Ethical Egoism & Altruism
Plato &
the Ring of Gyges:

In Plato’s *Republic*, Glaucon (Plato’s older brother) presents the argument that if anyone had a magic ring making him invisible, whether or not that person were just or unjust, he would always act selfishly since he could do almost anything he wanted without fear of punishment.

Glaucon uses one version of a myth about Gyges who found such a ring and used it to murder Candaules, the King of Lydia and then marry the king’s wife, Tudo.
Class Exercise:

1. If you found Gyges’ ring and could pretty much get away with almost anything, what would you do with it?

2. Is there anything you just wouldn’t do with it?

3. Reviewing your answers to the first two questions, do you agree with the argument Glaucon presented?
Glossary:

- **Selfish** – concerns over one’s own interests at the expense of others – always looking for self-gratification
- **Self-Interested** – concerns over one’s own welfare – considered by some to be completely rational and justifiable & does not necessarily conflict with also being interested in the welfare of others.
- **Egotism** – generally having a high opinion of oneself & often engaging in self-praise
- **Psychological Egoism:** It is natural to be principally self-interested (descriptive claim)
- **Ethical Egoism:** One has an obligation to pursue solely what is best for oneself (normative claim)
- **Psychological Altruism:** It is natural to be principally interested in the welfare of others (descriptive claim)
- **Ethical Altruism:** One has an obligation to pursue the interests of others – one may even be required to sacrifice one’s own interests for the welfare of others (normative claim)
Lincoln & the Piglets: Egoism or Altruism?

On his way to an important function Abraham Lincoln stopped his coach in order to save a sow and her piglets from drowning, and in so doing, got a goodly amount of mud on his clothes. Lincoln was reputed to remark,

“Why that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone on and left that suffering old sow worrying over those piglets. I did it to get peace of mind, don’t you see?”

(Quoted in F. Sharp, Ethics, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1928)
Thomas Hobbes

- Hobbes characterized human life as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. (p.206) Hobbes makes the following 3 points:
  1. Humans choose to live in a society with rules because they are concerned with their own safety and for no other reason
  2. Humans are by nature self-interested and any show of concern for others hides a true concern for ourselves
  3. We would be fools if we didn’t look after ourselves. (p.170)

- For Hobbes, pity is really just a reflection of one’s ability to personalize an event and identify with the victim – we have no pity except for ourselves.
Hobbes & “Self Love” – We agree to certain moral rules *only* because that benefits ourselves *not* because we are driven by concern for others

1. People act from their appetites
2. Our appetites define what is good to each individual
3. Since the good is individually defined, there are no universal truths
4. Every one is essentially equal
5. If everyone sought what they wanted without restraint, war would ensue & no one’s best interests would be served
6. We could avoid war by agreeing to a basic set of moral rules which would establish social stability

C) We should agree to a basic set of moral rules
Appeal of Psychological Egoism:

- It encompasses a presumed honesty – no hypocrisy over one’s “true” motivations
- We have a tendency towards cynicism - An attitude of scornful or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others – seems especially warranted given prevalence of political and religious scandals – if one assumes the worst of people, then one is never disappointed and is occasionally pleasantly surprised.
- The theory provides a facile excuse for selfish action – I can’t help but act this way, it is my nature.
Some Problems with Psychological Egoism:

1. No guarantee of happiness

- Plato argues in the Republic that the unjust life will lead not to happiness & getting what one wants but instead to unhappiness.
- In Tolkien’s *Ring* trilogy, Sauron’s ring makes a lasting mark on all who use it. Sméagol becomes the Gollum. For both Plato and Tolkien, such power corrupts and will inevitably fail to lend itself to achieving a good life for oneself.
- This arose as a quotation by John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton (1834–1902). The historian and moralist, who was otherwise known simply as Lord Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."
- Plato and Tolkien further argue that those who become corrupted wind up living mean and solitary lives rather than a meaningful life full of friendship & love. One of the best theatrical examples is in the 1941 movie, *Citizen Kane*. 
Some Problems with Psychological Egoism:

2. **Falsification is not possible** (Karl Popper’s requirement for all scientific theories.)

