

## REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHICS OF SELFLESSNESS

This essay is adapted from Dr. Branden's latest book, *The Art of Living Consciously*, published in 1997 by Simon & Schuster.

This essay is offered not as a full treatise on ethics but rather as a stimulant to new thinking about some old issues. It challenges some conventional notions about morality and invites a reexamination of certain ethical precepts often associated with spirituality, religion, and mysticism. It is an exercise in what, in "The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem", I call "the practice of living consciously," applied to the field of values. The focus of these reflections is the traditional identification of goodness with "selflessness."

In an ethical context, "selflessness" means devoid of, or untainted by, self-interest. To behave selflessly is to act without concern for any benefit to oneself. This is commonly regarded as the essence of morality, especially in mystical traditions. It is held to be the way that spiritually evolved people behave. Indeed, such behavior is sometimes taken as evidence of one's spirituality. By contrast, selfishness is commonly regarded as evidence of one's non-spirituality.

Observe, first of all, that in equating unselfishness with morality, the implication is that self-interested actions are either immoral or nonmoral. That is, they are either bad or without moral significance. If, for instance, I protest paying taxes to support welfare programs of which I do not approve, then according to this code I am being selfish and therefore immoral. If I work to support myself, that is not immoral but neither is it admirable; it is ethically neutral.

This doctrine takes for granted as self-evident a clash between self-interest and morality: We can pursue our self-interest or we can be moral, but we can't be both. And it upholds self-sacrifice as the ideal. Sometimes this ideal is expressed as "a life of selfless service."

As one transpersonal psychologist puts it:

As [spiritual] awakening begins, motivations inevitably shift from the egocentric toward the desire to serve others. This kind of service is seen as absolutely necessary if the awakening and development are to continue; [spiritual] growth requires a life of service. [1]

What is significant about this viewpoint concerning the evil of "selfishness" is in how many versions it has appeared throughout human history. Don't be selfish—subordinate your interests to those of the tribe. Don't be selfish—subordinate your interests to those of the family. Don't be selfish—sacrifice for the Pharaoh, Emperor, King, Church, Country, Race, State, Proletariat, Society, or Globe. Remember: Service is your noblest goal; selfishness is the root of all evil.

In this doctrine, selfishness is presumed to be narrow, petty, small-minded, materialistic, immature, narcissistic, anti-social, exploitative, mean-spirited, arrogant, ruthless, indifferent, cruel, and potentially murderous. These traits are evidently regarded as being to one's self-interest, since they are labeled as expressions of selfishness. It is interesting to speculate about the psychology of those who believe this. By my own understanding I would say that these traits are self-destructive and that self-destruction is not to one's self-interest.

If one's goal is a happy and fulfilling life, self-interest is best served by

rationality, productivity, integrity, and a sense of justice and benevolence in dealings with others. It is served by learning to think long-range and to project the consequences of one's actions, which means learning to live responsibly. Irresponsibility is not to one's self-interest. And neither is mindlessness, dishonesty, or brutality.

In taking for granted a conflict between morality and self-interest, exponents of self-sacrifice and selfless service assume, first of all, that no one could have a selfish interest in being moral, and second, that the purpose of morality is not to serve the individual's well-being but to subordinate it to allegedly higher ends. These are the necessary presuppositions of the idea that morality equals selflessness. This doctrine says to the individual: Your life does not belong to you; you are not an end in yourself but only a means to the ends of others; you are here to serve; you have no right to exist for your own sake. What is remarkable is that when this moral vision is offered in a religious context, it is identified as an expression of "love for humankind."

Consider the following example. A young woman—I will call her Marny—decides she would like to become an architect. Her father is deeply disappointed, because he had always dreamed that after college she would join him in the dress business. "Must you be so selfish?" Marny's mother says to her. "You're breaking your father's heart."

"If I don't study architecture," Marny answers, "I'll break my own heart."

So Marny goes to college to become an architect. While at college, she dates a young man who falls in love with her. He begs her to marry him, give up architecture, and become the mother of his children. "In the first place," Marny tells him gently, not wishing to cause pain, "I don't love you. And in the second place, I don't plan to have children, at least not in the foreseeable future."

"Not have children?" the young man cries. "How can you be so selfish? And don't you care at all about my happiness?"

"Don't you care at all about mine?" she responds, smiling.

