“Do not do to others what you do not like done to you”: self-interest is assumed to be valid.
Plato c.428-348

Thought Experiment: The Ring of Gyges

Imagine that you had a ring which, if you twisted it when on your finger, would make you invisible. What would you do with this ring?
Plato c.428-348

The ring of Gyges thought experiment raises questions about what possible motive we have for acting with justice. Is fear really the only basis for non-selfish action?
Aristotle 384-322 BCE

Aristotle does not assume that concern for others is necessarily tainted by partiality. He nonetheless insisted that self-love was the highest love and maintained a conception of selfishness, such that it not only contributed to, but was requisite for, virtuous living.
“Man is by nature a social animal; ... anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.”
Thomas Hobbes 1588-1679

In the ‘state of nature’ it would be a “war of all against all”…

…and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”.
Hobbes thought that self-interest lay at the heart of all human motivation. Left to their own devices, humans would act in a violent and selfish manner: taking what they wished and asserting dominance over others. Paradoxically, it is human egoism which drives people to live together. Hobbes claimed that societies form on the basis of mutual self-interest. Hobbes argued we give to others out of a selfish desire to demonstrate our power to both look after ourselves and others.
Butler noted we may not want to do a certain thing, but that we choose to do it because the end is what we desire. Actions aren't born solely out of desire, but out of the ends that we seek. Even if all voluntary action is motivated by desire, that doesn't mean that it's self-interested. It is because someone is unselfish that he or she has the desire to give.
Hume rejected the idea that there are objective moral facts, instead proposing that moral claims are really just expressions of ‘sentiment’. However, Hume saw these feelings in quite a positive light; he claimed that humans have a natural feelings of concern for others. Sympathy and compassion are strong emotions, and work as major motivators for ethical behaviour.
Adam Smith 1723-1790

Smith argued for egoism as a practical ideal that benefits others. Smith believed that by granting entrepreneurs freedom to promote their own business interests and so maximise their profit, community benefits would be produced as by-products.
Friedrich Nietzsche
1844-1900
“Egoism is the very essence of a noble soul.” Nietzsche suggested that egoistic or "life-affirming" behavior stimulates jealousy or "ressentiment" in others, and that this is the psychological motive for the altruism in Christianity.
Psychological egoism cannot be ‘falsified’. Psychological egoism may be a weak theory because it cannot be properly tested; it keeps moving the goalposts to explain altruistic behaviour in terms of ulterior motives.
Rand holds that it is both irrational and immoral to act against one's self-interest. According to Rand, a rational man holds his own life as his highest value, rationality as his highest virtue, and his happiness as the final purpose of his life.
Frankena identifies two principles in ethical egoism. First, our basic and only obligation is to promote the greatest good over evil - which we can do. Secondly, when making judgements about others we should go by what is in our own best interest.
Kurt Baier 1917-2010

Baier describes egoists as 'self centred, inconsiderate, unfeeling, unprincipled, ruthless self-aggrandizers, pursuers of the good things in life whatever the cost to others, people who think only about themselves or, if about others, then merely as means to their own ends'.
Mackie notes that egoism is a desirable moral principle. While this may seem to go against the grain of traditional morality, it seems reasonable to assume that it's right and proper for people to pursue what is in their own well-being.
Rachels observed that selfishness and self-interest aren't the same. It is in my interest to see a doctor when I feel sick, but this isn't being selfish. It is also natural and necessary for us to feel right about the way we act and in our relations with others. The callousness of an ethical egoist seems strange and unconvincing.
Looking after others is rational because in the long run everybody benefits. This solution does not deal with the choice between myself or others, but looks after myself and others.