

Key concepts:

- Ethical egoism is a theory based in the 'self' or 'ego' and its normative dictum is 'it is morally right to seek out that which best suits one's own self-interest'.
- It is not to be confused with psychological egoism which holds that we naturally do seek out our own self-interest even if our behaviour suggests otherwise.
- Psychological egoism teaches we do act out of self-interest; Ethical egoism argues that we should act out of self-interest.
- Ethical egoism is an agent-focused ethic and rejects the notion of universal moral obligation.
- However, Ethical egoism asks one to consider short term and long-term consequences and so it does not mean it promotes selfish actions only.
- Actions benefitting others may also achieve the goal of advancing one's self interest. For example, a business manages its workers and cares for its customers as a long-term strategy because it brings personal financial reward.

- The philosopher Max Stirner developed a unique form of Ethical egoism in his book *The Ego and His Own*.
- Stirner initially rejected psychological egoism because he argued that most self-interest is deluded and that the self is always slave to a 'spook' unless liberated.
- For example, religious, philosophical or materialistic frameworks for moral behaviour control us even if we readily accept them.
- Stirner argued that ideologies beyond the true self never lead to true self-interest and true freedom.
- An ethical egoist has a clear idea of what the self 'is' and only then is free to act in a self-interested way.
- The true ethical egoist understands what is 'ownness' (eigenheit) and is not driven by materialistic or any other slavish ends, thus liberating one's 'self'.

- This true self needs to be free from the constraints of created ideologies so that it is truly 'self', and therefore, 'unique' (einzig).
- The only way to engage with one's uniqueness in the world is to be party to the union of egoists, an impermanent arrangement that recognises the uniqueness of the egoist and which disbands as soon as the particular issue of self-interest has been achieved.

- Many have challenged the danger of Ethical egoism as potentially leading to the breakdown of community. Indeed, some anarchists quote Stirner.
- Social justice is about the welfare of the collective and both cannot and should not be driven by individual needs.
- For many, the pursuit of one's self interest inevitably leads to conflict situations where personal interests collide. This could potentially mean that only the powerful prevail.
- Therefore some see Stirner as opening the door to social chaos by his declaration, 'should I not help myself as well as I can?'

Key quotes:

Useful Max Stirner quotes:

"Why will you not take courage now to really make yourselves the central point and the main thing altogether?"

"I decide whether it is the right thing in me; there is no right thing outside me."

"Away, then, with every concern that is not altogether my concern!"

"I am unique. Hence my wants too are unique, and my deeds; in short, everything about me is unique."

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Some philosophers would argue that Max Stirner's proposals would mean a rejection of any ethical system because it would limit human freedom; no system or ideology can do justice to the notion of 'uniqueness'.

Others would question the notion of self-interest as an ethical norm when there are some remarkable examples of self-disinterest and sacrifice to inspire us.

Key questions

Can we really avoid being selfish or is it our survival instinct?

If there is no common ground how can we ever not be in conflict?

Key words:

Ego	self-interest	psychological egoism	agent focused	liberated
norm	short-term	long-term	altruism	selfish
Stirner	spook	union of egoists	systems	einzig
eigenheit	delusion			