

CHAPTER 5

Ethical Egoism

The achievement of his own happiness is man's highest moral purpose.

AYN RAND, *THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS* (1961)

5.1. Is There a Duty to Help Starving People?

Each year millions of people die of malnutrition and related health problems. A common pattern among children in poor countries is death from dehydration caused by diarrhea brought on by malnutrition. Researchers estimate that nearly 5000 children die in this way every day. That comes to 1.8 million children every year. If we add in those children who die from other preventable causes, the number goes over 10 million. Even if this estimate is too high, the number who die is staggering.

For those of us in the affluent countries, this poses an acute problem. We spend money on ourselves, not only for the necessities of life but for countless luxuries—for nice cars, expensive clothes, CD players, movie tickets, and so on. In America, even people with modest incomes enjoy such things. The problem is that we could forgo our luxuries and give the money for famine relief instead. The fact that we don't suggests that we regard our luxuries as more important than their lives.

Why do we allow people to starve when we could save them? Few of us actually believe our luxuries are that important. Most of us, if asked the question directly, would probably be a bit embarrassed, and we would say that we probably should do more to help. The explanation of why we do not is, at least in part, that we hardly ever think about the problem. Living our own comfortable lives, we are insulated from it. The starving people are dying at some distance from us; we do not see them

and we can avoid even thinking of them. When we do think of them, it is only abstractly, as statistics. Unfortunately for the hungry, statistics do not have much power to move us.

We respond differently when there is a "crisis," as when a tsunami devastated Indonesia in 2004 or when Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans in 2005. Then it is front-page news and relief efforts are mobilized. But when the needy are scattered, the situation does not seem so pressing. The 1.8 million children are unfortunate that they are not all gathered in, say, Chicago.

But leaving aside the question of why we behave as we do, what is our duty? What *should* we do? We might think of this as the "commonsense" view of the matter: Morality requires that we balance our own interests against the interests of others. It is understandable, of course, that we look out for ourselves, and no one can be faulted for attending to their own basic needs. But at the same time, the needs of others are important, and when we can help others—especially at little cost to ourselves—we should do so. So, if you have an extra 10 dollars, and giving it to a famine relief agency would help to save the life of a child, then commonsense morality would say that you should do so.

This way of thinking involves a general assumption about our moral duties: that we have moral duties to other people, and not merely duties that we create, such as by making a promise or incurring a debt. We have "natural" duties to others simply because *they are people who could be helped or harmed by what we do*. If a certain action would benefit (or harm) other people, then that is a reason why we should (or should not) perform that action. The commonsense assumption is that other people's interests *count*, for their own sakes, from a moral point of view.

But one person's common sense is another person's naïve platitude. Some thinkers have maintained that, in fact, we have no duties to other people. Ethical Egoism is the idea that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. On this theory, our only duty is to do what is best for ourselves.

Ethical Egoism is a challenging theory. It contradicts some of our deepest moral beliefs—beliefs held by most of us, at any rate—and it is not easy to refute. We will examine the most important arguments for and against it. If it turns out to be true, then that is immensely important. But even if it turns out to be false, we can still learn from it, for we may gain some insight into the reasons why we *do* have obligations to other people.

5.2. Psychological Egoism

Ethical Egoism must be carefully distinguished from a different theory known as Psychological Egoism. Ethical Egoism claims that each person *ought* to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. Psychological Egoism, by contrast, asserts that each person *does in fact* pursue his or her own self-interest alone. Thus, these two theories are very different. It is one thing to say that people are self-interested and that our neighbors therefore will not give to charity. It is quite another to say that people *ought* to be self-interested and so our neighbors *ought* not to give to charity. Psychological Egoism makes a claim about human nature, or about the way things are; Ethical Egoism makes a claim about morality, or about the way things should be.

Psychological Egoism is not a theory of ethics; rather, it is a theory of human psychology. Nevertheless, moral philosophers have always been worried about it. If Psychological Egoism were true, it would seem to have devastating consequences for morality. If people are moved only by their own welfare, isn't it pointless to talk about what we "ought" to do? If we are just self-interested beings, then aren't we going to behave selfishly no matter what our well-meaning but naïve moral theories tell us to do? Before returning to the topic of Ethical Egoism, let us first assess Psychological Egoism and see if morality has anything to worry about.

