Ethical Egoism: Objections and Replies
Keith Burgess-Jackson
1 March 2017

Ethical Egoism (EE):¹ For all acts x, x is right iff x maximizes net agent utility.²


Moore’s Objection:³

1. EE implies that {each person’s good is the sole good}.
2. It’s false that {each person’s good is the sole good}.
   Therefore,

¹ Also known as the Ethics (or Ethic) of Self-Interest. The English word “ego” derives from the Latin word for “I” (the personal pronoun). It refers to “the conscious thinking subject, as opposed to the non-ego or object.” The word “egoism,” in ethical contexts, means “The theory which regards self-interest as the foundation of morality.” The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (1971). Ethical egoism is not to be confused with psychological egoism, which is a theory of human nature (i.e., a theory of how human beings are by nature). Ethical egoism is a normative ethical theory, like act-utilitarianism.

² The term “utility” is a placeholder. It can be understood as pleasure, happiness, welfare (i.e., well-being), the satisfaction of desires, or the satisfaction of preferences. Let us call these views, respectively, hedonism (pleasure), eudaimonism (happiness), welfarism (welfare), and preferentism (satisfaction of desires or preferences).

³ See George Edward Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903 [1966 reprint]), 96-102 (§§ 58-60). Moore writes: “What Egoism holds . . . is that each man’s happiness is the sole good—that a number of different things are each of them the only good thing there is—an absolute contradiction! No more complete and thorough refutation of any theory could be desired.” Ibid., 99 (italics in original). Also: “[If he [the egoist] further maintains, that each man’s happiness is the ultimate rational end for him, we have the fundamental contradiction of Egoism—that an immense number of different things are, each of them, the sole good.” Ibid., 101 (italics in original).
3. EE implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. EE is false (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The ethical egoist accepts the validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The ethical egoist also accepts premises 2 and 4, but rejects premise 1. (This is known as grasping the bull by the horn.) EE implies that each person’s good is a good (to that person); it does not imply that each person’s good is the sole good. Moore’s Objection may be effective against certain forms of ethical egoism, but it is not effective against EE.

**Commentary:** This objection shows the importance of formulating a theory correctly. Suppose there are two ways to formulate EE. A particular objection may be effective against one formulation but not against the other.

**Baier’s Objection:**
1. EE is true (assumption for indirect proof, or *reductio ad absurdum*).
2. If EE is true, then B ought to liquidate K.
3. If EE is true, then K ought to prevent B from liquidating him.
   Therefore,
4. B ought to liquidate K (from 2 and 1, modus ponens).
   Therefore
5. K ought to prevent B from liquidating him (from 3 and 1, modus ponens).

---

4 Moore is inconsistent in his statement of the theory. On page 96 of *Principia Ethica*, he says that, “Egoism, as a form of Hedonism, is the doctrine which holds that we ought each of us to pursue our own greatest happiness as our ultimate end.” This can be understood as a paraphrase of EE. On page 97, however, he writes: “What I am now concerned with is that utterly distinct kind of Egoism, which holds that each man ought rationally to hold: My own greatest happiness is the only good thing there is: my actions can only be good as means, in so far as they help to win me this.”

6. Preventing people from doing what they ought to do is wrong. Therefore,

7. K’s preventing B from liquidating him is wrong (from 6 and 4). Therefore,

8. K’s preventing B from liquidating him is not wrong (from 5). Therefore,

9. K’s preventing B from liquidating him is wrong and K’s preventing B from liquidating him is not wrong (from 7 and 8, conjunction).

**Analysis and Reply:** The grand conclusion (proposition 9) is an explicit self-contradiction (it has the form ‘p and not p’), so it cannot be true. Therefore, if the inferences are valid (as they appear to be), then there must be at least one false premise. (By definition, a valid argument cannot have both true premises and a false conclusion.) The premises are propositions 1, 2, 3, and 6. Baier rejects 1. The ethical egoist rejects 6. According to the ethical egoist, it is not always wrong to prevent people from doing what they ought to do. Whether it is wrong to prevent people from doing what they ought to do depends on whether the act of prevention maximizes net agent utility. If it does, then the act is right; if it doesn’t, then the act is wrong. The ethical egoist may also reject 2 or 3 (or both). (That is to say, he or she may grasp the bull by the horn.)

