

While Rand’s particular form of ethical egoism suffers from serious problems, it is worth noting one last way in which ethical egoism can take different forms. Notice that ethical egoism specifies a rather straightforward **rule of evaluation**, saying to always select that which best promotes your own self-interest. This rule, however, can be applied to different **evaluative focal points** in order to derive different versions of ethical egoism. An evaluative focal point is whatever a rule of evaluation might directly assess. Typical evaluative focal points include actions, rules, and character traits. Indeed, each of these different focal points leads to a different form of ethical egoism:

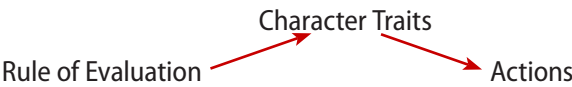
Act Ethical Egoism: A person should directly evaluate each of his or her actions by selecting those that best promote his or her own self-interest.



Rule Ethical Egoism: A person should indirectly evaluate each of his or her actions by employing a system of rules such that conformity to this system of rules will best promote his or her own self-interest.



Virtue/Character Ethical Egoism: A person should indirectly evaluate each of his or her actions by selecting the ones that a virtuous person would select, where a virtuous person is someone who has that set of character traits that will best promote a person’s own self-interest.



Can you think of situation where an act egoist might say to do one thing but a rule egoist would say do another?

Why is Rachels not impressed with this distinction between act and rule ethical egoism (seen in his response to the claim that “ethical egoism [is] compatible with commonsense morality”)?

Introduction to Philosophy

Ethical Egoism

So far we have seen several different potential sources of right and wrong, and how these influence answering the more general practical question concerning what ought I do. However, when we started this unit, I said there was another related question concerning morality: What matters morally? Today we make the turn towards answering this question.

One place to begin in determining what matters morally is to consider whether the interests of other people should influence one person’s decisions. James Rachels believes that commonsense morality recognizes that the interests of others should matter. Meanwhile, the Russian-American novelist Ayn Rand (1905–1982 CE) argues that this so-called “common sense” is naïve and even dangerous. As a result, Rand maintains that a person should care solely about his or her own interests and not those of others. Positions like this are often described as forms of egoism because they emphasize the importance of selfishness or self-interest in a person’s life.

Similar to what we have seen before in this unit, an account of egoism must begin by recognizing that it may be understood as making either a *descriptive* claim about how people actually behave or a *normative* claim about how people ought to behave. So we must always be careful to distinguish the following sorts of claims:

Psychological Egoism: People generally do pursue their own self-interest.

Strong Version: Altruism (the helping of another at one’s own expense) is abnormal or even impossible.

Weak Version: Altruism occasionally occurs and is normal.

Ethical Egoism: People should pursue their own self-interest.

Strong Version: You and you alone determine your interests, and you cannot ever be wrong about them.

Weak Version: You must distinguish your true interests from your apparent interests; you should do what you want, but you may be wrong about what it is you really want

For her part, Rand is clearly an egoist:

You have heard no concepts of morality but the mystical or the social. You have been taught that morality is a code of behavior imposed on you by whim, the whim of a supernatural power or the whim of society, to serve God’s purpose or your neighbor’s welfare, to please an authority beyond the grave or else next door—but not to serve your life or pleasure. . . .

Accept the fact that the achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life.

- Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*.

However, which one of the four types of egoism given above is Rand defending? How does this explain her hostility towards religion and “social” interests?

There are many different forms that ethical egoism may take, based on how it defines a person’s “self-interest”. Some examples include the following:

Preference Satisfaction Ethical Egoism: A person should act so that he or she promotes (satisfies) his or her own values and preferences

Hedonistic Ethical Egoism: A person should act so that he or she promotes his or her own pleasure.

Rational Ethical Egoism: A person should act so that he or she promotes his or her own long-term interests.

What does Rand mean by “selfishness” or “self-interest”? How does this reveal which one of these three types of ethical egoism Rand adopts?

