

Selflessness: an Overview

Abstract

The term selflessness can be a perspective, a call to action, and a means of action, since it has cognitive, emotional and physical aspects. The construction of the word indicates the lack of an (isolated) self; it also indicates the lack of an isolated not-self (other). Selflessness has spiritual connotations: from a spiritual perspective, people often talk about the fundamental interconnection of people (if they talk at all). Many spiritual people, however, act kindly simply because they feel it is the right thing to do, not because they have convinced themselves through reasoning, or because they have been convinced either through peer pressure or promises of a personally rewarding afterlife. This does not mean, of course, that kindness is without reason: selflessness is the most reasonable option.

The philosophy of selflessness is not intended to remain philosophical: it entails a system of ethics which is rooted in psychology and has immediate physical consequences. There are systems in the brain which operate rationally (conceptually or dualistically), and other systems which operate intuitively (non-conceptually, or non-dualistically). This essay introduces the notion of selflessness and its scientific basis, and the three subsequent essays explore the nature of selfishness and selflessness from cognitive, emotional, and physical perspectives. Although we will not attempt to prove that selflessness is the only "correct" choice in any absolute sense, we will hopefully show that the assumption of selfishness is not well-founded.

Introduction

Most of us understand the doctrine of selfishness with relative ease: we are individuals, and individuals do what they want because it makes them feel good. Fewer of us seem to understand selflessness to the same depth, although it is not immediately clear why this is the case. Perhaps selflessness has been obscured with bad arguments by various religious traditions, or perhaps it is more difficult to understand. For whatever reason¹, it seems clear that the amount of happiness in the world would increase if people were increasingly selfless (kind), so if we want a happier world, we should explore and understand the nature of selflessness.

Selflessness entails not being selfish, but it is not a form of forgetfulness that entirely

eliminates one's own concerns. Selflessness relies on sympathy and empathy, and it depends on knowing more than just a selfish point of view: it requires knowing and feeling the point of view of others. Because selflessness entails acting for the benefit of all beings (for the good of the many), it requires seeing² all of the points of view of the individuals within it (or understanding the perspectives of many interdependent and interwoven selves). To see the world from multiple different perspectives at once requires the use of intuition and emotional balance.

If we interact with reality in virtue of the conceptual scheme that we impose on it, then we will experience the limitations of that conceptual scheme. In addition to the limitations associated with any particular view, there are other limitations such as the amount of time reasoning takes as compared to intuition, which makes it unsuitable when one wishes to consider an issue from a very large number of perspectives. If we wish to avoid the limitations of any conceptual schema, we must perceive and interact with reality non-conceptually, which entails becoming more familiar with both our selfless nature and the operation of our intuitive mind³.

In this essay, we will consider the notion of selflessness primarily from a spatial perspective: the self is considered as a three-dimensional object, and other is considered as the complement of that object with respect to that space. It may be useful to keep in mind, however, that the argument for selflessness can be applied to the present and future versions of one's self just as it is applied to self and other. In other words, a temporal version of selflessness would entail empathizing more strongly with the future version of oneself as opposed to empathizing only with one's present self, thereby avoiding instant gratification (the temporal equivalent of selfishness).

Dualistic Reasoning

The motivation for kindness is very often based on assumptions about who we are, or our selves. When we say that you should treat your neighbors kindly, we begin with notions of "self" (our bodies and minds) and "other" (your neighbors' bodies and minds). If you treat yourself better than you would treat your neighbors in similar circumstances, you are considered selfish. If you treat your neighbors better than you would treat yourself, however, that is not selfless: that is "otherish" (to coin an analogy with the word "selfish"). A person is "selfless" only if they do not strongly reify the division between self and other, and so selfless means exactly the same thing as "otherless".

In many cultures, the concepts of "self" and "other" reinforce a dualistic attitude toward

kindness, which may be expressed as a tenuous balance between selfish and otherish behavior. Unfortunately, attempts to motivate non-selfish behavior from this dualistic position often manifest in a judgmental approach that frequently entails the word "should". If the intrinsic value of kindness is insufficient, it also involves rewards for kindness or punishment for unkindness. For example, when you are told "Don't hit your brother!", the tone might imply that understanding why you should not hit your brother is unnecessary. While such an injunction may have an ethical basis, its expression is unfortunately authoritarian.

Concretely, if we assume the self as a starting point, then kindness manifests with that "self" as the agent and some "other" as the recipient. To use the terminology of the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, the self is called the "I", and the other is called either "it" or "thou". To briefly summarize his work⁴, the other is called "thou" if it is regarded as friendly, and is called "it" if it is regarded as impersonal or non-friendly. Selfish behavior is a result of seeing the other as an "it" to be utilized and manipulated, and selflessness is the result of seeing the other as a "thou" which is very much like oneself (and thus warranting kindness).

Definition of Self

Since selflessness implies the lack of self, we need to understand what the self is that we are negating. There are at least two ways⁵ in which we can understand this "self": a self which constitutes our personal identity, and a self which all objects have (i.e. their nature or identity).

Our personal identity, or personal sense of self, is that with which we identify. We might identify with our consciousness, or with certain characteristics of ourselves such as "kind to puppies" or "likes chocolate cake". These tend to be somewhat nebulous things, however, since they are prone to change and hard to measure. What it is that constitutes a continuity worthy of a single unchanging name is a subject of considerable debate.