Is Altruism Possible? Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish businessman who could have stayed safely at home, spent the closing months of World War II in Budapest, Hungary. Wallenberg had volunteered to be sent there as part of Sweden's diplomatic mission after he heard reports about Hitler's "final solution to the Jewish problem." Once there, he successfully pressured the Hungarian government to stop the deportations to the concentration camps. When the Hungarian government was replaced by a Nazi puppet regime, and the deportations resumed, Wallenberg issued "Swedish Protective Passes" to thousands of Jews, insisting that they all had connections with Sweden and were under the protection of his government. He helped many people find places to hide. When they were rounded up, Wallenberg would stand between them and the Nazis, telling the Germans that they would have to shoot him first. At the very end of the war,

when everything was chaos and other diplomats were fleeing, Wallenberg stayed behind. He is credited with saving as many as 100,000 lives. When the war was over, he disappeared, and for a long time no one knew what had happened to him. Now it is believed that he was killed, not by the Germans, but by Soviet occupation forces.

Wallenberg's story is more dramatic than most, but it is not unique. The Israeli government recognizes over 20,000 Gentiles who risked their lives trying to save Jews from being murdered in the Holocaust. And though few of us have saved lives, acts of altruism appear to be common. People do favors for one another. They build homeless shelters. They volunteer in hospitals. They read to the blind. They give blood. Many people donate money to worthy causes when they could keep that money for themselves. In some cases, the amount given is extraordinary. David Allsop, an Australian civil servant, donates half of his income to environmental causes. Zell Kravinsky, an American real estate investor, gave his entire \$45-million fortune to charity. And then, for good measure, Kravinsky donated one of his kidneys to a complete stranger.

These are remarkable deeds, but should they be taken at face value? According to Psychological Egoism, we may believe ourselves to be noble and self-sacrificing, but that is only an illusion. In reality, we care only for ourselves. Could this theory possibly be true? Why have people believed it, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary? Two arguments have often been advanced in favor of Psychological Egoism.

The Argument That We Always Do What We Most Want to Do. If we describe one person's action as altruistic and another person's action as self-interested, we are overlooking the fact that in both cases *the person is merely doing what he or she most wants to do*. If Raoul Wallenberg chose to go to Hungary, and no one was coercing him, that only shows that he wanted to go there more than he wanted to remain in Sweden—and why should he be praised for altruism when he was only doing what he wanted to do? His action was dictated by his own desires, his own sense of what he wanted. Thus, he was moved by his own self-interest. And since exactly the same may be said about any alleged act of kindness, we can conclude that Psychological Egoism must be true.

This argument, however, is flawed. There are things that we do, not because we want to, but because we feel that we *ought* to. For example, someone may do something because she has promised to do it, and thus feels obligated, even though she does not want to do it. It is sometimes suggested that in such cases we carry out the action because, after all, we most want to keep our promises. But that is not true. In such cases, it is simply false to say that what I most want is to keep my promise. My strongest desire is to break my promise, but I keep it anyway. For all we know, Wallenberg was in this position: Perhaps he wanted to stay in Sweden, but he felt that he had to go to Budapest. In any case, the fact that he chose to go does not imply that he most wanted to do so.

The argument has a second flaw. Suppose we concede that we always act on our strongest desires. Even if this were granted, it would not follow that Wallenberg was acting out of self-interest. For if he wanted to help other people, even at great risk to himself, that is precisely what makes his action a refutation of Psychological Egoism. The mere fact that you act on your own desires does not mean that you are looking out for yourself; rather, it depends on *what it is* that you desire. If you care only about your own welfare and give no thought to others, then you are acting out of self-interest; but if you want other people to be happy, and you act on that desire, then you are not. To put the point another way: In assessing whether an action is self-interested, the issue is not *whether* the action is based on a desire; the issue is *what kind of desire it is based on*. If what you want is to help someone else, then your motive is altruistic, not self-interested.

Therefore, this argument goes wrong in just about every way that an argument can go wrong: The premise is not true, and even if it were, the conclusion would not follow from it.

The Argument That We Do What Makes Us Feel Good. The second argument for Psychological Egoism appeals to the fact that so-called altruistic actions produce a sense of self-satisfaction in the person who performs them. Acting “unselfishly” makes people feel good about themselves, and that is the real point of it.

According to a 19th-century newspaper, this argument was advanced by Abraham Lincoln. The Springfield, Illinois, *Monitor* reported:

Mr. Lincoln once remarked to a fellow-passenger on an old-time mud coach that all men were prompted by selfishness in doing good. His fellow-passenger was antagonizing this position when they were passing over a corduroy bridge that spanned a slough. As they crossed this bridge they espied an old razor-backed sow on the bank making a terrible noise because her pigs had got into the slough and were in danger of drowning. As the old coach began to climb the hill, Mr. Lincoln called out, “Driver, can’t you stop just a moment?” Then Mr. Lincoln jumped out, ran back, and lifted the little pigs out of the mud and water and placed them on the bank. When he returned, his companion remarked: “Now, Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?” “Why, bless your soul, Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don’t you see?”