**Commentary:** Baier’s objection rests on a misunderstanding of ethical egoism. He assumes, falsely, that the ethical egoist is committed to accepting premise 6. Another way to look at it is as follows. Baier forces the ethical egoist to reject premise 6. Anyone who accepts premise 6 must reject either premise 1, premise 2, or premise 3.

**The Promulgation Objection:**

---

6 See Brian Medlin, “Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 35 (August 1957): 111-8. For a critique of Medlin’s argument, see Hospers, “Baier and Medlin on Ethical Egoism.” Here is how Jonathan Harrison states the Promulgation Objection: “It is in everyone’s interest to be egoistical himself, but for everybody else to be altruistic. In telling other people that it is their only duty to pursue their own interest, one is behaving in a way that is contrary to one’s interest.” Jonathan Harrison, “Ethical Egoism, Utilitarianism and the Fallacy of Pragmatic Inconsistency,” *Argumentation* 9 (November 1995): 595-609, at 599.
1. All normative ethical theories are consistently promulgatable.\(^7\)
2. EE is not consistently promulgatable.
   Therefore,
3. EE is not a normative ethical theory (from 1 and 2, universal instantiation and modus tollens).

**Reply:** The ethical egoist accepts the validity of the argument, but rejects both premises. Why must a normative ethical theory be consistently promulgatable? This appears to be an *ad hoc* requirement. But even if premise 1 is true, why is EE not consistently promulgatable? Arguably, it is in each person’s interest for everyone to act in accordance with self-interest.

**Commentary:** The conclusion of this argument does not say, as many other objections say, that EE is unacceptable; it says that EE is not (even) a normative ethical theory. The implication is that it need not be taken seriously.

---

### The Arbitrariness Objection: \(^8\)

1. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it rests on a morally arbitrary distinction.
2. EE is a normative ethical theory.
   Therefore,
3. EE is unacceptable if it rests on a morally arbitrary distinction (from 1 and 2).
4. EE rests on the distinction between self and others.
5. The distinction between self and others is morally arbitrary.
   Therefore,
6. EE rests on a morally arbitrary distinction (from 4 and 5).
   Therefore,
7. EE is unacceptable (from 3 and 6, modus ponens).

---

\(^7\) To *promulgate* is to “make known to the public; disseminate; promote (a cause, etc.).” *The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide*, 1999. A thing (such as a moral doctrine) is *promulgatable* if it is capable of being promulgated. A moral doctrine is “*consistently promulgatable* if it is possible to teach [it] to others without performing an action judged by that doctrine to be wrong.” Fred Feldman, *Introductory Ethics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 93 (italics and boldface added).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The ethical egoist accepts the validity of all three arguments that make up the chain. The ethical egoist also accepts premises 1, 2, and 4, but rejects premise 5. The distinction between self and others is no more morally arbitrary than the distinction between one’s own children and other people’s children. Either both distinctions are morally arbitrary or neither distinction is morally arbitrary. Since the distinction between one’s own children and other people’s children is not morally arbitrary, neither is the distinction between self and others. The ethical egoist may go further than this and say: EE is not the view that there is some person whose utility is to be maximized (by everyone), which would indeed be arbitrary. It is the view that each person’s utility is to be maximized (by that person).

Commentary: This objection raises the question of which distinctions are, and which are not, morally arbitrary (and why).

The Counterintuitive-Consequences Objection:

1. EE implies that {Rachels’s doctor9 acted rightly}.
2. It’s false that {Rachels’s doctor acted rightly} (i.e., Rachels’s doctor acted wrongly).
   Therefore,
3. EE implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. EE is false (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The ethical egoist accepts the validity of all three arguments that make up the chain. The ethical egoist also accepts premises 1, 2, and 4, but rejects premise 5. The distinction between self and others is no more morally arbitrary than the distinction between one’s own children and other people’s children. Either both distinctions are morally arbitrary or neither distinction is morally arbitrary. Since the distinction between one’s own children and other people’s children is not morally arbitrary, neither is the distinction between self and others. The ethical egoist may go further than this and say: EE is not the view that there is some person whose utility is to be maximized (by everyone), which would indeed be arbitrary. It is the view that each person’s utility is to be maximized (by that person).

