if one graduated with honors and scored well on the admissions test while the other dropped out of college and never took the test, then it is acceptable to admit the first student but not the second.

At root, the Principle of Equal Treatment is a principle that requires fairness in our dealings with others: Like cases should be treated alike, and only dissimilar cases may be treated differently. Two points should be made about the principle. The first is that treating people in the same way does not always mean ensuring the same outcome for them. During the Vietnam War, young American men desperately wanted to avoid getting drafted into the armed services, and the government had to decide the order in which draft boards would call people up. In 1969, the first "draft lottery" was televised to a national audience. Here is how it worked: The days of the year were written on 366 slips of paper (one slip for February 29) and inserted into blue plastic capsules. Those capsules were placed in a glass jar and mixed up. Then, one by one, the capsules were drawn. September 14 was drawn first—so, young men with that birthday, age 18–26, would be drafted first. The winners of the lottery, drawn last, were born on June 8. These young men never got drafted. In college dormitories, groups of students watched the drawings live, and it was easy to tell whose birthday had just come up—whoever just groaned or swore. Obviously, the outcomes were different: In the end, some people got drafted, and others didn't. However, the process was fair. By giving everyone an equal chance in the lottery, the government treated everyone in the same way.

A second point concerns the *scope* of the principle, or which situations it applies to. Suppose you're not going to use your ticket to the big game, and so you give it to a friend. In doing so, you are treating your friend better than everyone else you could have given the ticket to. Does your action violate the Principle of Equal Treatment? Does it need justification? Moral philosophers disagree about this. Some of them think that the principle does not apply to cases like this. The principle applies only in "moral contexts," and what you should do with your ticket is not important enough to count as a "moral question." Others think that your action does require justification, and various justifications might be given. Your action might be justified by the nature of friendship; or by

The Social Contract Theory

Wherever law ends, tyranny begins . . .

JOHN LOCKE, *THE SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT* (1690)

6.1. Hobbes's Argument

Suppose we take away all the traditional props for morality. Assume, first, that there is no God to issue commands and reward virtue. Next, suppose that there are no "natural purposes"—objects in nature have no inherent functions or intended uses. Finally, assume that human beings are naturally selfish. Where, then, could morality come from? If we cannot appeal to God, natural purpose, or altruism, is there anything left to base morality on?

Thomas Hobbes, the leading British philosopher of the 17th century, tried to show that morality does not depend on any of those things. Instead, morality should be understood as the solution to a practical problem that arises for self-interested human beings. We all want to live as well as possible; but in order to flourish, we need a peaceful, cooperative social order. And we cannot have one without rules. Those rules *are* the moral rules; morality consists of the precepts we need to follow in order to get the benefits of social living. That—not God, inherent purposes, or altruism—is the key to understanding ethics.

Hobbes begins by asking what it would be like if there were no way to enforce social rules. Suppose there were no government institutions—no laws, no police, and no courts. In this situation, each of us would be free to do as we pleased. Hobbes called this "the state of nature." What would it be like? Hobbes thought it would be dreadful. In the state of nature, he says,

As before, cooperation will not yield the optimum outcome for each individual, but it will lead to a better result than non-cooperation. We need, in David Gauthier's words, to "bargain our way into morality." We can do that by establishing laws and social customs that protect the interests of everyone involved.

6.3. Some Advantages of the Social Contract Theory

Morality, on this theory, consists in the rules that rational people will accept, on the condition that others accept them as well. The strength of this theory is due, in large part, to the fact that it provides plausible answers to some difficult questions.

1. *What moral rules are we bound to follow, and how are those rules justified?* The morally binding rules are the ones that facilitate harmonious social living. We could not live together in peace if we allowed murder, assault, theft, lying, promise breaking, and so on. The rules forbidding those acts are, therefore, justified by their tendency to promote harmony and cooperation. On the other hand, "moral rules" that condemn prostitution, sodomy, and sexual promiscuity cannot be justified on these grounds. How is social living hampered by private, voluntary sexual activity? How would it benefit us to agree to such rules? What people do behind closed doors is outside the scope of the social contract. Such rules, therefore, have no claim on us.