In this story, Honest Abe employs a time-honored tactic of Psychological Egoism: *the strategy of reinterpreting motives*. Everyone knows that people sometimes seem to act altruistically; but if we look deeper, we may find that something else is going on. And usually it is not hard to discover that the “unselfish” behavior is actually connected with some benefit for the person who does it. Thus, Lincoln talks about the peace of mind he got from rescuing the pigs.

Other examples of alleged altruism can also be reinterpreted. According to some of Raoul Wallenberg’s friends, before traveling to Hungary, he was depressed and unhappy that his life didn’t seem to be amounting to much. So he undertook deeds that would make him a heroic figure. His quest for a more significant life was spectacularly successful—here we are, more than a half-century after his death, talking about him. Mother Teresa, the nun who spent her life working among the poor in Calcutta, is often cited as a perfect example of altruism—but, of course, she believed that she would be handsomely rewarded in heaven. David Allsop, who gives half of his income to environmental causes, “had previously worked as a campaigner himself, and said he found it deeply satisfying now to be able to provide the financial support for others to campaign.” And as for Zell Kravinsky, who gave away both his fortune and a kidney, his parents never gave him much praise, so he was always trying

to do things that even they couldn't deny were admirable. Kravinsky himself said that, as he began to give away his money, he came to think of a donation as "a treat to myself. I really thought of it as something pleasurable."

Despite all this, Lincoln's argument is badly flawed. It may be true that one of Lincoln's motives in saving the pigs was to preserve his own peace of mind. *But the fact that Lincoln had a self-interested motive doesn't mean that he didn't have benevolent motives as well.* In fact, Lincoln's desire to help the pigs may have been even greater than his desire to preserve his own peace of mind. And if this isn't true in Lincoln's case, it will be true in other cases: If I see a child drowning, my desire to help that child will usually be greater than my desire to avoid a guilty conscience. Cases like these are counterexamples to Psychological Egoism.

In many instances of altruism, we don't even have self-interested motives. If I quickly decide to jump into the water to save the child, I may not have time to think about myself at all—I may be thinking only of the child. There is a general lesson to be learned here, one having to do with the nature of desire and its objects. We desire all sorts of things—money, a new car, video games, a spouse, and so on—and because we desire these things, we may derive satisfaction from getting them. But the object of our desire is not the feeling of satisfaction—that is not what we are after. What we are after is simply the money, the car, the game, or the marriage. It is the same with helping others. Our desire to help others often comes first; the good feelings we may get are merely a by-product.

Conclusion about Psychological Egoism. If Psychological Egoism is so implausible, why have many intelligent people been attracted to it? Part of the attraction is the theory's hardheaded, deflationary attitude toward human pretensions. Psychological Egoism provides a theoretical rebuttal to human vanity. Also, people are drawn to it because it is beautifully simple. It would be pleasing to find a single formula that explains all human behavior. And since self-regard is a tremendously important factor in motivation, it is natural to try to use it to account for all human action. However, every attempt to do so seems strained and implausible; Psychological Egoism is not a credible theory.

Thus, we may conclude that morality has nothing to fear from Psychological Egoism. Since we *can* be moved by regard for others, it is not pointless to talk about whether we *should* care about our neighbors. Moral theorizing need not be a naïve endeavor, based on an unrealistic view of human nature.

5.3. Three Arguments for Ethical Egoism

Ethical Egoism, again, is the idea that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively. Before we talk about the arguments that have been made in its favor, we should understand exactly what this theory says and what it does not say. In the first place, Ethical Egoism does not say that one should promote one's own interests *in addition to* the interests of others. That would be an ordinary, commonsense view. Ethical Egoism is the radical idea that one's *only* duty is to promote one's own interests. According to Ethical Egoism, there is only one ultimate principle of conduct, that of self-interest, and this principle sums up all of one's obligations.

However, Ethical Egoism does not say that you should *avoid* actions that help others. It may happen in many instances that your interests coincide with the interests of others, so that in helping yourself you will be helping them. Or it may happen that aiding others is an effective means for creating some benefit for yourself. Ethical Egoism does not forbid such actions; in fact, it may recommend them. The theory insists only that in such cases the benefit to others is not what makes the act right. Rather, what makes the act right is the fact that it is to one's own advantage.

Finally, Ethical Egoism does not imply that in pursuing one's interests one ought always to do what one wants to do, or what gives one the most pleasure in the short run. Someone may want to smoke cigarettes, or bet all his money at the race-track, or set up a meth lab in his basement. Ethical Egoism would frown on all this, regardless of the momentary pleasure it brings. Ethical Egoism says that a person ought to do what really is in his or her own best interests, over the long run. It endorses selfishness, not foolishness.