The other sense of self applies to any particular thing. Nominalistic views such as the one we advocate here tend to emphasize that a self exists in virtue of being named, or being conceived of as a self. However, there is a lack of correspondence between a labeled concept (which exists as a single entity and does not change) and the object to which that concept applies (which does not exist as a single thing, and undergoes constant change). Thus, the selflessness of objects amounts to the belief that objects do not have a permanent, independent, singular self in the way that we conceive and rationally think about them⁶.

Nondualistic Reasoning

From a philosophical perspective, selflessness is a nondualistic⁷ perspective that is negatively characterized by lacking the division between self/other that is present in a dualistic perspective. Although it is tempting to positively characterize selflessness by further stating that self/other are either inseparable (which emphasizes the lack of a division between self/other) or collections of smaller things (which emphasizes the further division of self/other into many different parts), there are difficulties with both approaches. Essentially, these positive (dualistic) characterizations of selflessness make an implicit assumption that reality has constituents of a certain size, as opposed to nominalistic theories which assert that breaking reality into constituents can be done in any way we choose⁸.

At this point, it seems worth reiterating how the philosophy of selflessness relates to kindness. Selfishness corresponds to knowing and acting in the world from a particular point of view, i.e. from the perspective of the self. Otherishness knows and acts in the world from the perspective of other, although of course the degree of knowing is relatively limited because it does not occur from the first-person perspective.

In terms of psychological systems, the conceptual (rational) mind can take the perspective of any given individual, although to consider multiple points of view in this serial manner would take a relatively long time⁹. Compare this with intuition, which sees events from multiple perspectives at once, and responds almost instantaneously. Although intuition may require appropriate training in order to give an unbiased answer, its relative speed suggests it is necessary for acting selflessly.

Definition of Selflessness

The doctrine of selflessness proposes that there is a conceptual oversimplification, or even a mistake, with the formulation of the world in terms of only "self" and "other". If selflessness is not articulated well, however, it can lead to a good deal of confusion. In particular, it would make little sense to entirely deny the self, since we have been operating (more or less successfully) with the concept of a self for most of our lives. Similarly, if selflessness does not impose a dualism between self and other, it may seem to be endorsing some ignorance with respect to the difference between self and other.

It may be for reasons such as these that proponents of selflessness often resist analysis [of the self], and prefer to make appeals to our feelings or intuition. From emotional and

intuitive points of view, it seems possible to hold multiple views at the same time, as these are seen as multiple possible (or actual) ways of analyzing reality. From a cognitive point of view, however, the formation of the concept of self entails forming a generality, and generalities exist in virtue of forgetting details. It is those details, however, which are essential to forming other generalities. Therefore, the formation of multiple simultaneous generalities is not possible: conceptual mind is inherently limited because it is inherently conceptual. Selflessness, because it requires multiple points of view, ultimately requires that we learn to operate with our intuition (at least part of the time).

Conclusion

In this overview, we considered how the notion of selflessness differs from the notions of “self” and “other”. To reiterate, maintaining selflessness does not entail denial of self (which would amount to less knowing than that with which we currently operate). Neither does it entail an emotional stance which is completely “otherish”. Rather, selflessness entails a denial of the limitations imposed by a dualistic viewpoint, whether that is selfish or otherish. Selflessness does not entail ignorance: it is not the case that one ceases to understand things from the perspective of the self. Rather, selflessness is a form of knowledge: it is that knowing that encompasses all possible perspectives, and it is a kindness that considers the benefit of any particular individual as a part.

In simple terms, we believe in an overly reified distinction between self/other because we have been highly trained in this view, and minds operate as they have been trained. Further, we often act either selfishly or altruistically in dependence on this view of self/other. On the other hand, most of us have not been taught the view of selflessness. As a result of this lack of education, it is difficult to act selflessly or even rationally explain why one would act selflessly, even though it may be in our basic nature to act in that way.

¹ Feel free to insert your favorite conspiracy theory here (or just admit that we are not very highly evolved).

² It may be that selflessness, in addition to knowing how another individual feels (sympathy), requires feeling how that individual feels (empathy). If one did not share the feelings of other people but did have feelings of one's own, then those feelings might make one self-centered. Thus, completely selfless kindness would seem to require either universal empathy or none at all. If we empathized too strongly with another person, we would simply be engaging in the emotional equivalent of otherishness; we would be sympathizing too strongly with someone else's emotional selfishness. From these considerations it seems clear that engaging in kindness requires selflessness within the emotional sphere as well as the intellectual sphere.

³ I am inclined to say “heart” in this context, but avoid doing so in order to appeal to a brutally scientific

audience.

⁴ I am not clear if Martin Buber himself held a non-dual ethics, but this expression is very clearly dualistic.

⁵ In Buddhism, these two kinds of self are called the "self of persons" and the "self of phenomena".

⁶ According to Indian philosophy, selves are things that have the three characteristics of persisting through time, being independent of other objects, and singularity (or wholeness). Further details about this can be found in the book "Recognizing Reality" by Georges Dreyfus. A mathematical analogy of selflessness exists in the series of slides "Mathematics of Enlightenment" by Alec Rogers.

⁷ The nondualism that is referred to here pertains to the ultimate lack of separateness between any two objects, not the various Western philosophical schools of dualism which describe the relation between material and mental things (e.g. materialism or idealism).

⁸ These positive characterizations are appropriate, however, in arguments against strong claims of the existence of self and other.

⁹ In fact, the ability of the rational mind to take only a single perspective at a time may help to explain why many spiritual traditions downplay rational thought: it is not that there is an inherent problem with rational thought, but rather that it is incapable of knowing (and acting) from many perspectives at once.