

Moral Egoism / Ethical Egoism

Does this sound odd? Isn't egoism the problem of ethics – not a theory of ethics?

Nevertheless, Ethical Egoism is considered to be one option when it comes to moral theories - because the ethical egoist holds that we do have **(one) moral concern-obligation**:

It is to benefit and not to harm self.

That's it – ONE moral concern-obligation **that is the criterion of right / wrong action**:

It is morally required / right to act to benefit one's self.

It is morally prohibited / wrong to act so as to harm self.

One therefore has **no moral obligation to benefit others** for their own sake or to refrain from harming others for their own sake.

However, if you are a “smart” / **rational egoist**, you will not go around harming others unless it is necessary to do so – *because their negative reaction would be harmful to you!*

And you may want to benefit others – but not for their sake, rather for your sake – *because it somehow will be beneficial to you* to benefit others.

In other words, if you are a “smart egoist,” you will **consider how other people's reactions to your actions will affect you** before you act. But not out of concern for them – rather, merely out of concern for you! (Thus, you will probably even want to keep ‘the Golden Rule’ of “doing to-for others as you want them to do for-to you!”)

Also, if you are a “smart egoist,” you will not only take into account other people's reactions to your actions, **you will not act on whim – with only a concern for the short-term consequences / benefits** of your actions. **You will think long-term** as well: some actions that might benefit you in the short-term will be harmful to you in the long-term, so you will refrain from doing those actions.

Ayn Rand was a good example of an ethical egoist.

She wrote a classic essay “**The Virtue of Selfishness.**”

She held one should not engage in “self sacrifice” for the good of others at the cost of what is good for you as an individual. She rejected ‘altruism,’ the view that at least sometimes one ought to sacrifice their own good / benefit so as to do good / to benefit another.

There are some **strengths of Ethical egoism**:

1. Your benefit / well-being ought to be a moral concern to you. You should act, at least sometimes, be motivated by the fact that the act would benefit you as an individual. You ought to care for your-self and act on that concern / care.
2. We do have moral obligations to self ... not to harm self ... to benefit self.
3. The ethical egoist can possess many admirable virtues: independence, rationality, personal responsibility, productivity, etc.

There are some **weaknesses of Ethical egoism**:

1. Traditional / "common sense" morality holds that the well-being of others ought to be a moral concern to you. You should act, at least sometimes, motivated by the fact that the act would benefit another for their sake. You ought to care about others for their own sake and act on that concern / care.
2. The radical ethical egoist is willing to harm others if that harm would benefit their own self. But the reason we have morality and need ethics is to limit the harms and maximize the benefits of our actions to others as well as self.
3. How could ethics resolve a dispute between two radical egoists? Upon what rational basis could two opposed egoists resolve their differences if neither has a moral obligation to sacrifice for, compromise with, or benefit the other?
4. Could a society function well if its citizens were all ethical egoists?

Most ethical egoists, including Ayn Rand, have seen the necessity of supplementing Ethical Egoism with a **Social Contract** theory of law. (Rational egoists will agree to make and keep laws, because it is ultimately to their self-benefit to do so, as it will be to the self-benefit of others to keep those laws. So the exercise of an individual's egoism will be significantly limited by agreed-upon laws which benefit all persons as individuals.)