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“Ethical Egoism”
Psychological Egoism ≠ Ethical Egoism

Psychological Egoism:

- An empirical (descriptive) theory
  - A theory about what in fact motivates people to act:
    » People in fact act only on selfish motivations.

Ethical Egoism:

- A normative (prescriptive) theory
  - A theory about how people ought to act:
    » People ought to do only what is in their own selfish interest.
Ethical Egoism:

“the idea that each person *ought* to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively.”

- This is not a claim about how people *in fact* act (which is what psychological egoism claims), but a claim about how people *ought* to act. (That’s what makes it ethical egoism.)
  - This doesn’t claim that it is our duty to pursue other’s interests *as well as our own*, but the more radical claim that it is our duty *only* to pursue our own interests.
  - It also doesn’t say that we *must avoid* actions that benefit others. But such actions should be pursued *only* if they are *instrumental* to pursuing one’s own interests.
Three Arguments in favor of Ethical Egoism (with responses)

1) “Looking out” for the interests of others is “self-defeating.” By helping others, we make them less able to help themselves, and thereby actually harm them.

– Response: this actually argues against ethical egoism. It says that we shouldn’t act in certain ways (ways we think will help people) because acting this way actually harms them—i.e., it presupposes we have a duty to help (or at least not to harm) others, which is just what ethical egoism denies.
Second argument in favor (the Ayn Rand argument):

- Altruism (acting for the benefit of others at a cost to oneself) requires one to sacrifice one’s individual goals. But the individual is the only thing that has value. So, sacrificing for the good of others does not “respect the integrity of the individual human life.”

  – Response: Altruism simply does not require denying one’s own integrity—it doesn’t require such a large sacrifice.
Third argument in favor:

- In the long run, helping others is often in our interest. In these cases, we do have a duty to help others, but only because doing so advances our own interests.

  - Response: Even if this is true in many cases, it is not true in all cases. Sometimes doing what (our intuition tells us) is the “right” thing requires genuine sacrifice. In these cases, ethical egoism does not capture our intuitions.
Three arguments against (with responses):

1) Ethical egoism gives no way to solve moral disputes, since it tells each party simply to act selfishly.

– Egoist Response: it is not the business of a moral theory to solve moral disputes.
Second argument against:

2) It attributes contradictory obligations: When you act contrary to my interest, I have an obligation to prevent you (since I have an obligation to protect my interests), but I also have an obligation not to prevent you (because you are doing your duty, and we have a duty not to prevent people from doing their duty). This is a contradiction.

- Egoist Response: The Egoist denies the underlined claim, i.e., that we have an obligation not to prevent others from fulfilling their obligations—The Egoist claims we have such an obligation only when acting this way is in our interests.
Third Argument against:

3) Like racism, sexism, etc., it violates the principle that “We can justify treating people differently only if we can show that there is [a] ... difference between them ... relevant to justifying the treatment.” That is, it treats some people differently without any factual difference to justify differential treatment.

– Egoist Response: The Egoist simply denies this principle: Morality is (for the Egoist) not about what is fair to people in general, but about what is good for me.
Remember: Ethical Egoism ≠ Psychological Egoism

- **Psychological Egoism** is a theory how people in fact **do** act.
  - i.e., they are in fact motivated only by self-interest.

- **Ethical Egoism** is a theory about how people **ought** to act.
  - i.e., that people *ought* to act only for their own self-interest.

- Whatever plausibility Psychological Egoism has as a psychological theory should not be confused with whether or not Ethical Egoism is plausible as a moral theory.