

Abstract

Ethical Egoism: It May Be Nasty, but is it also Incoherent?

Normative Ethical egoism claims that the only duty or duties persons have is to themselves; or to put it another way, “self-interest is the sole valid standard of right conduct.” (Taylor 1975: 32) There is good reason to suppose this standard of right conduct is not coherent, let alone correct.

The criterion of self-interest would not be interpreted as necessarily furthering ones immediate self-interest since some greater interest may be served only if the satisfaction of some immediate self-interest is forgone. Thus, in the relatively short term it might seem as if it is in my best interest to pursue a career in philosophy. However, if doing so prevents me from pursuing some longer term ambition and goal (e.g. designing gardens)—one that would better serve my self interest in the long term, then pursuing a career in philosophy would be not just a mistake of judgment. It would also be an improper action given ethical egoism’s standard for right conduct.

In those (countless) cases where the goods one gets by acting in one’s self interest (goods gotten by acting in one’s self interest now vs goods gotten by acting in one’s self-interest later) are incommensurable, the ethical egoist’s standard of right conduct comes undone. If one tried to act in accordance with the egoist standard one would, at least on some occasions, simply be stymied.

Incommensurability of values makes it problematic, if not impossible, to decide what acting in one’s own best interest (i.e. doing the right thing in egoist terms) amounts to. Here we are considering the matter from the side of value. But consider it from the side of oneself. Is it in *your* self-interest to forgo a modelling career in order to pursue a college education at this time? Who knows! And if one wholeheartedly pursues one course of action at the expense of the other, then unless the choice really turns out to have dismal or dire consequences (you end up teaching philosophy) then it is unlikely that one can ever find out.

It makes little, if any, sense to ask the question “which of the alternatives will bring about more things that the person would like and fewer that he would dislike over his life span as a whole than any other alternative?” Normative ethical egoism is incoherent because what counts as our self-interest partly depends on our present choices, so our present choices can't be normatively guided (in whole) by our perception of our self-interest. If this is right it then the point has applications or implications far beyond ethical egoism and well into the way we think about ourselves and our lives across time.