

## 6. CHAPTER 6: ETHICAL EGOISM

### 6.1. Is There a Duty to Contribute for Famine Relief?

Why do we allow people to starve when we could save them? What is our duty? What should we do? Morality requires that we balance our own interests against the interests of others. We have "natural" duties to others simply because they are people who could be helped or harmed by our actions.

Ethical egoism is the idea that each person ought to pursue his or her own self interest exclusively. Psychological egoism says that people do in fact always pursue their own interests. Ethical egoism, by contrast, is a normative theory -- that is, a theory about how we ought to behave. Regardless of how we do behave, ethical egoism says that we have no duty except to do what is best for ourselves.

Ethical egoism is the radical view that one's only duty is to promote one's own interests. Ethical egoism does not say that we should avoid actions that help others, either. Ethical egoism says that a person ought to do what really is to his or her own best advantage, over the long run.

### 6.2. Three Arguments in Favor of Ethical Egoism

1. Making other people the object of one's "charity" is degrading to them; it robs them of their individual dignity and self respect.

Is the starving child in Ethiopia really harmed when we "intrude" into "her business" by supplying food? It hardly seems likely.

2. Altruism leads to a denial of the value of the individual. If a man accepts the ethics of altruism his first concern is not how to live his life but how to sacrifice it. The ethics of altruism does not take seriously the value of the human individual.

3. Ethical egoism is presented as a revisionist moral philosophy.

*The duty not to harm others:* it is to our own advantage to avoid harming others.

*The duty not to lie:* it is to our own advantage to be truthful.

*The duty to keep our promises:* from the point of view of self-interest, we should keep our promises.

### 6.3. Three Arguments Against Ethical Egoism

If the point of view of morality were that of self-interest, then there could never be moral solutions of conflicts of interest.

(1) Any moral doctrine that assigns greater importance to the interests of one group than to those of another is unacceptably arbitrary unless there is some difference between the members of the groups that justifies treating them differently.

(2) Ethical egoism would have each person assign greater importance to his or her own interests than to the interests of others. But there is no general difference between oneself and others, to which each person can appeal, that justifies this difference in treatment.

(3) Therefore, ethical egoism is unacceptably arbitrary.

Ethical egoism fails as a moral theory.

Adam Smith observed that the wealth of nations was based on self interest. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."