

## SELFISHNESS AND SELFLESSNESS: NEW APPROACHES TO UNDERSTAND MORALITY

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At a time when one's strivings and choices are evaluated through pre-given moral categories, when 'the self' becomes the recurrent site of ethical judgements this book marks an empirical turn in the discourse on morality. In critically discussing the definition of 'selfishness' and 'selflessness', the editor of the book, Linda L. Layne, presents an ensemble of essays mapping the role of morality in day-to-day decision making. Flagging the underpinned theoretical framework, she problematizes the uncritical internalization of sacrosanct moral judgements. The chapters in this edited book jointly probe into moral conscience embedded in emotional and rational choice making. The accounts of moral experience not only hint at the instances of interpersonal negotiations in resolving ethical obligations but also promote respect for personhood. In countering the rationalization of moral conscience, the book upholds the overlooked aspect of day-to-day decision making based on individual ethos.

The multitudinous hierarchies in vocabulary, feeling and sensibility depicted across the chapters call for debunking the unquestionable effectiveness of morality in our lives. The context of abolitionist (Barker-Benfield, chapter 2), anti-sexist movement (Delap, chapter 3), selfless motherhood (Faircloth, chapter 4), single mother by choice (Graham and Layne, chapter 5), selfish masturbators (Mohr, chapter 6), altruistic organ donors (Strathern, chapter 7) and intersubjective reciprocity between human and animal relations (Barbara Bodenhorn, Chapter 8) together invite readers to take an 'ethical turn' by explicitly studying moral phenomena at an intersubjective level. Discontinuities between dichotomies like good/evil, black/white, selfish/selfless give way to an understanding of the liminal spaces that hardly ever catches our attention. The possibility of engaging with the genealogy of moral categories challenges the hegemonic claim of discursive knowledge production that is limited within 'what ought to be'. For example, Charlotte Faircloth's study of the British La Leche League of '*Full Term*' *Breastfeeding Mothers* brings up the shared meaning of selflessness attached to the maternal roles of women in contradiction to the castigation of selfish mothers engaged in breastfeeding older children as a source of sexual gratification. This paradox unravels the politics of moral judgement that construe the identity of a mother through her socially expected roles rather than the essence of the mother-child bond. Here, the selfhood of a breastfeeding mother lies in 'the dualistic self/other' dichotomy that moralizes 'selflessness' over 'selfishness'. The multidisciplinary approach offered in the book

questions the consequentialist understanding of morality that is often limited within the ambit of righteousness of an act. These broader arguments invite a multi-disciplinary interpretation of morality.

The book's larger arguments look at questions like: what does it mean to be selfish; how can one tell if one is, in fact, selfish and what are the criteria by which such judgements are made? The theoretical framework that spans from Mauss to Asad places moral reasoning at the intersections of a wide range of disciplines to succinctly deconstruct the binary thinking of hierarchized categories. The perennial debates on moral relativism over that of moral absolutism are not settled in the chapters but the ethnography of 'selfishness' and 'selflessness' invites an empirical turn that deserves serious attention. However, the rich theoretical engagement embroils the quintessence of morality over the trope of personal and moral obligation. The nature and purpose of morality based on the dichotomy of selflessness and selfishness is also explored beyond the choice of virtue or conscientious duty. Even 'mundane morality' is based on an ethical motive. For example, Susanna Graham and Linda L. Layne probe into *Single Mothers by Choice in U.S and U.K* encouraging the reader not to supplant the negative moral judgment with the dimension of selfless parenting.

Along with debunking the hierarchal relationships between moral categories, the chapters also unravel the ethical threshold of a society at a given time. Dispensing with binaries, the chapters enquire into everyday dynamics of right and wrong, good and bad actions. Mutually gratifying interpersonal negotiations counter the unquestioned moral sanctions of society, and the ethnographic accounts question the symbolic association of personal values with moral values. The normative system of thinking is pushed beyond the universal understanding of morality and ethics. Particularly, Lucy Delap's work on 'self-effacement' emphasizes the politics of construed 'selflessness' against the call of personal gratification. Justifying 'self-effacement' as a novel ideal of humanity hints at the paradox that resides between personal values and social norms.

The book's profound contextual and theoretical literature broadens our conception of morality that otherwise is veiled by academic siloing. All chapters delve into interesting aspects of moral reality in our day-to-day lives. For example, Sebastian Mohr, through his ethnography on Danish sperm donors, considers the religious stigma assigned to masturbation to be unethical. By looking into biomedical facilitation of life, through sharing or selling of sperm, he brings forth the need to integrate personal moral principles with biomedical ethics.

This book is indeed a remarkable contribution in the field of social history and philosophy of morality that discovers the layers of moral categories. Here the rigorous theoretical abstraction presumes a specialist audience. Therefore, this book is best recommended to readers who already possess a familiarity with the subject. Apart from this limitation, the book flows consistently to arrive at sharp conclusions that are integrated with larger concern of evaluating self and society as morally charged.