

Chapter 9

Altruism, Renouncing the Renunciant: A Discussion on Desire and Selflessness

Sangeetha Menon

9.1 Introduction

The origin of the term altruism is more Western than Eastern in its import and usage. Comte, the father of sociology, adopted it to describe dispositions, tendencies, and actions that have the good of others as their object. According to Comte, the goal is not to subordinate egoism to altruism, but to develop egoism to its proper proportions, in the belief that the higher and fuller a personality is, the more it has to contribute to the happiness of humankind (Iverach, 1994). The mainstream explanations for altruism have been biological and support rules of adaptation. Using the selfish meme approach to explain all of the past, present, and future of human mind and creativity is a reductive epistemological strategy to biologically explain self-expressions, such as altruism, that have spiritual roots (Menon, 2002). Behavioral sciences that inspire sociobiology theorize the nonexistence of a nonphysical self with arguments that are based on mimetic information and our evolutionary stance. Self is nothing but a bunch of memes (Dawkins, 1976) and is constituted by the genetic processes behind the transmission of cultural traits. The dualistic division of the human self into acts such as “selfishness” and “altruism” is restrictive and offers limited frameworks to explain the complexity of subtler human expressions.

Arguments that favor selfishness as a natural, biological trait that supports species survival are meaningful when limited to body-oriented experiences and personal identity that are defined by constraints such as the physical body, limited resources, distrust of members of the same species, and fear of powerful predators. The nature of selfishness is different when it comes to a species that is defined primarily by its culture and less by biology. A marked feature of the human species is the complexity in self-perception and perception of the other. “Me” and “you” is a central divide

S. Menon (✉)

National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science Campus,
560012 Bangalore, India

e-mail: smenon@nias.iisc.ernet.in; prajnanata@gmail.com

that is overtly and covertly present in human living and engagement. This divide is the motivator for desire, action, and the exercise of choice making. Sociobiological discussions of altruism give exclusive attention to altruism as an *act* with evolutionary or social benefits. It is not considered that altruism is a phenomenon exhibited by a living *self* with mind and emotions.

A good place to begin a dialogue on “selfishness versus altruism” is to ask “who is selfish for whom?” and “who is altruistic for whom?” If the responses are not self-revealing, then the next tier of questions is “why selfish?” and “why altruistic?” And the subsequent tier of questions posits a fundamental context for a dialogue focused on identity and embodiment. A resolution of the seemingly opposing duals of “take in” and “give up” is possible only if we elevate the discussion from an exclusive sociobiological space to the space of a deeper, core self.

In the context of Indian wisdom traditions, the concerns of altruism are best understood against a background of the concepts self, desire, and well-being. The representations of self, identity, and the ability to give up and share are best explained by the ontological considerations of the self. Altruistic and selfish acts are driven by the self-concepts and the sense of security that emerges from the (inclusive or exclusive) space of the self. The Vedantic idea of self as pure consciousness posits to possess a space that is unlimited and all-inclusive. From the *atman* space, no acts are directed because of the binary of “selfishness and altruism” but are gauged toward the well-being of all. There is neither giving up for the sake of another nor possessing what belongs to another. All acts are intended for mutual nourishment. There is no giver and taker, from the standpoint of a self that is established in true identity, according to Vedanta.

In Indian traditions, and Vedanta in particular, the construal of self suggests that the concept of *spiritual altruism* is oriented toward the greater and common good of the body, mind, and the spirit. The nature of selflessness in spiritual altruism emerges from the selflessness as a *state of being*. It is directly connected to the transformation of consciousness, influencing compassion, empathy, and social good.

The question to be debated is whether altruism and selfish behavior are better understood if we make a deliberate shift of focus from the act, and behavior, as articulated in preservationist, hedonistic theories evidenced in the sociobiological literature, to formation of self-identities, group identities, and the process of self-transformation (Menon, 2007). The concept of spiritual altruism is best understood with the help of some examples from Indian wisdom traditions that inspire us to go beyond the simple binary of selfishness and altruism.

9.2 A Story from the *Mahabharata*

How do we respond when confronted with grave risks and minimal options? What is considered a priority when life is at stake? How much self-giving is motivated by the urge to rescue kith and kin? The impact of choice and decision-making in defining risk is best illustrated by a story from the *Mahabharata*, which narrates the

Pandava brothers' rendezvous with Yaksha. The story goes thus (narration is adapted from Subramaniam, 1990):

Once, when the Pandavas were living in Dwaitavana—it was during their final stay of a few months—a brahmin came to Yudhishtira with an appeal. He said that a deer had entered his hut and carried away the sticks used for making fire, the Arani. The Pandavas left at once and went in pursuit of the deer. They followed it very far but suddenly it disappeared from their sight. Depressed in mind and fatigued by thirst and hunger, they sat down under the shade of a huge tree. They were very unhappy and all the brothers except Yudhishtira started lamenting about the fate and the unending number of woes that follow them.

