

Egoism II: An Argument for Ethical Egoism

Premise: Free markets, in which everybody looks out for themselves, result in a much more productive society than places where people try to look after each other.
Conclusion: Everybody should look out just for themselves.

Rachels objects to arguments of this form, since he says that they are ultimately not egoistic at all. The justification for behaving egoistically is ultimately a non-egoistic one: it is the attempt to maximize the well being of everyone. But: (i) wouldn't it be interesting if there were a good argument for behaving as egoists, even if our basic motivations were not; and (ii) couldn't the egoist use such arguments as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the altruist's position: even if you are an altruist you will ultimately end up as an egoist; so being an egoist is the only coherent position. (A *reductio ad absurdum* is an argument that shows that a certain position ends in a conclusion that would be unacceptable to the proponent of that position: typically a contradiction.)

How good is the argument?

(i) Is it valid? Depends on whether we think that we should aim for the most productive society. What about other issues, such as Equality; solidarity; respect for the environment. (Note that the argument moves from a descriptive premise to an evaluative conclusion; from an 'is' to an 'ought'. This kind of argument is widely—but not universally—held to be fallacious.)

(ii) Is the premise true? There are various arguments raised in its support: to do with knowledge and co-ordination (we know only our own desires well enough, and they are all we can keep track of); and to do with motivation (we won't really be moved to help others, however much we might think we will, as much as we will be motivated to help ourselves; the power that is needed to help others will actually be used corruptly; ultimately those who are helped will lose the motivation and skills needed to help themselves).

A problem for all arguments of this sort has come from the prisoners' dilemma. Consider two prisoners, who are suspected of the same crime, but are being held in solitary confinement. To each of them the police make the same offer: if you confess and the other one doesn't, we'll reward you with freedom, and jail him for ten. If both of you confess, we'll give you each three years. If neither of you confess, we'll give you each one year on a trumped-up charge.

	B confesses	B doesn't confess
A confesses	3 years for A, 3 years for B	Freedom for A, 10 years for B
A doesn't confess	10 years for A, Freedom for B	1 year for A, 1 year for B

What should they do? Suppose they are both egoists. Each wants to get the shortest sentence for himself. So each reasons as follows: suppose my partner confesses; then I'd be better off confessing (3 years for me, instead of 10). Suppose he doesn't confess; then I'd still be better off confessing (freedom for me, instead of 1 year). Whatever happens I'd be better off confessing. But both will think like this, and each will get 3 years when they could have got only 1 each. It seems that acting egoistically doesn't always result in the best solution. There are similar standard free rider problems. Why should I save energy, recycle etc.?