A few years later, now a practicing architect, she meets a man with whom she falls in love. Marny sees in him the embodiment of the traits she most admires: strength, self-confidence, integrity, and a passionate nature unafraid of love or intimacy. To marry him, share her excitement and joy with him, nurture him at times, support him in his struggles as he supports her in hers—join with him in fighting for causes in which they both believe—is experienced by her as selfish in the most natural and benevolent sense of the word. She is living for her values. Her life is productive, stimulating, and filled with love.

So when her husband becomes ill, for a long time she curtails many of her activities to take care of him. When friends praise her for her "unselfishness," she looks at them incredulously. "I love him," is her only answer. The thought of selfless service would not occur to her. She would not insult what she feels for her husband by calling her caretaking self-sacrifice. "Not if you hold the full context," she explains. "What would I do if I were 'selfish?' Abandon him? Whose notion of self-interest is that?"

Later, when her husband recovers and life has stabilized again, she

returns to work with great passion. She is eager to make up for lost time. When certain of her friends call to discuss personal problems, she accommodates them for a while, but when she realizes how much of her energy is being drained by them she finally calls a halt. “Sorry,” she says. “I don’t want to disappoint you but right now I’ve got more urgent priorities.”

“God, but you’re selfish,” she is told.

When she deals with other human beings, she respects the legitimacy of their self-interest and does not expect them to sacrifice it, any more than she would sacrifice her own. And she cannot understand why other people do not necessarily feel this way.

She notices that “selfish” is what some people call her when she is doing what she wants to do rather than what they want her to do. She also notices that while she is not intimidated by this accusation, many others are.

Question: Is Marny a virtuous woman or an unvirtuous one? Is she moral or immoral? Clearly, she is not an altruist, since altruism, in its literal meaning, is not merely kindness or benevolence but the subordination of self to others. But then what is Marny? What can we say about her?

The first thing I would say about her is that she operates consciously. And the next thing I would say is that she stands outside traditional moral categories: she is an exponent of rational or enlightened self-interest—a possibility not even acknowledged by those who talk about self-sacrifice as the moral ideal, and imply that the only alternative to sacrificing self to others is sacrificing others to self. Marny does neither; she does not believe in the practice of human sacrifice. She does not believe that masochism and sadism exhaust our moral possibilities.

Observe that everything she does is motivated by loyalty to her values. She acts on her judgment. And her judgment is thoughtful, not impulsive. For her husband, whom she loves most in the world, there are almost no limits on what she is prepared to do (within a rational framework). For her friends, there are many more limits; she is generous, but not to the point of ignoring her higher values. If she supports certain causes, it is because they concern values that are important to her and to the kind of world she wishes to live in. She respects self-interest but understands that what is or is not to one’s self-interest is not necessarily self-evident—it requires thought. And her range of concern is a lifetime, not the convenience or inconvenience of this moment. That is why I say she operates consciously.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant would tell her she is immoral, since everything she does is by selfish inclination. Kant taught that any action contaminated by self-interest to even the smallest degree can make no claim to moral merit—only that which is done out of duty can be virtuous. Hitler would tell her she has no right to live for herself, that her life is owed to the German race, and that the pursuit of personal happiness leads only to suffering. Stalin would tell her that her petty bourgeois preoccupations are absurd, that her egoistic inclinations are subversive, and that her life belongs not to herself but to the Proletariat, meaning the State. Mao would tell her it is evil and irresponsible for her to imagine that her person is her property—she must accept that she is to be disposed of as the People see fit. The Pope would tell her that her practice of birth-control is sinfully egocentric. A New Age psychologist enamored with the wisdom of the East might tell her she is retarded in her spiritual development because she still thinks of her happiness in terms of the narrowly personal. And

a mystic would tell her that if she dedicates unknown years of her life to meditation, prayer, and study, eventually the veil of ignorance will fall away and she will grasp that selfishness is indeed the root of all evil and that only through selfless service can her soul fully awaken.

Now, if we want to talk about evil, I will say that these teachings are what I regard as evil—because of the consequences to which they lead for human life on earth.

No one inveighed against “selfishness” or advocated “selfless service” more passionately than the leaders of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Communist China, or Cambodia. Take a look at what those “ideals” mean when translated into political reality. More people have been tortured and murdered in this century than any other in history, and the justification was always “in the name of a higher good to which the individual must be subordinated.” Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot taught their people a lot about “selfless service.”