What arguments can be advanced to support this doctrine? Unfortunately, the theory is asserted more often than it is argued for—many of its supporters apparently think its truth is

self-evident, so that arguments are not needed. When it is argued for, three lines of reasoning are most commonly used.

The Argument That Altruism Is Self-Defeating. The first argument has several variations, each suggesting the same general point:

- Each of us is intimately familiar with our own individual wants and needs. Moreover, each of us is uniquely placed to pursue those wants and needs effectively. At the same time, we know the desires and needs of other people only imperfectly, and we are not well situated to pursue them. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that if we set out to be “our brother’s keeper,” we will often bungle the job and end up doing more harm than good.
- At the same time, the policy of “looking out for others” is an offensive intrusion into other people’s privacy; it is essentially a policy of minding other people’s business.
- Making other people the object of one’s “charity” is degrading to them; it robs them of their dignity and self-respect. The offer of charity says, in effect, that they are not competent to care for themselves; and the statement is self-fulfilling. They cease to be self-reliant and become passively dependent on others. That is why the recipients of “charity” are so often resentful rather than appreciative.

Thus, the policy of “looking out for others” is said to be self-defeating. If we want to do what is best for people, we should not adopt so-called altruistic policies. On the contrary, if each person looks after his or her own interests, it is more likely that everyone will be better off. As Alexander Pope put it:

Thus God and nature link’d the general frame
And bade self-love and social be the same.

It is possible to object to this argument on a number of grounds. Of course, no one favors bungling, butting in, or depriving people of their self-respect. But is that really what we are doing when we feed hungry children? Is the starving child in Niger really harmed when we “intrude” into “her business” by supplying food? It hardly seems likely. Yet we can set this point

aside, for considered as an argument for Ethical Egoism, this way of thinking has an even more serious defect.

The trouble is that it isn’t really an argument for Ethical Egoism at all. The argument concludes that we should adopt certain policies of behavior, and on the surface, they appear to be egoistic policies. However, the *reason* we should adopt those policies is decidedly unegoistic. It is said that we should adopt those policies because doing so will promote the betterment of society—but according to Ethical Egoism, that is not something we should be concerned about. Spelled out fully, with everything laid on the table, the argument says:

- (1) We ought to do whatever will best promote everyone’s interests.
- (2) The best way to promote everyone’s interests is for each of us to adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.
- (3) Therefore, each of us should adopt the policy of pursuing our own interests exclusively.

If we accept this reasoning, then we are not ethical egoists. Even though we might end up behaving like egoists, our ultimate principle is one of beneficence—we are doing what we think will help everyone, not merely what we think will benefit ourselves. Rather than being egoists, we turn out to be altruists with a peculiar view of what in fact promotes the general welfare.

Ayn Rand’s Argument. Ayn Rand is not much read by philosophers, largely because the leading ideas associated with her name—that capitalism is a morally superior economic system and that morality demands absolute respect for the rights of individuals—are developed more rigorously by other writers. Nevertheless, she was a charismatic figure who attracted a devoted following during her lifetime, and today, more than 20 years after her death, the Ayn Rand industry is still going strong. Among 20th-century writers, the idea of Ethical Egoism is probably more closely associated with her than with anyone else.

Ayn Rand regarded the “ethics of altruism” as a totally destructive idea, both in society as a whole and in the lives of individuals taken in by it. Altruism, to her way of thinking, leads to

a denial of the value of the individual. It says to a person: Your life is merely something that may be sacrificed. "If a man accepts the ethics of altruism," she writes, "his first concern is not how to live his life, but how to sacrifice it." Those who promote the ethics of altruism are beneath contempt—they are parasites who, rather than working to build and sustain their own lives, leech off those who do. Rand continues:

Parasites, moochers, looters, brutes and thugs can be of no value to a human being—nor can he gain any benefit from living in a society geared to *their* needs, demands and protections, a society that treats him as a sacrificial animal and penalizes him for his virtues in order to reward *them* for their vices, which means: a society based on the ethics of altruism.

By "sacrificing one's life" Rand does not mean anything so dramatic as dying. A person's life consists, in part, of projects undertaken and goods earned and created. Thus, to demand that a person abandon his projects or give up his goods is an effort to "sacrifice his life."

Rand also suggests that there is a metaphysical basis for egoistic ethics. Somehow, it is the only ethic that takes seriously the *reality* of the individual person. She bemoans "the enormity of the extent to which altruism erodes men's capacity to grasp . . . the value of an individual life; it reveals a mind from which the reality of a human being has been wiped out."

