

# EGOISM

## A. What is Egoism?

1. the view that the right thing for a person P to do is whatever brings about the best consequences for P
2. What is meant by "best consequences"?
  - a) We'll be discussing this later on
  - b) For now, think in terms of happiness & unhappiness
  - c) So an act's having the best consequences for me just means that it makes me happier (or less unhappy) overall than any other choice

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## A. What is Egoism?

### 3. Here's one precise formulation:

(EEg) An act-token X performed by person P at time T is morally right if and only if there is no other act that P could perform at time T that would produce a greater balance of happiness vs. unhappiness for person P over the remainder of P's life

### 4. In the case of a "tie", either act is right

E.g. a colorblind person buying either a red or green balloon

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## A. What is Egoism?

### 5. Contrast with **psychological egoism**.

a) The theory that *in fact* people always act in their best interest, or that no one every acts unselfishly.

b) Psychological egoism is a psychological theory, about how people *do* behave.

To tell if it's true we need to do experiments and research actual behavior.

c) **Ethical egoism** (Eeg) is a thesis in ethics about how people *should* act.

There's no easy experiment to tell us whether or not it's true.

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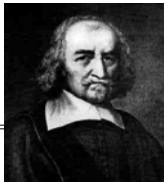
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### B. Arguments for Egoism

1. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)
2. Source of morality is the need for humans to live together in a civilized society in order to survive.
3. Without law and morality, we would be in "a state of nature", where each person competed with others for food, shelter, and resources.



4. Everyone is better off when we agree to abide by certain principles of respect and cooperation, and punish those who break the agreement.
5. This is the reason to act morally.

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### B. Arguments for Egoism

6. Hobbes's line of thought can be made into an argument:

P1. The only reason a person has to act morally is to protect his or her own self-interest.

P2. If the only reason a person has to act morally is to protect his or her own self-interest, then EEG is true.

C. Therefore, EEG is true.

This argument is valid. Is it sound?

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### B. Arguments for Egoism

7. Is self-interest the only reason to act morally?

a) Raises very difficult issues about *reasons*

b) The notion of *reason* is usually tied up with the notion of *rationality*, and what it is *rational* to do.

c) Rationality usually defined as doing as well as we can in bringing about our desires, goals and ends.

d) However, can't we have goals, desires or ends to bring about things other than our own self-interest?

e.g. Grandmother setting up college fund for Grandkids.

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### B. Arguments for Egoism

e) Perhaps morality itself could be a source of reasons.

8. Let's move to P2, which says that if our own self-interest is the only reason to act morally, then egoism is true.

a) Do we need to have *reasons* for acting morally?

b) Again, raises questions about what it is to have *reasons*

c) Perhaps it is still morally *right* to act unselfishly even if this doesn't give us a *reason* to act that way.

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### B. Arguments for Egoism

9. Another line of argument for egoism: everyone is better off if each person looks out for him or herself.

a) Adam Smith (1723-1790): economist

- said economy is better off when each person pursues what's best for him or herself only
- said this created an "invisible hand" that created the best results for everyone

b) I am in a better position than others to:

- to know what will make me happy
- actually do things to make myself happy
- perhaps this is the best way I have to increase the sum total of happiness

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### B. Arguments for Egoism

10. Here's a formulation of the argument

P1. The community as a whole is best off if each person works to bring about his or her own self-interest exclusively.

P2. If the community as a whole is best off if each person works to bring about her own self-interest, then EEg is true.

C. EEg is true.

Again, the argument is valid. Is it sound?

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## B. Arguments for Egoism

11. The first premise is very controversial.

Is the community really better off when each person always acts for his or her best interest?

a) a potential counterexample: *the friend or foe dilemma*

- Two contestants face off in a trust contest.
- In secret, each decides to choose "friend" or "foe".
- If both choose "friend", they split \$5000 evenly.
- If one says "foe" and the other "friend", the one who says "foe" takes \$4000 and the other gets nothing.
- If both choose "foe", they each get \$500.
- Let's call our contestants "Sanjukta" and "Fred"

## B. Arguments for Egoism

Sanjukta

Friend:      Foe:

Fred	Sanjukta: \$2500	Sanjukta: \$4000
Friend:	Fred: \$2500	Fred: \$0
	Sanjukta: \$0	Sanjukta: \$500
Foe:	Fred: \$4000	Fred: \$500

- Whatever Fred does, Sanjukta is better off saying "foe".
- But whatever Fred does, the *community* (both together) is better off if she says "friend".
- If both follow Egoism, both end up with a mere \$500.

## B. Arguments for Egoism

b) There are many other examples very much like the one we just considered.

- *The prisoner's dilemma*
- *The tragedy of the commons*
- *The fishing village*
- *The voter paradox*
- *Cheating on your taxes*

c) Upshot: not always true that the community is better off if everyone acts in his/her own self-interest.

d) Leads into arguments against Egoism, which we'll discuss later.

## B. Arguments for Egoism

P1. The community as a whole is best off if each person works to bring about his or her own self-interest exclusively.

P2. If the community as a whole is best off if each person works to bring about her own self-interest, then EEg is true.

C. EEg is true

12. We've discussed P1. What about P2?

a) Assumes that whatever brings about what is best for the whole community is the morally right thing.

b) Ironically, that's a core principle of *Utilitarianism*, usually seen as a rival to egoism.

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## C. Arguments against Egoism

1. In effect, we have already seen the most powerful arguments against Egoism. For example:

P1. If EEg is true, then Fred's act of picking "Foe" on "Friend or Foe" was morally right.

P2. Fred's act of pick Foe on "Friend or Foe" was not morally right.

C. EEg is not true.

This argument is valid. Is it sound?

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## C. Arguments against Egoism

2. A possible response: "what goes around, comes around"

a) Perhaps Fred will need something from Sanjukta at some point in the future. No longer trusting Fred, she will not help.

b) The fishing village will likely catch and punish any of those caught with more than his or her quota of fish.

c) But is this really true? Sometimes it seems not to be. Consider the saying, "No good deed goes unpunished."

d) The idea is a powerful one, and taught in many traditions: (Karma, Heaven and Hell, etc.)

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### C. Arguments against Egoism

#### 3. Another argument against Egoism, from James Rachels



James Rachels  
(1941-2003)

- a) Says egoism involves a unique form of discrimination
- b) Widely agreed that everyone has the same moral status regardless of:
  - class                      - nationality
  - gender                   - sexual orientation?
  - race                        etc.
  - age
  - ethnicity
- c) These features do not make anyone more or less morally worthy.
- d) So it's arbitrary and unfair to treat anyone differently because of them.

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### C. Arguments against Egoism

e) Suggests that egoism involves arbitrarily treating yourself differently than others

f) The case of Desiree and Hugh

g) Rachels: Desiree treated herself as more worthy of consideration than Hugh arbitrarily

P1. If EEg is true, then Desiree's act of eating the bread was right.

P2. Desiree's act of eating the bread was not morally right.

C. EEg is not true.

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### C. Arguments against Egoism

4. But is it really arbitrary to treat yourself differently than you would treat other people?

a) Most of you have bought shoes for yourself recently.

- There are people in certain places in the world who need a new pair of shoes far more than you.

- Was it morally wrong of you to treat yourself differently than others?

b) Doesn't it matter that *you are you*?

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