It could be argued that whatever may be true about the cases just cited, it does not apply to Buddhists, who are probably the most peaceful, non-violent people on the planet. This is correct, and it is a fair point to raise. However, consider this: if we teach that individuality is an illusion and that service to others is the essence of morality, what kind of cultural and intellectual climate do we help create? One that serves a society built on the principles of individual freedom and individual rights—or a society that proclaims duty to the collective above all? Is the doctrine of selfless service more likely to protect an individual when freedom is threatened, or make the individual more vulnerable to manipulation and control?

Anyone who practices psychotherapy almost certainly knows how frightened many people are of even the most appropriate acts of self-assertiveness—they do not know how to answer the charge that they are being selfish. How many people die in insane wars because they do not want to admit that they care more about their own lives than about some abstract cause that may make no sense to them? How many people give up their dreams and aspirations in deference to the needs and demands of others because they dread the charge of being egocentric? This is an open secret: almost everyone knows it and almost no one talks about it. Instead, we go on insisting that ego is the cause of all our misery.

In the course of everyday life, we are bombarded in a thousand ways with messages to the effect that “service” is the highest mark of virtue and that morality consists of living for others. We are told that the intelligent, the enlightened, the able, the competent, the strong must exist for the sake of those who lack those traits; that those who suffer or are in need have first claim on the lives and energy of the rest of the human race, that theirs is the right superseding all other rights. We are told that an individual’s mind and effort are the property of the community, the nation, the globe. We are told that those who have created wealth owe a particular debt to those who have not created it—including an apology. And all the while politicians, religious leaders, and intellectuals subtly or not so subtly chastise the electorate for being too reluctant to sacrifice for the greater good.

Most people do not try to practice the code of self-sacrifice consistently in their everyday choices and decisions. That would not be possible. But to the extent that they accept it as right, they are left in confusion, if not in a moral vacuum. They have no adequate set of principles to guide their actions. In relationships, they do not know what demands they can permit themselves and what demands they can permit to others; they do

not know what is theirs by right, theirs by favor, or theirs by someone's sacrifice. Under the pressure of conflicting personal desires and conflicting external injunctions, they fluctuate between sacrificing themselves to others and sacrificing others to themselves. They swing between the belief that self-surrender is a virtue and the knowledge that they must smuggle some selfishness into their lives in order to survive.

Small wonder that when some people do decide to be selfish, they are so often selfish in the narrow and petty sense rather than in the rational and noble sense. No one taught them that rational self-interest is possible—and that it is the obligation of a conscious human being to think carefully about what does in fact represent long-term self-interest. When they hear selfishness castigated as petty, cruel, materialistic, anti-social, or mean-spirited, these epithets strike a responsive chord within them: their own guilt feels like a validation of the charge.

If we are operating consciously, the most obvious question to ask, when someone proposes “a life of selfless service,” is why?

To quote novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand in “Atlas Shrugged”:

Why is it moral to serve the happiness of others, but not your own? If enjoyment is a value, why is it moral when experienced by others, but immoral when experienced by you? ... Why is it immoral for you to desire, but moral for others to do so? Why is it immoral to produce a value and keep it, but moral to give it away? And if it is not moral for you to keep a value, why is it moral for others to accept it? If you are selfless and virtuous when you give it, are they not selfish and vicious when they take it? Does virtue consist of serving vice?

Those who tend to associate spirituality with selfless service typically offer two answers to the question of why? The first is not really an answer. It consists of the assertion that at a certain level of spiritual evolution, one gains the mystical insight—as a self-evident fact, requiring no further explanation—that one should take the path of selfless service. It becomes as obvious as the sun hanging in the sky—one simply sees it. This is not an explanation likely to impress a thoughtful person.

The second, and by the far the more interesting explanation, is the statement that the value of such service lies not so much in the help given the beneficiaries as in liberation from ego on the part of the one who serves. A life of service, it is said, facilitates self-transcendence. In secular terms, this is dangerously close to an egoistic justification: I will serve others as a means to personal development.

I confess I am not really clear on what a life of selfless service literally means. I cannot find a plain definition anywhere. Do we ask people what they would like us to do and then do it (like a solicitous “pleaser”)? Do we decide what we think is best for them and do that (like a totalitarian altruist)? Does it mean we abandon the life and work we chose before we attained liberation from ego and go searching the world for suffering to ameliorate (like anyone for whom self-surrender is glory)?