Yudhishtira smiled at them all and said, "This is not the time to look back and think of the might-have-beens. Our immediate worry is this: How are we to quench this dreadful thirst that has been troubling us since some time? Nakula, get up on the tree and look around. See if you can find any spot of water in the neighborhood. We are all almost dying with thirst." Nakula did as he was told. He said, "I can see a lake just nearby." They were all so happy to hear it. Yudhishtira said, "My child, go at once and bring water for all of us." Nakula hurried to the lake.

He reached the lake. The water looked so cool and inviting. He went near it to drink it. Suddenly he heard a voice from nowhere. It said, "You must not drink the water of this lake, not before you have answered certain questions of mine. You can neither drink this water nor can you carry it unless you answer my questions." Nakula did not pay any heed to this voice coming from nowhere. He was very thirsty. He rushed to the brink of the lake and drank the cold water eagerly. Immediately Nakula fell down dead. The others waited for him for a long time. But Nakula did not return.

Yudhishtira sent Sahadeva to go in search of his brother. Sahadeva reached the lake. He saw the dead form of his brother on the ground. He was shocked at the sight. But his thirst was so great that he rushed towards the water as Nakula had done. The same voice was heard with the same warning. But Sahadeva was like Nakula. He disregarded the warning and drank the water and suffered the same fate as his brother. Yudhishtira next sent Arjuna and then Bheema. Not one of them came back. Yudhishtira waited for a long time and yet they did not come back. Intrigued by this, and with misgivings of the mind, Yudhishtira walked towards the lake. He reached it soon. He stopped in his tracks, horrified by the sight that met his eyes. He saw all his brothers there, dead.

Yudhishtira was almost mad with grief. His roving eyes fell on the cool water and his thirst came back. His throat was parched and dry with unshed tears. He walked to the brink of the lake and was about to drink the water, when he was arrested by the unearthly voice. He was told that he should not drink until some questions were answered. Yudhishtira paused in the act of drinking. He looked around to locate the source of the voice. The voice said, "I saw your brothers come here one by one. I told them not to drink. They would not listen to me. They drank and died. I am the Yaksha who owns this lake."

The story goes on to explain that Yudhishtira answers all of the 60 odd questions posed by Yaksha, and to Yaksha's happiness he is not only granted water from the lake but also the lives of the four brothers. In this event, Yudhishtira and his brothers had to face two risks: the risk of having to die with no water to drink and the risk of having to die by giving wrong or no answers to Yaksha. There was the risk of death in both options of choices and decisions. Yudhishtira in this story places his life at risk to rescue the lives of others. And that is why it was prudent for him to strategize how he should be preserving his own life.

The brothers were already fatigued by hunger and afflicted by depression. Since their immediate worry was thirst, Yudhishtira prodded his brothers to find a water source. Nakula and the other brothers found a lake and confronted the owner of the

lake—the Yaksha—but did not heed his questions. Because of the blinding desire for at least a few drops of water, the surroundings did not matter much to them. They were unable to focus on what was happening in their environment. The water of the lake was so cool and inviting that even death did not become a concern. What obsessed them deeply was a haste to somehow quench their thirst. Hence, they either did not hear the voice of Yaksha or ignored him and his forewarning of death. At that point, quenching thirst was the primary desire. Even the sights of the dead bodies of the brothers did not stop Bhima, Arjuna, and Sahadeva from stepping to the lake and drinking water.

Only Yudhisthira heard the voice of Yaksha, in spite of his desire to quench his thirst, and had the patience as well as courage to answer to Yaksha's questions. What we may conclude from the story is that when pushed into a corner, we are forced to take a risk, even if it is at the cost of a trade-off like death. All acts are directed toward one's well-being.

9.3 Maitreyi's Dilemma and the Three *Da*

Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad presents a dialogue between a husband and wife. Yajnavalkya is a mendicant and sage, and Maitreyi, his wife, an earnest philosopher. Yajnavalkya decides to pursue a secluded life and leave his family. Maitreyi, unsure about her choice, makes an effort to stop him by asking what is worth having. This dialogue raises two issues: when does the “other” give you up and what makes the “other” desirable. The discussion's center point is *atmanastu kamaya sarvam priyam bhavati*—that is, everything else becomes endearing because of the endearment to Self.

