

Ethical Egoism In Teaching

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Introduction: What Ethical Egoism Claims

Ethical egoism is the normative view that a person ought to act in ways that advance that person's own good. It differs from psychological egoism, which claims that people always act from self-interest, and from ordinary selfishness, which often implies disregard for others. Applying ethical egoism to teaching creates a difficult question because education is a fiduciary and professional relationship: teachers possess authority, students are vulnerable to evaluation, and society expects learning to serve more than the teacher's private benefit. The theory can illuminate legitimate self-care and professional development, but it becomes unacceptable when personal advantage overrides fairness, student welfare, truthfulness, or the public purpose of education. (Rachels & Rachels, n.d.)

Clarifying Self-Interest

Self-interest does not have to mean immediate pleasure or material gain. A person may value health, reputation, knowledge, meaningful work, friendship, integrity, and long-term stability. An ethically reflective teacher may therefore pursue interests that align with excellent teaching: mastering the subject, building a respected career, creating an orderly classroom, and experiencing satisfaction when students develop. This broader view makes egoism more plausible than crude selfishness. It also creates a problem for the theory. If enlightened self-interest includes concern for relationships, community, and moral identity, ethical egoism begins to resemble other theories that recognize mutual flourishing. The distinctive claim—that one's own good is the ultimate standard—still requires defence.

Psychological Egoism Is Not Ethical Egoism

The original discussion risks moving between what people do and what they ought to do. Even if every teacher were motivated partly by salary, status, satisfaction, or avoidance of guilt, that psychological claim would not prove that self-interest is morally right. A description of motivation cannot establish a duty without an additional argument. Psychological egoism is also difficult to test because any caring action can be re-described as seeking good feelings, making the theory unfalsifiable. Teachers often act from mixed motives: professional duty, compassion, identity, institutional expectation, and personal benefit. Ethical evaluation should focus on reasons, choices, and effects rather than assuming that one hidden motive explains every action.

The Teacher–Student Power Relationship

Teachers control grades, recommendations, access to opportunities, discipline, and classroom attention. Students may be children or adults whose future depends partly on those decisions. This power creates duties that cannot be reduced safely to the teacher’s preference. A teacher who gives high marks to popular students, avoids difficult learners to protect evaluation scores, or withholds support to save time may benefit personally while violating fairness. Professional authority is justified by its educational purpose. The teacher receives discretion because it should be exercised through competence, evidence, and equal respect. Ethical egoism must explain why the stronger party should not exploit opportunities that serve personal interest when external punishment is unlikely. (National Education Association, n.d.)

Self-Care as a Legitimate Interest

Teaching cultures sometimes idealize unlimited sacrifice, treating exhaustion as proof of commitment. This expectation is neither sustainable nor fair. Teachers need rest, healthcare, boundaries, preparation time, reasonable workloads, and psychological safety. Protecting these interests can improve patience, judgement, and instructional quality. Ethical self-care differs from abandoning students. A teacher may decline unpaid duties, use contractual leave, or request support while still meeting professional responsibilities. The relevant principle is that care for students does not require self-destruction. Ethical egoism contributes a useful correction when it challenges the belief that educators possess no legitimate interests of their own, though other moral theories can defend the same conclusion without making self-interest supreme.

Professional Development and Mutual Benefit

A teacher may pursue advanced qualifications, research, leadership roles, or specialist skills because they improve salary, status, or personal fulfilment. Students can benefit when those activities increase subject knowledge and instructional ability. This is a case of aligned interest rather than moral conflict. Schools should design systems in which professional growth and student learning reinforce one another through mentoring, collaborative planning, and recognition of excellent practice. Alignment should not be assumed automatically. A qualification may advance a résumé without improving teaching, and research activity may consume time needed for students. Ethical assessment requires evidence about both personal benefit and educational consequence.

Spinoza and Collective Flourishing

Johan Dahlbeck’s discussion of the “egoistic teacher” draws on Spinoza rather than the narrow idea that one person gains by defeating others. In a Spinozist account, rational self-preservation and

flourishing depend on relationships that increase people's power to understand and act. A teacher's good can therefore develop alongside student growth. The teacher gains competence, joy, and a stronger community by helping learners become capable. This version challenges the opposition between egoism and altruism, but it also changes the meaning of egoism substantially. The teacher's self is embedded in social relations, and rational interest includes conditions that support others. Exploitation would weaken rather than fulfil that interest. (Dahlbeck, 2017; Spinoza, 1677)

Ethical Egoism and Classroom Decisions

Consider a teacher choosing whether to spend additional time helping a struggling student. A simple egoist might refuse if no reward follows. An enlightened egoist might help because student success improves reputation, classroom performance, or personal satisfaction. The action can benefit the student, but its reliability depends on the teacher's incentives. Students whose progress is less visible or whose behaviour threatens the teacher's comfort may receive less care. Professional ethics seeks duties that continue when helping is inconvenient. Fairness requires consistent support based on educational need, not only expected personal return. Motivation may include self-interest, but the standard for action should protect all students.