What also confuses me is that I have known a number of prominent intellectuals who became professors, wrote books, and then, at some point, saw the light and embraced the ideal of selfless service. They are still professors and they still write books, and in their books they talk about the ideal of service—but apart from that I cannot see how their lives has changed. Whom are they serving, and how are they doing it? (Some of them have become social activists dedicated to saving the world from capitalism, about which they know appallingly little.)

Perhaps I will be asked: But is not the justification for a life of service

the fact that there is so much suffering in the world? Are not kindness and compassion virtues even in your morality?

The answer to the second question is yes, kindness and compassion are virtues. We cannot have a decent life without them. But why would anyone identify kindness or compassion with self-sacrifice? If it is in the name of one's values—such as regard for the value of a human life—kindness can be as much an act of self-assertion as any other act of self-expression. And yes, there is a great deal of suffering in the world. And one of the reasons for that suffering is the fact that most people have never been taught a code of ethical principles that would support a truly human form of existence on earth.

One of the greatest causes of suffering on this planet is poverty. It follows, therefore, that if one is genuinely interested in relieving suffering and is disposed to approach the problem consciously, one would wish to understand how poverty is eliminated. Fortunately, the answer is known.

Prior to the industrial revolution and the birth of capitalism, poverty was the natural condition of almost all of the human race. It was not perceived as an aberration but as the norm. Ninety-eight percent of the world's population lived in conditions unimaginable to a twentieth century citizen of the United States. That was poverty of a kind that makes what we call poverty today look like luxury. Then, dating from the time of the American Revolution, the ideas of individualism, human rights, and political-economic freedom—capitalism—began to sweep the Western world. To the extent that capitalism was accepted, which varied enormously from country to country, the result was an unprecedented rise in the standard of living of millions and millions of people that would have been inconceivable a century earlier. Infant mortality rates dropped and life expectancy leapt upward. In the brief span of less than two hundred years the West witnessed a growth in material well-being unequalled by the sum of human progress up to that time. At every step of the way, the freer the country was, the faster the rate of progress and the more rapid the decline of poverty.

What compassionate mystic understood what he was seeing, above all in the United States, stopped talking about self-sacrifice, decided to rethink his code of values—and began proclaiming the glories that were possible when human intelligence is liberated and people are free to act on their own initiative? What compassionate mystic—hit by a this-worldly vision—got enlightenment and realized that there might an answer to suffering this side of Nirvana, and began to champion the right of life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness?

Notice, even today, with the worldwide collapse of collectivist economies, how grudgingly the Vatican acknowledges the achievements of free minds and semi-free markets in raising the quality of our lives. Notice the resentment that still attaches to the word profit by glowering, cassocked Rip van Winkles who still think they are living in the year 1200 and have not yet discovered the industrial age, let alone the information age. Notice the arrogant presumptuousness of offering miserly recognition to entrepreneurs who have transformed the world—and immediately following it by scolding reminders that they are, after only, only servants of humanity and should not be allowed to forget it.

To carry this point still further: a major part of the world that for a very long time fiercely resisted the incursion of “Western ideas” is Asia, and this is an area where the influence of mysticism has been at its strongest and where for centuries poverty has been at its worst. But in the

years following World War 2, the situation began to change. Slowly the ideas of entrepreneurial capitalism caught fire in the Asian mind. Men (and women!) of courage, initiative, and ambition began to challenge old traditions and think about the possibilities of this world, if governments would cede them even a modest degree of economic and political freedom. They got a little freedom, and then they pressed for a little more and a little more. The battle is still going on and is far from over. But what has happened has been described as a miracle.

To quote from John Naisbitt's "Megatrends Asia":

From 1945 to 1995, half a century, Asia went from rags to riches. It reduced the incidence of poverty from 400 million to 180 million, while its population grew by 400 million during the same period. The World Bank has pronounced that nowhere and at no time in human history has humanity achieved such economic progress, and concluded that the East Asia story is an economic miracle.