Maitreyi's dilemma was what use are material benefits if they cannot ensure immortality? In response to her query, Yajnavalkya gives a series of instances for “cherishability.” The pertinent question implied in this dialogue is whether we can discretely possess and give up anything. Is that which is possessed and given up always neatly demarcated? The fringes of “me” and the “other” are so delicately separated that the distinction itself is created by human interventions like culture, social, and individual demands. The “other” that which is given up, according to Yajnavalkya, is never given up in the truest sense since the “other” is not a real entity. The most valuable possession is the Self which includes everything, even the “giver” that makes the demarcation between the other and oneself, and that which is possessed and that which is given up. Any act or possession becomes meaningful because it adheres to a self. The Vedantic interpretation of this discussion is that the source of contentment that is invoked by an object (or person, or relation) inheres in the Self. According to this framework of Self, there are no generalist altruistic or selfish acts. It is one's social and individual responsibilities and adherence to one's set of values that design an act to be altruistic or selfish.

The *Mahabharata* and the Indian wisdom traditions introduce the concept of *dharma* to point toward the primacy of individual uniqueness as a criterion that is

prior to a labeling based on generalist standards and perceptions. An altruistic act performed by one could also be interpreted as selfish if seen out of context of the *dharma* of a particular individual. Altruism is to be understood from the context of one's *dharma* (Davis, 2005, p. 164).

The contextual significance of act performed and objects given up is illustrated by another story in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad. The representatives of three classes of beings—humans, demons, and demigods—go to the god of creation, Brahma, to learn about best practices in life. Brahma's monosyllabic response to all of them was *da*. The syllable *da* invoked three different meanings in the minds of the humans and demigods. Humans understood *da* as *dana*, charity; demons understood *da* as *daya*, compassion; and demigods understood *da* as *dama*, control of mind.

While we discuss whether a particular act is altruistic or not, it is to be considered from the context of one's ability to give and share, to be compassionate, and to restrain one's desires. Altruistic expressions are borne from the continuum of the person whose identity is defined by the processes and range of the three abilities—sharing, compassion, and restraint of desires (desire being the innermost component of mind). In a sense, what we consider as an expression of altruism is perhaps not so, but is only a sensitivity to detach from what belongs to another. Such an idea is expressed in the *Isavasya Upanishad*. The opening verse of this Upanishad exhorts to discriminate between what belongs to oneself, and what belongs to another, and to consume only what belongs to oneself, and not to have greed for another's legitimate possession.

9.4 Desire and Its Mysterious Functions

The *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Kama Gita*, in the *Mahabharata*, place the psychology of desire as the forerunner to understand the philosophy of any act of renunciation. While the *Bhagavad Gita* details the dynamics of desire with the help of the agent of actions, the *Kama Gita* mocks human efforts to defeat the indefatigable nature of desire and its existence.

We usually understand "desire" as a propensity of the mind to attain a desirable object or to move away from something which is undesirable. The *Kama Gita* satirically presents another form of desire. Desire is portrayed as the intenter behind the intent of "desiring." Even when we think that we have transcended a particular desire, desire persists in another form which is the agent behind such a thought. Far from being a propensity, an act, and a behavior, the dynamics of desire is deep rooted in agenthood—one who desires and one who gives up a desire.

The idea is that true giving up happens not by giving up an object, or a person, or any physical attribute, but the agent who intends the process of giving up. Such a focus on agenthood is not to be misinterpreted as an unethical dismissal of responsibility. Giving up the giver is not even a mental or physical act, but a spiritual act of extending one's self for maximal inclusion, of all duals. The object of renunciation is not the "other" but is the limited self-identity—this idea is at the core of the philosophy of action in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* discusses the concepts of desire and “giving up” in the background of a discussion on agency. A radical view presented in the *Gita* is that renunciation is a state of being and not necessarily an act. The habitual nature of mind is to initiate an action motivated by a desire and later to get perturbed by the outcomes. The root of desire is the attachment of mind to objects in the form of expectation for contentment. Attachment to objects marks a chain of psychological mishaps, according to the *Gita*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* explains the nature of desire and its varied expressions based on the theory of *guna* or individual propensities. The *guna* theory of *Bhagavad Gita* is a typology built on attitudes and dispositions. The *Bhagavad Gita* advocates a vocation in tune with one’s *prakrti*, which is called *svadharma*. *Prakrti* is a dynamic of the three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. The *prakrti* of an individual is determined by the predominant *guna* in his mental makeup. Accordingly, he is inclined to different pursuits/vocations. His ego, knowledge, work, inclinations, goals, happiness experience are all determined by this *guna* mix. In the area of mind and work, the *Bhagavad Gita* is deterministic. There is no way a *tamasic* mind can become *rajasic* and then *sattvic* as far as choice of vocation is concerned. That is why different disciplines are prescribed for *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaisya*, and *sudra*. One’s vocation is predetermined, depending on the *prakrti*, which is a carry forward from the past. But this has nothing to do with one’s birth in a particular social stratum, but is purely by the inborn *guna* and the consequent *karma* (Bodhananda, 2005).