Confidentiality and Personal Advantage

Teachers learn sensitive information about disability, family conflict, health, immigration, finances, and behaviour. Sharing that information may provide entertainment, social status, or protection from criticism, but confidentiality limits personal use. Disclosure is justified only for legitimate educational, safeguarding, or legal reasons and should be restricted to people who need the information. Ethical egoism faces a direct conflict when secrecy benefits the student but disclosure benefits the teacher. A professional code resolves the issue by recognizing rights and duties independent of personal gain. The teacher's reputation may eventually benefit from trustworthy conduct, but confidentiality remains obligatory even when no reputational reward is expected.

Assessment, Honesty, and Grade Integrity

Accurate assessment can create conflict with self-interest. Inflated grades may reduce complaints, please administrators, or improve apparent performance. Excessively harsh grading may display authority or reduce workload by discouraging questions. Ethical teaching requires valid criteria, useful feedback, consistent application, and correction of errors. Students should understand how work is evaluated and have a fair appeal process. Grade integrity serves learners, institutions, employers, and the credibility of qualifications. An egoist could support honesty because long-term reputation matters, but that argument is contingent. Professional duty explains more directly why evidence should govern assessment even when manipulation would produce immediate personal benefit.

Trustworthy conduct also protects students from becoming material for gossip among staff or examples used casually in public professional discussion.

Competition, Cooperation, and Colleagues

Teachers also make ethical decisions about colleagues. Hoarding resources, taking credit, undermining a new teacher, or withholding information may create short-term advantage in competitive institutions. Yet education depends on shared curricula, safeguarding, moderation, and continuity across classrooms. Cooperation can serve enlightened self-interest by building reciprocal support and reducing isolation. It also reflects obligations to the institution and students who move between teachers. School leaders should avoid incentive systems that reward individual metrics while requiring collective work. Ethical culture is weakened when employees must choose between personal survival and honest collaboration. Structural design influences whether self-interest aligns with educational purpose. Transparent moderation and external review can help identify patterns of grade inflation, inconsistency, or bias that one teacher may not recognize alone.

Student Egoism and Ethics Education

Recent scholarship describes “student egoism” as the assumption that moral reasons ultimately reduce to personal advantage. This belief can limit ethics education because students may dismiss duties whenever compliance does not benefit them. Teachers should not respond by demanding unexamined altruism. They can compare psychological and ethical egoism, test consistency, analyse conflicts of interest, and examine cases where cooperation supports or fails to support individual good. Classroom discussion can ask whether a theory can condemn exploitation when the exploiter benefits and avoids punishment. The aim is not to force one moral doctrine but to develop reasoning that recognizes stakeholders, evidence, power, and principles beyond preference. (Balg, 2026)

Comparison with Other Ethical Theories

Utilitarianism evaluates consequences for everyone affected, deontology emphasizes duties and rights, virtue ethics asks what a good teacher would characteristically do, and care ethics focuses on relationships and responsiveness. Each framework identifies dimensions that ethical egoism may neglect. Utilitarianism highlights collective learning, deontology protects fair treatment, virtue ethics values honesty and practical wisdom, and care ethics attends to dependency and context. None is free from difficulty. Consequences are uncertain, duties can conflict, virtues require interpretation, and care can become partial. Using multiple frameworks helps teachers test decisions. Ethical egoism can be included as one perspective, but it should not dominate professional practice where others bear significant risk. (Noddings, 2013)

A Practical Ethical Decision Process

When a personal interest conflicts with a teaching responsibility, the educator should identify the decision, relevant policy, affected people, power differences, evidence, and possible alternatives. The teacher should ask whether the action could be explained openly, whether similar students would be treated consistently, and whether a trusted colleague or professional body would find the reasoning defensible. Conflicts of interest should be disclosed, and some decisions should be reassigned. Reflection should distinguish legitimate boundaries from convenience disguised as self-care. This process does not eliminate self-interest. It places personal benefit inside a structure of rights, professional purpose, transparency, and accountability. Teachers can also examine whether the proposed action creates a precedent they would accept if roles were reversed or if the decision became public.

Conclusion

Ethical egoism offers a useful challenge to the expectation that teachers must ignore their own well-being. Self-care, professional growth, reputation, and satisfaction are legitimate interests and often support student learning. The theory becomes insufficient when it treats those interests as the ultimate moral standard. Teaching involves power, trust, confidentiality, assessment, and obligations to students who cannot ensure that every ethical action rewards the teacher. A defensible professional ethic allows mutual benefit but protects fairness when interests conflict. Teachers should pursue flourishing that is compatible with student development, institutional honesty, and public responsibility rather than using the language of egoism to justify avoidable harm.

References

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