A significant aspect of this story is the cultural transformation in the role of women. An increasing number of Asian women have become entrepreneurs, against thousands of years of tradition. And more and more women are pouring into the workplace. (In Japan, for example, virtually all the currency traders are women.) To be sure, there is still much resistance to these changes, and there are still efforts to integrate Asia's semi-capitalism into "the old ways," resulting in some rather incongruous mixtures of practices and principles. That is culturally inevitable. But an extravagant source of human energy has been released by such freedom as has been permitted and is not likely to be bottled up again.

In an age in which few achievements seem to impress us and the most extraordinary triumphs of human intelligence often leave us blasé, take a moment to meditate on the meaning of the quote from Naisbitt. And then ask yourself:

Why aren't the apostles of kindness, compassion, and concern for human suffering shouting about this historic achievement from the rooftops?

Why are they not celebrating the nobility of the entrepreneurial spirit and the power of the liberated mind to accomplish "miracles"?

Why are they not championing such life-serving virtues as independence, productive ambition, competence, self-responsibility, self-assertiveness, integrity, and the drive to innovate?

Instead, they still talk as if we lived in preindustrial times, before anyone grasped that wealth could be created, when all one could do at best was share one's meager subsistence with a fellow sufferer, and the first traders and businessmen were looked on with scorn because of their concern with "material" reality. Perhaps, then, in the darkness and despair of the times, kindness and compassion were just about all human beings could offer one another. Certainly they could not project new industries that would offer employment to millions of people, build communities, heal poverty, and create undreamed of possibilities of survival and well-being. But today the evidence is all around us—and if it is not acknowledged and appreciated then we have to wonder whether the amelioration of suffering is really the primary agenda of these exponents of enlightenment, or whether other agendas are operating within them that enjoy a higher priority. With the best will in the world, I am unable to believe that blindness of this magnitude can be innocent.

It is not kindness, compassion, or selflessness that lift people out of poverty. It is liberated human ability—combined with perseverance,

courage, and the desire to achieve something worthwhile and (sometimes) make money in the process. But of course, such motives are not unselfish. And that is why they can accomplish "miracles."

Kindness and compassion are virtues, to be sure, but what has carried the world and moved it forward, lifting humankind out of the cave and beyond a life expectancy of twenty-four—what has conquered disease and steadily lightened the burden of human existence—what has created and goes on creating new possibilities for fulfillment and joy on earth—is the rational, self-assertive egos of audaciously imaginative men and women who refuse to accept suffering and stagnation as our destiny.

If you doubt it, drop all our selfless politicians, social activists, and mystics into some jungle where people still live as they lived hundreds of thousands of years ago, barely able to scratch out subsistence and at the helpless mercy of every upheaval of nature, and invite these visiting humanitarians to create abundance.

"Even if everything you say is true," I am sometimes asked, "hasn't our progress generated new problems, new dislocations, instabilities, and dangers?" The answer is that every step of human progress creates new difficulties and challenges, and they can and will be overcome, but not by cursing the virtues that made the progress possible, not by curtailing the freedom that allows intelligence to function.

"But isn't there more to life than mere material reality?" The short answer is, of course. For a slightly longer answer, I will quote a favorite passage of mine from *Atlas Shrugged*:

You, who claim that you long to rise above the crude concerns of the body, above the drudgery of serving mere physical needs—who is enslaved by physical needs: the Hindu who labors from sunrise to sunset for a bowl of rice, or the American who is driving a tractor? Who is the conqueror of physical reality: the man who sleeps on a bed of nails or the man who sleeps on an inner-spring mattress? Which is the monument to the triumph of the human spirit over matter: the germ-eaten hovels on the shorelines of the Ganges or the Atlantic skyline of New York?

I will add: and if India has become economically more developed than it was forty-plus years ago, when the above passage was first published—if, for example, once-starving India has now become an exporter of food—who are the persons responsible: those who preached the renunciation of ego or those who fought for greater freedom for the individual? Those who lead ashrams or those who lead research institutes and business enterprises? Those who stare at another dimension or those who work to transform this one?

If ego is the unifying center of consciousness, the faculty within us that thinks, judges, wills, and drives the process of achievement, then—before embracing selflessness as an ideal—reflect on the nature of a world from which ego has vanished and consider whether it is a world in which you would wish to exist.

Right here, right now, is an opportunity to live consciously.

#### NOTES

[1] J. Levy. "Transpersonal and Jungian Psychology." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 2, Spring 1983, p.49.