The *Gita* emphasizes that a person of deluded intelligence, who mistakes the Self as the agent and the enjoyer, understands the truth neither of the Self nor of the action: “He who is untrained in understanding, looks on the pure Self as the agent, that man of perverted intelligence sees not” (*Bhagavad Gita*: 18.16). He becomes bound by “the threefold fruit of action—evil, good and mixed” (18.12). But he whose understanding is untainted and attitude is non-egoistic, though he works, is not bound by his work. “He who is free from egoistic notion, whose mind is not tainted ...He is not bound” (*Bhagavad Gita*: 18.17). For him, work becomes a medium for creative expression.

9.5 Is “Altruism” a Cover-Up for Escapism?

The dialogue of the *Bhagavad Gita* begins with a breath-taking description of the might and prowess of two armies in the battlefield. As narrated by Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra, there is a detailed description of the men, weaponry, and relative strengths of the opposing armies put in the words of Duryodana to Drona. Having seen the army, Arjuna asks Bhagavan Krishna to take his chariot to the middle of the two armies so that he can make a better visual assessment. The view of the armies has a huge physical and psychological impact on Arjuna because he sees in both armies fathers, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons and comrades, fathers-in-law, and friends. The massive assemblage of chariots and his kith and kin as fighters on both sides in the vast arid field of Kurukshetra, his precarious placement between the armies, the uncertain outcome of the battle—all

these might have brought down Arjuna's sense of identity from the esteemed heights of a warrior to the depths of a lesser mortal. What follows are disconnected words from a grief-stricken Arjuna, hopelessly hoping to avoid war and ready to quit the battlefield and lead a life of renunciation. Arjuna sees the meaninglessness of all that which he possessed and valued until then. Overcome by self-destructive thoughts, Arjuna talks about giving away all his wealth, land, and precious belongings and killing himself as a good option. Finally, we see an Arjuna ready to flee the scene.

In the beginning of the *Gita*, we see Arjuna ready to give up everything—the battlefield, wealth, victory, and so forth—and quit the need to act in a way he chose earlier. Was Arjuna being altruistic, ready to give up everything for his kith and kin and even to his foes? The rest of the dialogue in the *Gita* delves into the attitude which Arjuna thought he very nobly possessed at that point of time—willingness to give up victory and fame—for the same of others. Krishna in the course of the dialogue shows to Arjuna, with fine philosophical arguments that drive deep into his mind, how flimsy, deceptive, and hypocritical his notion of altruism and selflessness are.

Every act and attitude of altruism carries an apparent stamp of giving up something precious. But the analysis of the person's identity, value system, and the experiential crises people undergo reveals the intricacies and truth of such acts and attitudes. Many times we are ready to give up that which we either are tired of, or from which we wish to escape.

9.6 Give Up the Giver

Renunciation is not the physical giving up of action or the outcomes of action, according to the *Gita*, but is the essential attitude for the performance of an action. It is the subtle awareness that springs from the discrimination of the Self and the not-Self. Renunciation is the quality of mind that promotes true action. S. Radhakrishnan, the noted compiler of Indian philosophies, writes:

Inertia is not freedom. Again, the binding quality of an action does not lie in its mere performance but in the motive or desire that prompts it. Renunciation refers, not to the act itself but to the frame of mind behind the act. Renunciation means absence of desire. So long as action is based on false premises, it binds the individual soul. If our life is based on ignorance however altruistic our conduct may be, it will be binding. The *Gita* advocates detachment from desires and not cessation from work. (1977, pp. 67–68)

Renunciation is the discarding of the false notion that “I am the doer” and “I am the enjoyer.” It is not the action that is to be renounced, but the false notion of egoistic agency polluting its quality. It is not even giving up a particular behavior or giving up the urge to protect the self. Self-renunciation is not self-loss as Welsh and Knabb argue:

... that concern for the preservation of the self is a pathogenic inheritance common to all humankind and an integral part of development. Specifically, selfishness is acting consciously or unconsciously with the intent of protecting oneself from a perceived external or internal threat. Threats may be real or perceived and can easily be witnessed by observers of newborns who are afraid or angered by light, sounds, and other unwanted sensations.