- Pojman argues "One problem with it is that it seems to be an unfalsifiable dogma, for what evidence could ever count against it?" In other words, it is like a religious position - totally subjective and **unfalsifiable**. In fact, psychological egoism “begs the question” as it merely assumes motives in order to prove the theory.
Some Problems with Psychological Egoism:

3. Doing what we want may not always be selfish – or even self-interested

- we cannot confuse self interest with selfishness not every action is done either from self interest or from other-regarding motives - false dichotomy - sometimes we act neither in our own nor in anyone else's best interest (e.g. gluttony, smoking, etc....) therefore, "it is false that all actions are selfish and it is false that all actions are done out of self-interest." Pojman rejects the notion of Psychological egoism because he claims that, “We do not always consciously seek our own satisfaction or happiness when we act. In fact, some people seem to seek their own unhappiness, as masochists and self-destructive people do, and we all sometimes seem to act spontaneously without consciously considering our happiness.” [Pojman, Louis, Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong]
Some Problems with Psychological Egoism:

4. Fallacy of suppressed correlative

- Problem of Language – even if the psychological egoist is prepared to admit certain actions as less selfish than others which may be seen to be more selfish – the correlative to selfish is unselfish and the psychological egoist denies such acts as even possible. Without the correlative, then selfish becomes meaningless.
Ethical Egoism & Ayn Rand:

“Money is not the tool of the moochers, who claim your product by tears or of the looters, who take it from you by force. Money is made possible only by the men who produce. Is this what you consider evil?”

AYN RAND, Atlas Shrugged
Ethical Egoism & Ayn Rand:

Her argument:

- The perfection of one's abilities in a state of happiness is the highest goal for humans.
- The ethics of altruism prescribes that we sacrifice our interests and lives for the good of others.
- Therefore, the ethics of altruism is incompatible with the goal of happiness.
- Ethical egoism prescribes that we seek our own happiness exclusively, and as such it is consistent with the happiness goal.
- Therefore, ethical egoism is the correct moral theory.
Ayn Rand & Mike Wallace: 1959

- Part 1: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ukJiBZ8_4k&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ukJiBZ8_4k&feature=related)
- Part 3: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEruXzQZhNI&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEruXzQZhNI&feature=related)
Another Important Distinction:

- Individual Ethical Egoism: “everyone ought to do what I want”

- Universal Ethical Egoism: “everyone ought to pursue their own best interests”
Problems with Ethical Egoism:

1. Universalizing the theory seems to result in contradiction of duties – others will be working at cross-purposes to your interests (e.g. stealing files)
Problems with Ethical Egoism:

2. **It fails to help reconcile conflicts** – If I have an obligation to pursue my own best interests, how can you also pursue those interests if those interests conflict?
Problems with Ethical Egoism:

3. Universalizing the theory, in practice, seems to result in self-contradiction. One assigns a higher priority to one’s own pursuits and will almost always inevitably as a prudent plan logically advocate that others should not always exclusively pursue their own interests but should also be concerned for other’s interests – in other words – back to individual ethical egoism – which fails the core test of an ethical theory.
Problems with Ethical Egoism:

4. Caring for others for their own sake is rejected. Egoism argues that not only ought one to pursue one’s own interests but, that caring for others is ethically rejected unless one assigns self-value to the action. This means that one’s emotions of compassion and empathy for those less well off than us or those incapable of providing some benefit to us, should be discouraged. Though this is not a logical objection, it is perhaps an objection which arises from “common human feelings” which seem not only natural but also admirable to many.
Levinas & Ideal Altruism:

Core ideas:

- The other is always more important than oneself
- It is morally wrong to act to benefit oneself
- It is morally praiseworthy to sacrifice one's own interests to benefit others.
Peter Singer’s Reciprocal Altruism:

- Singer argues that pure Altruism and egoism result in a kind of false dilemma – that one needs to be concerned for oneself \textit{and} others.
- Ideal Altruism implies being self-interested is morally wrong.
Peter Singer’s Reciprocal Altruism:

- Singer uses the example of hunters – working in trustworthy partnerships is an evolutionary successful strategy.
- “Being capable of taking others’ interests into consideration actually improves our own survival odds.” (p.190)
Peter Singer’s Reciprocal Altruism:

- Why isn’t this theory called “Reciprocal Egoism?”
  - Because it involves someone else’s interests too.
  - Because “…in the end it is in your own self-interest not to be too self-interested.” (p.190)
  - Because the optimal solution involves satisfying the needs of oneself and others; the goal is not self but everyone.