2. *Why is it rational for us to follow the moral rules?* We agree to follow the moral rules because we benefit from living in a place where the rules are accepted. However, we *actually do* follow the rules—we keep our end of the bargain—because the rules will be enforced, and it is rational for us to avoid punishment. Why don't you kidnap your boss? Because you might get caught.

But what if you think you won't get caught? Why follow the rules then? To answer this question, first note that you don't want *other* people to break the rules when they think they can avoid punishment—you don't want other people to commit murder, assault, and so on, just because they think they can get away with it. After all, they might be murdering or assaulting *you*. For this reason, we

want others to accept the contract in more than a frivolous or light-hearted way. We want them to form a *firm intention* to hold up their end of the bargain; we want them to become the sort of people who won't be tempted to stray. And, of course, they will demand the same of us, as part of the agreement. But once we have this firm intention, it is rational to act on it. Why don't you kidnap your boss when you think you can get away with it? Because you've made a firm decision not to be that sort of person.

3. *Under what circumstances is it rational to break the rules?* We agree to obey the rules only on certain conditions. One condition is that we benefit from the overall arrangement. Another condition is that other people will do their part. Thus, when someone breaks the rules, he releases us from our obligations toward him. For example, suppose someone refuses to help you in circumstances in which he clearly should. If later on he needs your help, you may rightly feel that you have no duty to help him.

The same point explains why punishing criminals is acceptable. Lawbreakers are treated differently from other citizens—in punishing them, we treat them in ways that are normally forbidden, ways that they themselves wouldn't agree to. Why can we do this? Remember that the rules apply to you only if other people also follow them. So, you may disregard those rules when dealing with someone who doesn't follow them. In breaking the rules, the criminal thus leaves himself open to retaliation. This explains why it is legitimate for the government to enforce the law.

4. *How much can morality demand of us?* Morality seems to require that we be impartial—that is, that we give no greater weight to our own interests than to the interests of others. But suppose you face a situation in which you must choose between your own death and the deaths of five other people. Impartiality, it seems, would require you to choose your own death; after all, there are five of them and only one of you. Are you morally bound to sacrifice yourself?

Philosophers have often felt uneasy about this sort of example; they have felt instinctively that there are limits to what morality can demand of us. Therefore, they have traditionally said that such heroic actions are *supererogatory*—that is, above and beyond the call of duty, admirable when they occur but not morally

we agree to uphold the institutions that make them possible. This means that we must obey the law, pay our taxes, serve on juries, and so forth—these are the burdens we accept in return.

But what if some citizens are denied their basic rights? What if the police, instead of protecting those citizens, attack them with dogs while protecting those who lynch them? Under such circumstances, the social contract is not being honored. In asking the disadvantaged group to obey the law and pay their taxes and respect society's institutions, we are asking them to accept the burdens of social living without receiving its benefits.

This line of reasoning suggests that civil disobedience is not an undesirable "last resort" for socially disenfranchised groups. Rather, it is the most natural and reasonable means of expressing protest. For when the disadvantaged are denied the benefits of social living, they are released from the contract that would otherwise require them to follow society's rules. This is the deepest argument for civil disobedience, and the Social Contract Theory presents it clearly and forcefully.

6.5. Difficulties for the Theory

The Social Contract Theory is one of the major options in contemporary moral philosophy, along with Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Virtue Ethics. It is easy to see why; the theory seems to explain a great deal about moral life. Two important objections, however, have been made against it.

First, it is said that the Social Contract Theory is based on a historical fiction. We are asked to imagine that people once lived in isolation from one another, that they found this intolerable, and that they eventually banded together, agreeing to follow social rules of mutual benefit. But none of this ever happened. It is just a fantasy. So of what relevance is it? To be sure, if people *had* come together in this way, we could explain their obligations to one another as the theory suggests: They would be obligated to obey the rules that they had agreed to obey. But even then, there would be problems. Was the agreement unanimous? If not, what about the people who didn't sign up—are they *not* required to act morally? And if the contract was made a long time ago by our ancestors, why should we be bound