What, then, of the hungry children? It might be argued that Ethical Egoism itself "reveals a mind from which the reality of a human being has been wiped out," namely, the human being who is starving. But Rand quotes with approval the answer given by one of her followers: "Once, when Barbara Brandon was asked by a student: 'What will happen to the poor . . . ?' she answered: 'If *you* want to help them, you will not be stopped.'"

All these remarks are, I think, part of one continuous argument that can be summarized like this:

- (1) Each person has only one life to live. If we value the individual—that is, if the individual has moral worth—then we must agree that this life is of supreme importance. After all, it is all one has, and all one is.
- (2) The ethics of altruism regards the life of the individual as something one must be ready to sacrifice for the

good of others. Therefore, the ethics of altruism does not take seriously the value of the individual.

- (3) Ethical Egoism, which allows each person to view his or her own life as being of ultimate value, does take the individual seriously—it is, in fact, the only philosophy that does so.
- (4) Thus, Ethical Egoism is the philosophy that we ought to accept.

One problem with this argument, as you may have noticed, is that it assumes we have only two choices: Either we accept the ethics of altruism, or we accept Ethical Egoism. The choice is then made to look obvious by depicting the ethics of altruism as an insane doctrine that only an idiot would accept. The ethics of altruism is said to be the view that one's own interests have *no* value and that one must be ready to sacrifice oneself *totally* any time *anybody* asks it. If this is the alternative, then any other view, including Ethical Egoism, will look good by comparison.

But that is hardly a fair picture of the choices. What we called the commonsense view stands between the two extremes. It says that one's own interests and the interests of others are *both* important, and must be balanced against each other. Sometimes, when the balancing is done, it will turn out that one should act in the interests of others; other times, it will turn out that one should take care of oneself. So, even if we should reject the extreme ethics of altruism, it does not follow that we must accept the other extreme of Ethical Egoism. There is a middle ground.

Ethical Egoism as Compatible with Commonsense Morality.

The third line of reasoning takes a different approach. Ethical Egoism is usually presented as a *revisionist* moral philosophy, that is, as a philosophy that says our commonsense moral views are mistaken and need to be changed. It is possible, however, to interpret Ethical Egoism in a much less radical way, as a theory that accepts commonsense morality and offers a surprising account of its basis.

The less radical interpretation goes as follows: Ordinary morality consists in obeying certain rules. We must speak the truth, keep our promises, avoid harming others, and so on. At first glance, these duties appear to have little in common—they

are just a bunch of discrete rules. Yet, from a theoretical point of view, we may wonder whether there is not some hidden unity underlying the hodgepodge of separate duties. Perhaps a few fundamental principles explain all the rest, just as in physics certain basic principles bring together and explain diverse phenomena. From a theoretical point of view, the smaller the number of basic principles, the better. Best of all would be one fundamental principle, from which all the rest could be derived. Ethical egoists would say that all these duties are ultimately derived from the one fundamental principle of self-interest.

Understood in this way, Ethical Egoism is not such a radical doctrine. It does not challenge commonsense morality; it only tries to explain and systematize it. And it does a surprisingly successful job. It can provide plausible explanations of the duties mentioned above, and more:

- *The duty not to harm others:* If we make a habit of doing things that harm other people, other people will not mind doing things that harm us. We will be shunned and despised; others will not have us as friends and will not do us favors when we need them. If our offenses against others are serious enough, we may even end up in jail. Thus, it is to our own advantage to avoid harming others.
- *The duty not to lie:* If we lie to other people, we will suffer all the ill effects of a bad reputation. People will distrust us and avoid doing business with us. We need people to be honest with us, but we can hardly expect them to do so if we have not been honest with them. Thus, it is to our own advantage to be truthful.
- *The duty to keep our promises:* It is to our own advantage to enter into mutually beneficial arrangements with other people. To benefit from those arrangements, we need to be able to rely on others to keep their word—we need them to keep their promises. But we can hardly expect them to do so if we do not keep our promises to them. Therefore, from the point of view of self-interest, we should keep our promises.

Pursuing this line of reasoning, Thomas Hobbes suggested that the principle of Ethical Egoism leads to nothing less than the

Golden Rule: We should “do unto others” because if we do, others will be more likely to “do unto us.”

