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SELF-INTEREST

A PERSON IS SELF-INTERESTED, in the narrow sense of selfish or egoistic, if her most fundamental ends are focused on herself, such as her own health, wealth, social position, influence, or prestige (*TJ* 111; *LHPP* 58; *JF* 62). Someone is self-interested in a broader sense if she regards her aims and aspirations, whether selfish or not, as “worthy of recognition” and “deserving satisfaction” (*TJ* 110). More specifically, Rawls proposes that the interests of a self, which are not necessarily interests *in* oneself, are not merely determined by her tastes and preferences or her pains and pleasures. Her interests are instead determined by her conception of the good, which is the consistent and coherent plan of life she would choose under favorable conditions, with full information after careful reflection (*TJ* 358).

Egoism is one conception of the good, but personal ties, affections, and concern for the interests of others are likely to figure in the rational life plans of most people. Indeed egoism, according to Rawls, is incompatible with friendship and mutual trust because these relationships presuppose caring about others for their own sake. Egoism is also inconsistent with resentment and guilt because these moral feelings presuppose acceptance of principles of right or justice, which are necessarily general and universal (*TJ* 427). Egoism in its various forms is not a moral doctrine either because it fails to satisfy these formal constraints of morality and justice.

The basic role of justice, according to Rawls, is to adjudicate conflicting claims that people press on behalf of their various interests. Parties in the original position know they have determinate conceptions of the good but they do not know the precise contents of their various ends. Without this information, Rawls claims it is rational for them to maximize their own share of primary goods

without caring about the interests of one another. This puts them in a good position as citizens to pursue their own interests whatever they turn out to be. The parties would also choose retributive principles and individual duties and obligations because they know that even the best citizens will be tempted by self-interest to avoid doing their fair share, especially when they are not sure that others are doing their part. The public threat of sanctions, along with a natural duty to comply with just institutions whether or not one has voluntarily accepted their benefits, helps to stabilize just cooperative schemes in the face of self-interest (*TJ* 241, 295–296). And certain moral principles will make exceptions for cases in which otherwise fulfilling them would be particularly onerous (*TJ* 389–390). Principles of right and justice, according to Rawls, thus take into account the interests of persons, but once those standards are chosen, they always override self-interest should it ever conflict with morality and justice (*TJ* 117).

People who grow up against the background of just institutions, according to Rawls, are likely to develop a firm and overriding interest in accepting and complying with principles of justice. Just societies allow them to develop and realize their own capacities in concert with others as well as share in a wide variety of activities and values that they enjoy (*TJ* 500). For such people, justice and self-interest converge so that in acting justly they are also acting for their own good.

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Altruism

Desires

Egoism

Moral person

Moral psychology

Primary goods, social

Sense of justice

Social contract