Virtue Theory Vs. Ethical Egoism

“Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.” (Maya Angelou) Virtue and Selfishness are both a crucial part of morality, especially the main groundwork of these two ethical theories. On the other hand, common people could say that these two theories have absolutely nothing in common, but these two ethical theories have more in common than most people think. As we dig into the moral framework, we will be dissecting these two ethical theories, then we will be digging for similarities and differences, to discover that despite these two ethical theories that may look quite different, they have some very surprising comparisons and some pretty obvious differences.

Let us expand upon these two ethical theories. First up, Virtue Ethics. The foundation of this theory was based on the basic fact that human beings seek pleasure, and avoid pain. In every action that we do, we seek happiness in those actions. But, they sometimes have to step out of our comfort zone to help others. Virtue, as Richard Burnor and Yvonne Raley’s book Ethical Choices: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy defines Virtue as“...that each virtue is the golden mean between excess and deficiency” (228). Virtue is the balance of the character trait, like courage, generosity, and honesty. That also means that the person cannot have too little or too much of said character trait. It is the golden mean, showcasing that someone can be virtuous. For example, a stranger sees an old lady being robbed by a big and burly thug in a shady alley. This is where courage comes into play. Being able to act in the right manner with a cool head, is a correct way to define what acting courageous is supposed to be like. An excess of courage can lead to being reckless, and getting both the old lady and the supposed hero hurt. But a deficiency of courage is being a coward and walking with your head down. The balance between cowardice and recklessness is courage. The virtuous man would have called the authorities. Burnor and Raley sum it up quite well, by saying. Burnor and Raley are summarizing that virtue is how one acts, meaning that all virtue is doing the right thing to the best of your ability.

Moving on from Virtue Theory to another moral theory that is Ethical Egoism. Right from the beginning, most can assume that this moral theory is all about one’s self since it’s all about what. They just want to promote their own goals. Burnor and Raley formally define Ethical egoism as “The morally right act, for any particular situation, is the act that will benefit oneself” (96). For example, you have enough food for yourself to take you the next week, and you see a starving homeless man who’s begging for food. You could either toss him some food (which is the honorable thing to do), and be out food for the next week, or keep it for yourself. Being an ethical egoist, you “would” keep the food for yourself because it is in your interest that you stay healthy and strong. The survival of themself is what will most “benefit oneself” since we have to look out for our self-interests. Ethical Egoism promotes the practitioner's self-interest so that they may survive out in the world. That is true, and while ethical egoism does promote oneself, it does often look like the practitioner of this ethical theory seems selfish and cruel to others. Even Burnor and Raley summarize that “It seems that personality and moral character somewhat influence our actions…” (91). Burnor and Raley some to infer that since “personality and character somewhat influence our actions”, that it may look like that all practitioners of this ethical theory may be greedy, selfish and downright mean, but that is not exactly true.

We can now start looking at the similarities that Virtue Theory and Ethical Egoism share. There seems to have a commonality that they both seem to have “incentives” tied to them. For Virtue theory, your goal is to reach Eudaimonia. Burnor and Raley define this as “...eudaimonia relates to our ‘flourishing’ or fulfillment as human beings” (226). Eudaimonia doesn’t translate direct;y from Greek, but Burnor and Raley define it as human flourishing. The only way that people can achieve human flourishing, is with the help of their community. At the end of the day, a virtuous person should be happy that they were able to practice being virtuous. On the other hand, ethical egoism dives into its incentive of promoting the practitioner's desires. Burnor and Raley acknowledge this point in Chapter Five, writing “Ethical Egoism maintains that our moral duty is to promote our own interests whenever we can…” (96). Ethical Egoism’s goal is for the practitioner’s end goal is to achieve their desires. These personal desires can be anything that the practitioner’s wishes. Get a better grade, then study. Wanna buy a game, earn some money. These desires can range from worldwide fame to being rich. All it takes is the action the egoist takes to make it happen.

An additional example is a way that both theories determine what makes an act either virtuous or egoistic. Both use a combination of reason and emotions to determine what is ethically right and wrong. Ethical Egoism shows us that emotion is the leading cause of the actions performed by an egoist. It is not just emotion that drives this theory, it is the results as well. The consequences of your actions are a heavy influence on an egoist’s actions. Virtue Theory states that the way you figure out what …

After looking at the similarities, it is now time to look at the differences between Virtue Theory and Ethical Egoism. A prominent difference is the motive of our actions, the reason why we act how we act. Virtue Theory tells us the reason we should act virtuously is because of the end goal, which is eudaimonia. Youtuber John Green and his video Aristotle & Virtue Theory: Crash Course Philosophy #38 quotes “Virtue theory says that you should become virtuous because, if you are, then you can attain the pinnacle of humanity. It allows you to achieve what is known as eudaimonia.” (00:07:14 - 00:07:19). Green is simply stating that the main and the only reason you should be virtuous is that they want to attain eudaimonia. As previously stated, eudaimonia is human flourishing. The practitioner’s end goal isn’t just for himself to achieve eudaimonia, but for his or her community to achieve eudaimonia. In contrast, the end goal for ethical egoism is to promote the practitioner's overall interests and goals. Burnor and Raley emphasize this point by writing “Ethical egoism maintain that our moral duty is to promote our own interests whenever we can…” (96). Burnor and Raley are explaining that unlike virtue theory, ethical egoism is summarizing that the end goal for an egoist is to only look out for their interests, and only that. Helping others would put their interests at risk of not being accomplished.

Another difference between the two theories is that of the incentives. Both these theories work towards an incentive, or reward. But these theories’ reward are quite different from the other. On one hand, ethical egoism’s end goal is to ultimately achieve the practitioner's own goals. Burnor and Raley

Works Cited

1. Burnor, Richard, and Yvonne Raley. Ethical Choices: an Introduction to Moral Philosophy with Cases. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2018.
2. Green, John. “Aristotle & Virtue Theory: Crash Course Philosophy #38.” YouTube,

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