

2 Approaches to Ethics: Egoism and Altruism - Part 1

Each day we are required to make a variety of moral decisions.

The way we analyze different options is often based on intuition shaped by experience, family backgrounds, culture and faith traditions. For Christians, ethics is part of our commitment to follow Jesus into a broken world.

We live in an age in which the lives of most Christians are virtually indistinguishable from those of others in our broader culture. Accordingly, a focus on ethics is important if we wish to establish a vibrant witness in our communities.

An exposure to ethical theories can deepen our practice of Christian discipleship.

I will concentrate here on egoism and altruism as two opposing approaches to moral dilemmas, with acknowledgement to Barbara MacKinnon's and Andrew Fiala's "Ethics Theory and Contemporary Issues" for helping me formulate my views.

It is important to give attention to these two streams because the former is particularly prevalent in our social and political context.

The church in North America has largely lost the active altruist ethic that made its witness compelling in the first two centuries, as sociologist Rodney Stark's writings have reminded us.

Additionally, I venture to propose that each of us struggles to live in the tension between egoism and altruism in our personal lives.

The egoist approach to ethics is based on the criteria of self-interest, personal benefit and happiness.

Egoists evaluate each moral decision on the basis of advantage for self, family and social group. Ethical egoists maintain that people are responsible for their own happiness and well-being.

Consequently, individuals bear the moral obligation to look out for themselves. We are fully justified placing self-interest above the needs of others. People that require external assistance to maintain themselves are characterized as weak and dependent.

Ethical egoists generally disdain welfare, food banks and socialized medical programs. They are likely to endorse unrestricted capitalism believing that this economic system rewards those that work with diligence and creativity.

They have faith in Adam Smith's invisible hand of capitalism to guide individuals and nations. They are more likely to speak about individual than collective rights.

They recognize the need for enforcement agents to protect from others in society that break the law for reasons of personal advantage and profit.

The egoist approach to ethics does not invariably produce people that lack moral restraint and oppose all forms of cooperative action.

The ethical egoist understands that long-term goals of family, home, career and financial security require sacrifice and effort.

Furthermore, there can be personal benefits to community organization and taxes to support certain government services.

For example, the payment of taxes for the supply of safe water is valuable for each taxpayer. Speed limits in neighborhood school zones restrict personal freedom but protect their children.

It is more difficult to make a compelling case for financial support to improve the quality of education in marginal zones of a city because the benefit is further removed.

Accordingly, the egoist willingly enters into certain social contracts provided that there is personal benefit and all people give up similar freedoms.

These social contracts are not rooted in motivations of concern for others. The criterion is always a sense of self-interest.

The important point to note is that ethical egoism proposes that people should act consistently with motives of self-interest and personal happiness. This approach to moral dilemmas is foundational for this ethical current.

Ethical egoists argue that they are morally responsible because they take responsibility for themselves and their families, obey the law and do not depend on the state.

The altruist stream of ethics, in contrast, works with the moral criterion of the common good or the well-being of others.

This approach to ethics goes so far as to place a value on personal sacrifice for the sake of others. Personal advantage and happiness are less important than the well-being of diverse people in the community.

I sometimes wonder if the altruist approach to ethics finds some nourishment in collectivist rather than individualist cultures.

Let me give an example. A prolonged drought produced a famine in southeastern Kenya in 2006. Canadian Baptists ran a year-long project of food assistance with the help of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, and 42,000 people benefited from monthly supplies of beans, rice, cooking oil and other necessities.

The beneficiaries had been identified as severely food insecure and, therefore, vulnerable to starvation. Each beneficiary was given a ration card in order to make sure that we targeted needy families.

During the program, aid workers reported that most people immediately shared their food supplies with others in the community. Evidently, there was some sort

of a moral issue about receiving a benefit without giving to others.

Their actions clearly ran counter to their personal interest in a time of famine. Altruism trumped egoism.

The ethical altruist approach should not be characterized as “a bleeding heart” orientation to morality. Few altruists eat beans and rice each day so that they can send financial donations to feed the hungry.

However, their analysis of ethical problems consistently poses the fundamental question of the common good of the community and the world.

Ethical altruists are suspicious about policies and actions that benefit some people at the cost of others. There will be particular concern when a minority profits while the majority are excluded.

Altruists are prepared to make decisions for the benefit of others when it is not in their best interest.

One might consider the case of Warren Buffett, a respected American investor and multimillionaire.

He has argued that it is morally unacceptable that rich people like himself pay less in federal taxes, as a proportion of total income, than people in the middle class. He has gone so far as to propose a new level of tax on the wealthy.

This position clearly expresses an altruistic ethic that opposes tax policies that personally benefit him and his family.

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Editor’s note: This is the first of a two-part series. Part two is available [here](#).