Now that we are clearer on the position Rand actually holds, we assess her argument supporting it.

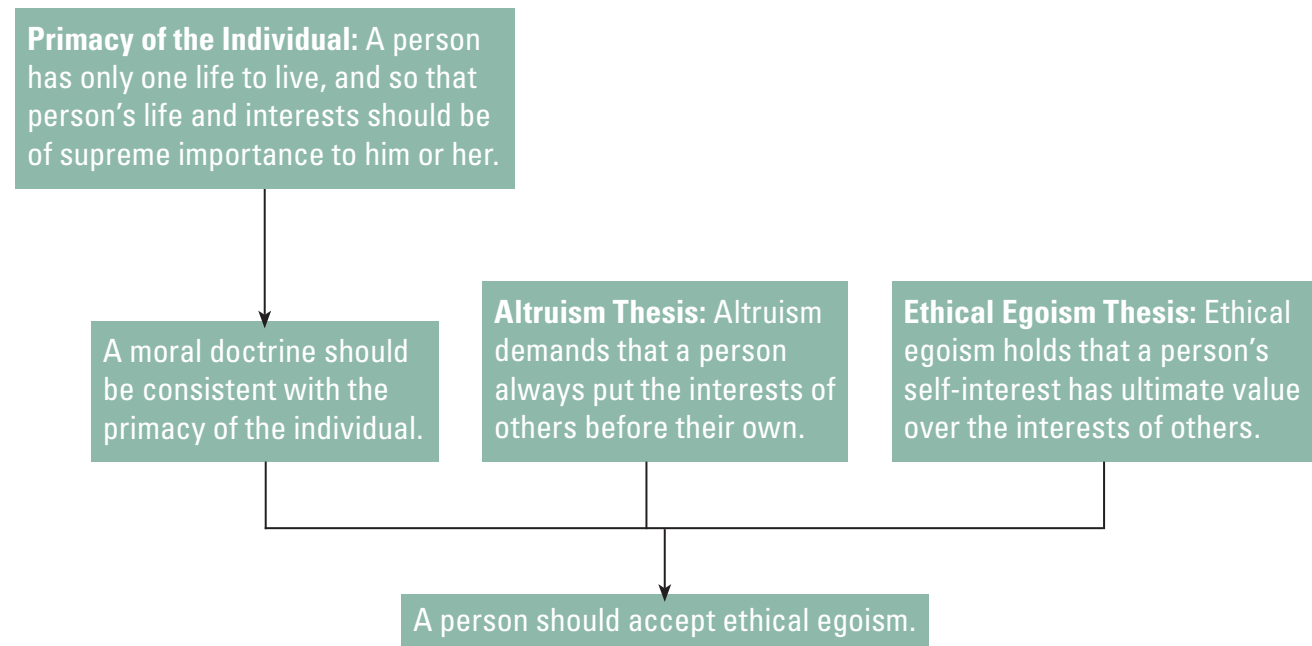
Man’s life is the standard of morality, but your own life is its purpose. If existence on earth is your goal, you must choose your actions and values by the standard of that which is proper to man—for the purpose of preserving, fulfilling, and enjoying the irreplaceable value which is your life.

Since life requires a specific course of action, any other course will destroy it. A being who does not hold his own life as the motive and goal of his actions, is acting on the motive and standard of death. . . .

Man—every man—is an end in himself, he exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose.

- Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*.

Here is the argument diagram of James Rachels’ interpretation of Rand’s argument:



As we have done before, we should check this argument for deductive soundness. The validity of this argument seems extremely shaky since it seems to presume a false dichotomy. Why is that?

Rachels argues that the theory ethical egoism suffers from a major problem that “comes closest to an outright refutation” of the theory.

It turns out that Ethical Egoism is an arbitrary doctrine, in the same way that racism is arbitrary.

- James Rachels, “Ethical Egoism”.

What exactly is Rachel’s argument here?