Ethical Egoism Essay, Research Paper

Ethical Egoism

Like all other moral philosophy theories, ethical egoism tries to develop a comprehensive set of rules by which each person should govern their lives. Instead of approaching each daily decision separately and interpreting the correct response, philosophers try and find an overall rule that will guide each person in their daily lives. This is obviously not an easy task and has given birth to hundreds of varying theories. Ethical egoism tries to solve the problem in terms of maximizing one’s individual good. There are several positive aspects of this position, however, it has also been disputed for a number of reasons. After analyzing these arguments, I find that while ethical egoism may seem like a great idea in theory, it is practically impossible to put into practice.

Ethical egoism is a theory that states that “mortality requires nothing more of us than that we maximize our own personal good.” (Holmes) In other words, it says that what is morally right for a person is what they consider “good” for themselves. Whatever brings us the greatest degree of good is right. The ethical egoist is not concerned with maximizing the good of the people as a whole. They simply say that we should only be concerned with what’s good for ourselves. A quick interpretation of this theory would be that ethical egoists are greedy and that this theory is only promoting selfishness. Many people would say that being concerned only with your own personal good is simply the definition of selfishness. However, this is untrue. Ethical relativism does not require selfishness, yet it does not denounce it either. It simply says that if being selfish or greedy maximizes your own personal good, then it is right. Yet, if being benevolent and generous promotes your good, then this is right as well. Ethical egoism is a system of creating a morality based not only on one’s actions, but one’s beliefs about those actions. A person’s actions must not create good for others, only for themselves.

Although many disagree with the theory of ethical egoism, there are a number convincing arguments in its favor. When one considers the theory at face value, there is little that can be said wrong about it. What could possibly be bad about each person devoting their lives to maximizing their own personal good? Isn’t that what we’re all looking for anyway? Don’t we all want good lives? In addition, if each person is living in a state which they consider good, then ethical egoists believe that this will bring about some universal good as well. The point of ethical egoism is not to bring about an overall good, yet through the actions of individuals, it will supposedly do so. Each person acting under the theory of ethical egoism is not obliged to bring about a greater good, but it will exist nonetheless. Another appealing aspect of ethical egoism is that it allows each individual to make decisions which will ultimately make them happy. It allows people the freedom to decide what is good for them and therefore it allows them to create their own system of morality. People have the right to do what they feel is going to benefit their good without having the sense that they are doing something morally wrong. Although many people do not necessarily see this as a good thing, it is a consideration that many see as favorable.

After analyzing the ethical egoist theory a bit further, one begins to see that the theory is not as clear cut as one would like to think. There are several discrepancies in the ideas behind the theory as well as problems with putting the theory into practice. One thing to take a second look at is the argument that the ethical egoist theory promotes selfishness and greed. As we have seen, this is not entirely true. An ethical egoist is not saying that one should be egotistical, he is simply saying that if this does maximize one’s good, it is acceptable. However, many believe that although the theory does not directly promote selfishness, it certainly provides one with little incentive to act otherwise. Living in the extremely cynical world that we do today, I think many people would agree that most people are prone to greed over charity. If you tell people to act in a way that will maximize only their personal good without the consideration of others, I believe this will generally lead them to act in selfish or greedy ways. Although the theory does not demand selfishness, it can be argued that it certainly facilitates it. This argument is based on personal opinion yet it doesn’t completely discount the theory of ethical egoism. It is matter how you think people will act according to the theory.

However, there are several greater problems with the theory. Egoism is a theory that requires us to evaluate our personal needs and wants. In order to live by the theory of ethical egoism, one must decide what it is that will bring them the greatest amount of good. This means that for every daily decision that one makes, they must weigh not only all the immediate consequences of their actions, but also the long term effects of their actions. Many people argue that humans don’t have the intelligence to know what is best for themselves all the time. They argue that not only do we not have the mental capacity to do this, but we also don’t always know what’s good for us. A good example of this is people who smoke cigarettes. These people may smoke because they feel, at the time, that smoking will maximize their good. Many people use cigarettes to calm themselves during times of stress or unhappiness. At that moment, the cigarette is providing them with the good that they need and is therefore, according to the ethical egoist, the right thing to do. However, very few would argue that, in the long run, smoking cigarettes maximizes one’s personal good. Smoking cigarettes causes severe health problems and may even lead to death. This is certainly not “good” for the smoker.