The infant will react with wincing, crying, or some other behavior that is intended to protect the fragile newborn. There is an innate sense that the world is dangerous and that the vulnerable self must be protected. It is intriguing to note that nearly all psychological difficulties will result in an attempt to save oneself. (Welsh & Knabb, 2009, p. 407)

Renunciation is not escaping from the fear of self-loss, or an act of giving up any particular act, but is the detached and equanimous response to the outcomes of action. Renunciation of act and its outcomes is not the physical renunciation of them successively, but by being aware of them from the state of an inclusive and sensitive mind. According to the *Gita*, renunciation is a state of awareness. Hence, the *Gita* (4.19) emphasizes that he whose engagements are all devoid of desires and imaginations and whose actions have been burnt by the fire of wisdom, him the wise call a sage. Renunciation of judgments is the quality of a free mind. A free mind is a pure mind that is not swayed by dualities of giving up and possessing. For an inclusive mind, giving up is not a negative act but a positive state of being. In this sense, by “giving up” one gains and does not lose something. The spiritual gain is described by the *Gita* (4.24) as—*brahma karma Samadhi*—a meditative state of being which is neither gained nor displaced by a mental or physical act. Hence, for a true renunciant “pleasure and pain are same,” and a truly renounced mind will be “free from the pairs of opposites.” Renunciation refers not to the act itself but to the frame of mind behind the act. Therefore, with the absence of such a state of being, of true “giving up,” even a supposedly altruistic act will not give the taste of true freedom anticipated from such an act.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* dialogue, there are instances where Krishna and Arjuna, the warrior hero, get into a discussion of complex processes that shape the connections among desire, action, and renunciation. The philosophy of action and renunciation or, in other words, possessing and giving up is centered on two questions: “What exactly is given up?” and “Why is it given up?” These questions lead us to the perception that renunciation is a state of being and not necessarily an act or idea. The idea of “giving up,” in the *Gita*, has also provoked several controversial interpretations, the most popular of which is that renunciation is yet another physical act, of giving up objects, people, and relations. This misinterpretation is promoted by a hasty philosophy that “everything is illusory.” The fact of the matter is that even physical giving up is not a difficult affair. What is challenging is to give up the feeling that “I have given up,” which is the agent that is at the root of the mental intention or the physical act. “Giving up,” according to the *Gita*, is neither a mere physical act or mental intention nor the abjuration of a social role. Renunciation is the ontological core of a person. Altruism is not an emotion or an action. It is the inclusive space defined by the core self.

9.7 Conclusion

In the mainstream discussion of altruism and altruistic acts, the popular trend is to classify certain behaviors as selfish and certain others as altruistic. The excessive interest in interpreting human acts in terms of behavior owes its origin to

evolutionary theories where all acts are judged through one filter—acts that favor survival and acts that do not. If we follow such a divide based on behaviors, the appropriate classification would be selfish acts as behaviors and altruistic expressions as self-expressions. While altruism and selfishness are still being discussed using exclusive biological parameters (expectation for future reward, or avoidance of future punishment), our day-to-day life experiences tell us that an altruistic gesture, or an act, is embedded in self-space, with indicators such as love, purpose-perception, and inclusivity. Altruism is not an isolated orientation per se.

The labeling of an act or gesture as altruistic, or not, is mostly done by another individual. For the person who expresses altruism, his or her gestures and acts are just signposts of contentment that is experienced in the inner depths, and for that reason, there is no giving up or sacrifice, and no expectation or disillusionment, but only expressions of joy.

References

- Bodhananda, S. (2005). *Psychology of the Gita*. Retrieved January 27, 2012, from Sambodh Foundation http://www.sambodh.org/September2004/messages/gita_psychology.htm.
- Davis, R. H. (2005). Altruism in classical Hinduism. In J. Neusner & B. Chilton (Eds.), *Altruism in world religions* (pp. 159–178). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Iverach, J. (1994). Altruism. In *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics* (J. Hastings, Trans., Vol. 1, pp. 354–358). Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Menon, S. (2002). The selfish meme and the selfless Atma. *Sophia*, 41(1), 83–88.
- Menon, S. (2007). Basics of “spiritual altruism.”. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 39(2), 137–152.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1977). *The Bhagavad Gita* (Vol. 6th Indian. rpt.). Bombay: Blackie and Son (India).
- Subramaniam, K. (1990). *Mahabharata*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Welsh, R., & Knabb, J. (2009). Renunciation of the self in psychotherapy. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 12(4), 401–414.