Commentary: This objection raises the question of which distinctions are, and which are not, morally arbitrary (and why).

The Counterintuitive-Consequences Objection:

1. EE implies that {Rachels’s doctor9 acted rightly}.
2. It’s false that {Rachels’s doctor acted rightly} (i.e., Rachels’s doctor acted wrongly).
   Therefore,
3. EE implies a falsehood (from 1 and 2).
4. Anything that implies a falsehood is false.
   Therefore,
5. EE is false (from 3 and 4).

Reply: The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series of two or more interlocking arguments. The ethical egoist accepts the validity of all three arguments that make up the chain. The ethical egoist also accepts premises 1, 2, and 4, but rejects premise 5. The distinction between self and others is no more morally arbitrary than the distinction between one’s own children and other people’s children. Either both distinctions are morally arbitrary or neither distinction is morally arbitrary. Since the distinction between one’s own children and other people’s children is not morally arbitrary, neither is the distinction between self and others. The ethical egoist may go further than this and say: EE is not the view that there is some person whose utility is to be maximized (by everyone), which would indeed be arbitrary. It is the view that each person’s utility is to be maximized (by that person).

Commentary: This objection raises the question of which distinctions are, and which are not, morally arbitrary (and why).

9 “A friend of mine who lives in a very small town in south Georgia told me about the following incident which occurred within the past year. The town is so small that there is only one doctor, and he is, as one might expect, one of the town’s more affluent citizens. One day the doctor was visited by a poor, uneducated black woman with a variety of minor complaints. A brief examination showed that she was suffering from malnutrition. The problem was that the woman did not have enough money to buy food for herself and her several small children. She worked, whenever she could, as a cleaning-woman in the homes of the better-off people in the town, but she was able to earn only a few dollars a month in this way. All this was known to the doctor. After spending no more than five minutes with the woman, and having done absolutely nothing for her, the doctor told her that the charge would be twenty-five dollars. The woman only had twelve dollars—this was, literally, all the money she had in the world—so the doctor took that.” James Rachels, “Two Arguments Against Ethical Egoism,” Philosophia 4 (April-July 1974): 297-314, at 308-9.
of two or more interlocking arguments. The ethical egoist accepts the
validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The ethical egoist
also accepts premises 2 and 4, but rejects premise 1. (This is called
grasping the bull by the horn.) EE, properly understood and properly
applied, does not imply that Rachels’s doctor acted rightly.

**Commentary:** EE requires that each agent maximize his or her long-
term, rational self-interest. It’s far from clear that the doctor’s act does
this. Possible long-term bad consequences for the doctor include (i) be-
ing charged with fraud by the authorities, (ii) losing his medical li-
cense, (iii) having his reputation destroyed or damaged, and (iv) being
retaliated against by the woman or by the woman’s family and friends.

### The Lack-of-Solution-to-Conflicts Objection:

1. A normative ethical theory is unacceptable if it fails to provide
   solutions to conflicts of interest.
2. EE is a normative ethical theory.
   Therefore,
3. EE is unacceptable if it fails to provide solutions to conflicts of
   interest (from 1 and 2).
4. EE fails to provide solutions to conflicts of interest.
   Therefore,
5. EE is unacceptable (from 3 and 4).

**Reply:** The objection takes the form of a chain argument, i.e., a series
of two or more interlocking arguments. The ethical egoist accepts the
validity of both arguments that make up the chain. The ethical egoist
also accepts premises 2 and 4, but rejects premise 1. “[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 ac-
cepts—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 ref-
eree in an Ultimate Fighting competition, who urges each fighter to do
his best.”

---

Commentary: This objection rests on a controversial understanding of the point of a normative ethical theory. The ethical egoist need not accept that understanding.