



Mains Practice Question

Q. Explain the difference between psychological egoism and ethical egoism. How does psychological egoism pose a challenge to ethical egoism? (150 words)

28 Dec, 2023 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach

- Begin with briefly discussing the concepts of psychological egoism and ethical egoism.
- Differentiate between them and discuss how psychological egoism poses a challenge to ethical egoism.
- Conclude by summarizing the key points.

Introduction

Psychological egoism and ethical egoism are two distinct theories that address the motivations behind human actions and the principles guiding ethical decision-making. While both concepts involve the notion of self-interest, they differ in their focus and implications.

Body

Difference between psychological egoism and ethical egoism:

Psychological Egoism	Ethical Egoism
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Descriptive theory claiming individuals always act in their own self-interest, motivated by a desire to maximize happiness or well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Primarily concerned with describing human behavior, not prescribing how individuals ought to behave.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Asserts that seemingly altruistic actions are ultimately driven by self-interest, as individuals may experience inner satisfaction or derive personal benefits from helping others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Normative theory prescribing that individuals ought to act in their own self-interest, emphasizing the moral rightness of self-centered actions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Unlike psychological egoism, ethical egoism makes ethical claims, asserting that individuals have a moral duty to prioritize their own well-being and interests above those of others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Suggests that acting in one's self-interest is not just a natural inclination but is also morally right.

Challenge Posed by Psychological Egoism to Ethical Egoism: Psychological egoism poses a challenge to ethical egoism in the following ways:

- One way that psychological egoism poses a challenge to ethical egoism is by **undermining the possibility of moral choice.**

- If psychological egoism is true, then **people cannot act otherwise** than what they perceive to be in their self-interest.
- This means that **ethical egoism cannot provide any guidance or justification** for human actions, since people are already doing what they think is best for themselves.
- **Ethical egoism would be redundant** or irrelevant in a world where psychological egoism is true.
- Another way that psychological egoism poses a challenge to ethical egoism is **by questioning the coherence of the concept of self-interest.**
 - If psychological egoism is true, then **people may not have a clear or consistent idea of what their self-interest is**, and they may act on impulses, emotions, or habits that are not conducive to their long-term well-being.
 - This means that ethical egoism is arbitrary, since it cannot define or measure what self-interest is.

Conclusion

Psychological egoism claims inherent self-interest, while ethical egoism asserts it as morally right. Tension arises from the conflict between descriptive psychological egoism and normative ethical egoism, questioning the necessity and moral basis of self-interest.

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