Does this argument succeed in establishing Ethical Egoism as a viable theory of morality? It is, in my opinion at least, the best try. But there are two serious problems with it. First, the argument does not prove quite as much as it needs to prove. At best, it shows only that it is *mostly* to one’s advantage to avoid harming others. It does not show that this is *always* to one’s advantage. And it cannot show that. Sometimes one can benefit from treating another person badly. In that case, the obligation not to harm the other person could not be derived from the principle of Ethical Egoism. Thus, it appears that not all our moral obligations can be derived from self-interest.

But set that point aside. There is a still more fundamental problem. Suppose it is true that, say, contributing money for famine relief is somehow to one’s own advantage. It does not follow that this is the only reason, or even the most basic reason, why doing so is a good thing. For example, the most basic reason might be *to help the starving people*. The fact that doing so is also to one’s own advantage might be only a secondary, less important consideration. Thus, although Ethical Egoism says that self-interest is the *only* reason why we should help others, nothing in the present argument really supports that.

5.4. Three Arguments against Ethical Egoism

Ethical Egoism haunts moral philosophy. It is not a popular doctrine; the most important philosophers have rejected it outright. But it has never been very far from their minds. Almost every ethicist has felt it necessary to explain what’s wrong with the theory, as though the very possibility that it might be correct was hanging in the air, threatening to smother their other ideas. As the merits of the various “refutations” have been debated, philosophers have returned to it again and again.

Curiously, philosophers have not paid much attention to the most obvious argument against Ethical Egoism, namely that it endorses wicked actions—provided, of course, that those actions benefit the person who does them. Here are some examples, taken from various newspapers: To increase his profits, a pharmacist filled prescriptions for cancer patients using watered-down

drugs. A nurse raped two patients while they were unconscious. A paramedic gave emergency patients injections of sterile water rather than morphine, so he could sell the morphine. Parents fed a baby acid so that they could fake a lawsuit, claiming the baby's formula was tainted. A 13-year-old girl was kidnapped by a neighbor and kept shackled in an underground bomb shelter for 181 days, where she was sexually abused. A 60-year-old man shot his letter carrier seven times because he was \$90,000 in debt and thought that being in federal prison would be better than being homeless.

Suppose that, by doing such things, someone could actually gain some benefit for himself. Of course, this means that he would have to avoid being caught. But if he could get away with it, wouldn't Ethical Egoism have to say that such actions are permissible? This seems enough by itself to discredit the doctrine. I believe this is a valid complaint. Nonetheless, one might think that it begs the question against Ethical Egoism, because in saying that these actions are wicked, we are appealing to a non-egoistic conception of wickedness. So, we might ask if there isn't some further problem with Ethical Egoism, one that doesn't beg the question.

Thus, some philosophers have tried to show that there are deeper logical problems with Ethical Egoism. The following arguments are typical of the refutations they have proposed.

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Cannot Handle Conflicts of Interest. In his book *The Moral Point of View*, Kurt Baier argues that Ethical Egoism cannot be correct because it cannot provide solutions for conflicts of interest. We need moral rules, he says, only because our interests sometimes conflict—if they never conflicted, then there would be no problems to solve, and hence no need for the kind of guidance that morality provides. But Ethical Egoism does not help to resolve conflicts of interest; it only makes them worse.

To illustrate his point, Baier asks us to suppose that there are two individuals, B and K, running for president. (Given that Baier wrote this in the 1950s, he can't have meant Bush and Kerry!) Since it would be in B's interest to win, it would also be in B's interest to murder K. From this it follows that B ought to murder K, that it would be wrong for B not to murder K,

and that B has not "done his duty" until he has murdered K. But it is also true that it is in K's interest not to be murdered. From this it follows that K ought to stop B from murdering him, that it would be wrong for K not to stop B, and that K has not "done his duty" until he has made sure of stopping B. Baier concludes:

This is obviously absurd. For morality is designed to apply in just such cases, namely, those where interests conflict. But if the point of view of morality were that of self-interest, then there could never be moral solutions of conflicts of interest.

Does this argument prove that Ethical Egoism is unacceptable? It does, *if* the conception of morality to which it appeals is accepted. The argument assumes that an adequate morality must provide solutions for conflicts of interest in such a way that everyone concerned can live together harmoniously. The conflict between B and K, for example, should be resolved so that they would no longer be at odds with one another. (One would not then have a duty to do something that the other has a duty to prevent.) Ethical Egoism does not do that, and if you think an ethical theory should, then you will not find Ethical Egoism acceptable.

