

## Is Selflessness a Virtue?

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### Giving of self

"Love your fellow as yourself."  
*Leviticus 19:18*

"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."  
*Matthew 5:38-42*

"Never will you attain the good until you spend from that which you love."  
*Quran 3:92*

Giving to others is almost universally considered a virtue across a broad and diverse range of moral, philosophical and religious traditions. What is the value in selfless giving?

"They are transmuting weakness into merit...impotence, which cannot retaliate, into kindness; pusillanimity into humility; submission before those one hates into obedience to One of whom they say that he has commanded this submission - they call him God. The inoffensiveness of the weak, his cowardice, his ineluctable standing and waiting at doors, are being given honorific titles such as patient; to be *unable* to avenge oneself is called to be *unwilling* to avenge oneself - even forgiveness."  
*Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals*

Should selflessness always be considered a virtue?  
Can selflessness ever arise out of weakness?  
Is religion the only source of justification for selflessness?

### Giving to self

"Animals are nice not just to their relatives. The biologist Robert Trivers developed a suggestion from George Williams on how another kind of altruism could evolve (where altruism, again, is defined as behavior that benefits another organism at a cost to the behavior). Dawkins explains it with a hypothetical example. Imagine a species of bird that suffers from a disease-carrying tick and must spend a good deal of time removing them with its beak. It can reach every part of its body but the top of its head. Every bird would benefit if some other bird groomed its head. If the birds in a group all responded to the sight of a head presented to them by grooming it, the group would prosper. But what would happen if a mutant presented its head for grooming but never groomed anyone else? These freeloaders would be parasite-free, and could use the time they saved not grooming others to look for food. With that advantage they would eventually dominate the population, even if it made the group more vulnerable to extinction. The psychologist Roger Brown explains, 'One can imagine a pathetic final act in which all birds on stage present to one another heads that none will groom.'

But say a different, grudge-bearing mutant arose. This mutant groomed strangers, groomed birds that in the past had groomed it, but refused to groom birds that had refused to groom it. Once a few of them had gained a toehold, these grudgers could prosper, because they would groom one another and not pay the costs of grooming the cheaters. And once they were established, neither indiscriminate groomers nor cheaters could drive them out, though in some circumstances cheaters could lurk as a minority. The example is hypothetical, illustrating how altruism among non-kin - what Trivers called reciprocal altruism - can evolve."

*Steven Pinker "How the Mind Works" pg. 402*

"When I give, I give myself"  
*Walt Whitman*

"Hillel says, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I?'"  
*Talmud, Tractate Ethics, 1:14*

"Men naturally, without reflection, approve of that character, which is most like their own. The man of a mild disposition and tender affections, in forming a notion of the most perfect virtue, mixes in it more of benevolence and humanity, than the man of courage and enterprize, who naturally looks upon a certain elevation of mind as the most accomplished character. This must evidently proceed from an immediate sympathy, which men have with characters similar to their own. They enter with more warmth into such sentiments, and feel more sensibly the pleasure, which arises from them."

*David Hume "Treatise on Human Nature, Book III: Of Goodness and Benevolence"*

Is giving to others simply a pragmatic necessity or evolutionary response of a social animal?

If good is done to fulfill a personal or selfish need, is it still virtuous?

How is giving to others also giving to oneself, and can any act be truly selfless?

### **No self**

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee." *Meditation XVII, John Donne*

[The character Vasily decides to sacrifice himself in order to save the life of his serf, Nikita, by keeping him warm during a snowstorm]

"[Vasily] remembered that Nikita was lying under him, and that he had got warm and was alive, and it seemed to him that he was Nikita and Nikita was he, and that his life was not in himself but in Nikita...his whole being was filled with joyful emotion."

*Tolstoy, Master and Man*

"If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there will be no water; without water the trees cannot grow; and without trees, you cannot make paper. So the cloud is in here. The existence of this page is dependent on the existence of a cloud. Paper and cloud are so close. Let us think of other things, like sunshine. Sunshine is very important because the forest cannot grow without sunshine, and we as humans cannot grow without sunshine. So the logger needs sunshine in order to cut the tree, and the tree needs sunshine in order to be a tree. Therefore, you can see sunshine in this sheet of paper. And if you look deeply, with the eyes of a bodhisattva, with the eyes of those who are awake, you see not only the cloud and the sunshine in it, but that everything is here, the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat, the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not in here - time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. 'To be' is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is."

*Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra"*

Is the separation of the self from other people and objects illusory?

Are there times in your life when the "inter-being" of all reality resonated as true?