Another problem that must be taken into account when discussing ethical egoism is what exactly we mean by the word “good.” Egoists say that we must always work to maximize our own good, but what exactly is “our own good”? For different people, the concept has conflicting meanings. Many people believe what is good for them is what makes them happy, so they strive to achieve ultimate happiness in their lives. However, others may feel that being wealthy is what ultimately makes a person good. Still others would find good in being healthy. So what good are we really talking about here? Ethical egoists would argue that there need not be one definition of good. Each person develops their own definition and strives to achieve it individually. This may be true, but the fact that people have different conceptions of what is good is essential when discussing how people striving to maximize their own good may conflict with one another. If one agrees with the egoist in the need to maximize one’s own personal good, then they also must believe that others should do the same. However, because not everyone has the same conception of what good is, often times, their views conflict. For example, a man trying to buy a car would obviously find it in his best interest to buy the most affordable yet trust worthy car. On the other hand, the man trying to sell the car may feel that the way to maximize his good would be to sell the car for the highest price because he equates his own good with wealth. In this situation, it seems that ethical egoism can provide no solution to the problem. If the man buying the car gets what he wants, the car dealer my feel as if he is not getting all the good out of the situation that he can. However, if the man buys the car at the dealer’s requested rate, he will not be fulfilled. It seems that no matter what, one of them will be going against the theory of ethical egoism.

If one applies this idea to the concept of ethical egoism itself, we develop an even stronger argument against the theory. By subscribing to the theory of ethical egoism you are saying that abiding by the rules of the theory is what will bring you the greatest amount of good. However, if the theory brings you into conflict with others, as in the situation with the car, then you are not maximizing your own good. The example of buying a car may not be that detrimental to your overall good, because a fight with a car salesman isn’t necessarily a terrible thing. However, if the conflict arises with someone very important in your life, the consequences could be disastrous. For example, a child going away to college may feel that in order to maximize his or her own good, they must go to the college of their choice. If the child feels that his education is important to his good then he will choose a college that is well known for its academic success. The child’s parents on the other hand may feel that the cost of a high ranked school is not worth it. In their best interest, it would be better to send their child to a cheaper school. These parents are not concerned with the good of their child, only with the good of their bank accounts. This sort of a family argument can break families apart. If the son decides to go against his parents wishes and go to the school of his choice, his parents may cut him off financially as well as emotionally. The son’s decision to maximize his own good by going to the college of his choice has caused him to go against the theory of ethical egoism in two ways. First, he has not allowed his parents to maximize their good. Second, by alienating himself from his family, he has not brought any good to himself in the long run. Therefore, there is no moral way of solving problems such as these, according to the theory of ethical egoism. There is no way for it to be morally correct for everyone to accept egoism.

In reality, the theory of ethical egoism is not an acceptable theory. There is no way to put ethical egoism into practice. In theory, it seems like a plausible idea, yet there is no way for it to be a universally accepted theory of morality. There is too much conflict that arises when applying egoism to everyday decisions. Even the theory itself is paradoxical in nature and cannot be carried out in the real world. Also, I feel that the theory is not acceptable because I do not agree with what it allows. According to ethical egoism, an act is right as long as it is good for the individual. This sort of rule allows for all sorts of actions that I can not condone as morally right. Ethical egoism allows you to lie, cheat, steal and all sorts of morally wrong actions as long as it causes you ultimate good in the long run. It doesn’t set any concrete rules that reject actions which most people would consider morally wrong. I cannot say that it is morally right for people to commit these acts on the basis that it will maximize their own good. I think that it is certainly a poor excuse to be able to act in cruel ways to others, simply because you feel it is helping your own good.

Ethical egoism is a theory that has several comprehensive and logical components. Yet, in its entirety, it is not an functional theory. It is not able to exist in the real world without causing conflict. However, I do believe that in our society people are, in general, egotistically motivated in everything they do. That is why we live in a world where conflict and war prevail. People are in a constant struggle to maximize the good in their lives, yet to do so they must be in constant competition with others.