But a defender of Ethical Egoism might reply that he does not accept this conception of morality. For him, life is essentially a long series of conflicts in which each person is struggling to come out on top; and the principle he accepts—the principle of Ethical Egoism—grants to each person the right to do his or her best to win. On this view, the moralist is not like a courtroom judge, who resolves disputes. Instead, he is like the referee in an Ultimate Fighting competition, who urges each fighter to do his best. (The difference is that in Ultimate Fighting, there are some things you *can't* do, such as biting and eye gouging. These things are allowed by Ethical Egoism.) So, the conflict between B and K will be "resolved" not by the application of an ethical principle but by one of them winning the struggle. The egoist will not be embarrassed by this. On the contrary, he will think it is no more than a realistic view of the nature of things.

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Is Logically Inconsistent. Some philosophers, including Baier, have leveled an even more

serious charge against Ethical Egoism. They have argued that it leads to logical contradictions. If this is true, then Ethical Egoism is indeed a mistaken theory, for no theory can be true if it is self-contradictory.

Consider B and K again. As Baier explains their predicament, it is in B's interest to kill K, and it is in K's interest to prevent this. But, Baier says:

If K prevents B from liquidating him, his act must be said to be both wrong and not wrong—wrong because it is the prevention of what B ought to do, his duty, and wrong for B not to do it; not wrong because it is what K ought to do, his duty, and wrong for K not to do it. But one and the same act (logically) cannot be both morally wrong and not morally wrong.

Now, does *this* argument prove that Ethical Egoism is unacceptable? At first glance, it seems persuasive. However, it is complicated, so we need to set it out with each step individually identified. Then we will be in a better position to evaluate it. Spelled out fully, it looks like this:

- (1) Suppose it is each person's duty to do what is in his own best interests.
- (2) It is in B's best interest to murder K.
- (3) It is in K's best interest to prevent B from murdering him.
- (4) Therefore, B's duty is to murder K, and K's duty is to prevent B from doing it.
- (5) But it is wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty.
- (6) Therefore, it is wrong for K to prevent B from murdering him.
- (7) Therefore, it is both wrong and not wrong for K to prevent B from murdering him.
- (8) But no act can be both wrong and not wrong; that is a self-contradiction.
- (9) Therefore, the assumption with which we started—that it is each person's duty to do what is in his own best interests—cannot be true.

When the argument is set out in this way, we can see its hidden flaw. The logical contradiction—that it is both wrong and not

wrong for K to prevent B from murdering him—does not follow simply from the principle of Ethical Egoism. It follows from that principle *together with* the additional premise expressed in step (5), namely, that "it is wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty." Thus, we are not compelled by the logic of the argument to reject Ethical Egoism. Instead, we could simply reject this additional premise and thereby avoid the contradiction. That is surely what the ethical egoist would do, for the ethical egoist would never say, without qualification, that it is always wrong to prevent someone from doing his duty. He would say, instead, that whether one ought to prevent someone from doing his duty depends entirely on whether it would be to one's own advantage to do so. Regardless of whether we think this is a correct view, it is, at the very least, a consistent view, and so this attempt to convict the ethical egoist of self-contradiction fails.

The Argument That Ethical Egoism Is Unacceptably Arbitrary.

Finally, we come to the argument that I think comes closest to an outright refutation of Ethical Egoism. It is also the most interesting of the arguments, because it provides some insight into why the interests of other people *should* matter to us. But before presenting this argument, we need to look at a general point about moral values. So let us set Ethical Egoism aside for now and consider a related matter.

There is a whole family of moral views that have this in common: They all involve dividing people into groups and saying that the interests of some groups count more than the interests of other groups. Racism is the most conspicuous example; racism divides people into groups according to race and assigns greater importance to the interests of one race than to others. The practical result is that members of one race are treated better than the others. All forms of discrimination work this way: anti-Semitism, nationalism, sexism, ageism, and so on. People in the grip of such views will think, in effect, "My race counts for more," or "Those who believe in *my* religion count for more," or "My country counts for more," and so on.

Can such views be defended? The people who accept such views are usually not much interested in argument—racists, for example, rarely try to offer rational grounds for their beliefs. But suppose they did. What could they say?

There is a general principle that stands in the way of any such defense. Let's call this the Principle of Equal Treatment: *We should treat people in the same way unless there is a relevant difference between them.* For example, suppose we're considering whether to admit two students to law school. If both students graduated from college with honors and aced the entrance exam—if both are equally well qualified—then it is merely arbitrary to admit one but not the other. However, if one graduated with honors and scored well on the admissions test while the other dropped out of college and never took the test, then it is acceptable to admit the first student but not the second.

