Ethical Egoism
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 Glaucon’s argument?
Glossary:

- 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

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)
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
Problems with Ethical Egoism:

- not universalizable – if one were consistently an egoist, one would want everyone else to be an altruist
- assumes false dilemma – best interest for oneself or others & ignores an alternate ideal: oneself and others
- seems to miss the point of ideal relationships – does one want a parent to care for children solely out of self-love?