Two points should be made about this principle. The first is that treating people in the same way does not always mean giving them the same outcome. During the Vietnam War, young American men desperately wanted to avoid the draft, and the government had to decide the order in which draft boards would call people up. In 1969, the first "draft lottery" was televised to a national audience. Here is how it worked: The days of the year were written on 366 slips of paper (one slip for February 29) and inserted into blue plastic capsules. Those capsules were placed in a glass jar and mixed up. Then, one by one, the capsules were drawn. The first was for September 14—young men with that birthday, age 18–26, would be drafted first. The winners of the lottery, drawn last, were born on June 8. In college dormitories, groups of students watched the drawings live, and it was easy to tell whose birthday had just come up—whichever just cursed or groaned. Obviously, the outcomes were different: In the end, some people got drafted and others didn't. However, the process was fair. By giving everyone an equal chance in the lottery, the government treated everyone in the same way.

A second point concerns the scope of the principle, or its range of application. Suppose you're not going to use your ticket to the big game, so you give it to a friend. In doing so, you are treating your friend better than everyone else you could have given the ticket to. Does your action violate the Principle of Equal Treatment? Does it need justification? Moral philosophers disagree on this question. Some think that the principle does not apply to cases like this. The principle applies only in "moral contexts," and what you should do with your ticket is not important

enough to count as a moral question. Others think that your action does require justification, and various justifications might be offered. Your action might be justified by the nature of friendship, or by the fact that the ticket belongs to you, or by the fact that it would be impossible for you to hold a lottery at the last minute for all the ticketless fans. It doesn't matter, from our point of view, who is right about the scope of the principle. Suffice it to say that everyone accepts the Principle of Equal Treatment, in one form or another.

Let's now apply that principle to racism. Can a racist point to any differences between, say, white people and black people that would justify treating them differently? In the past, racists have sometimes tried to do this by portraying blacks as lazy, stupid, threatening, and hypersexual. If these accusations were true, then they might justify treating blacks differently, in at least some circumstances. (This is the deep purpose of racist stereotypes: to provide the "relevant differences" needed to justify differences in treatment.) But, of course, they are not true; there are no such general differences between the races. Thus, racism is an arbitrary doctrine, in that it advocates treating people differently even though there are no differences between them to justify it.

Ethical Egoism is a moral theory of the same type. It advocates that each of us divide the world into two categories of people—ourselves and all the rest—and that we regard the interests of those in the first group as more important than the interests of those in the second group. But each of us can ask, What is the difference between me and everyone else that justifies placing myself in this special category? Am I more intelligent? Do I enjoy my life more? Are my accomplishments greater? Do I have needs or abilities that are so different from the needs or abilities of others? In short, *what makes me so special?* Failing an answer, it turns out that Ethical Egoism is an arbitrary doctrine, in the same way that racism is arbitrary. Both doctrines violate the Principle of Equal Treatment. And this, in addition to explaining why Ethical Egoism is unacceptable, also sheds light on the question of why we should care about others.

We should care about the interests of other people for the same reason we care about our own interests, for their needs and desires are comparable to our own. Consider, one last time, the starving children we could feed by giving up some of

our luxuries. Why should we care about them? We care about ourselves, of course—if we were starving, we would go to almost any lengths to get food. But what is the difference between us and them? Does hunger affect them any less? Are they somehow less deserving than we are? If we can find no relevant difference between us and them, then we must admit that, if our needs should be met, so should theirs. It is this realization—that we are on a par with one another—that is the deepest reason why our morality must include some recognition of the needs of others, and why, ultimately, Ethical Egoism fails as a moral theory.

CHAPTER 6

The Utilitarian Approach

Given our present perspective, it is amazing that Christian ethics down through the centuries could have accepted almost unanimously the sententious doctrine that “the end does not justify the means.” We have to ask now, “If the end does not justify the means, what does?” The answer is, obviously, “Nothing!”

JOSEPH FLETCHER, *MORAL RESPONSIBILITY* (1967)

6.1. The Revolution in Ethics

Philosophers like to think their ideas can change the world. Usually, it is a vain hope: They write books that are read by a few other like-minded thinkers, while the rest of humanity goes on unaffected. On occasion, however, a philosophical theory alters the way people think. Utilitarianism, a theory proposed by David Hume (1711–1776) but given definitive formulation by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), is a case in point.

The late 18th and 19th centuries witnessed an astonishing series of upheavals. The modern nation-state was emerging in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the wreckage of the Napoleonic empire; the revolutions of 1848 showed the transforming power of the new ideas of “liberty, equality, fraternity”; in America, a new country with a new kind of constitution was created, and its bloody civil war would put an end to slavery in Western civilization; and all the while, the Industrial Revolution was bringing about a complete restructuring of society.

It is not surprising that in the midst of all this change people might begin to think differently about ethics. The old ways of thinking were very much up in the air, open to challenge. Against this background, Bentham’s argument for a