

Teaching Caselettes

Teaching Notes

THE GIVING TREE

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This case study examines the ethics of altruism through the lens of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. Is altruism always good?

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Issues Raised

This case study examines the ethics of altruism. Is altruism always good? The questions and discussion notes encourage participants to evaluate altruism from a standpoint that prioritizes human flourishing.

Discussion

1. *Is this a good outcome for the tree?*

Issues/questions to consider:

- Is it good for the tree to behave altruistically?
To some extent this answer hinges upon whether one believes that being altruistic is the ultimate form of flourishing or whether one believes that flourishing requires things, such as companionship, physical wellbeing or the cultivation of artistic, athletic and academic talents, which are difficult to pursue if we always put other people's needs ahead of our own.
- Is it good for the tree to act out of love?
Loving and being loved by others is almost certainly essential to wellbeing. Yet, not all love is good for us—it is not good to love somebody who takes advantage of us and who does not consider our own needs.

It is worth noting that if the tree is giving out of love, she may be getting something in return, such as the pleasure of expressing her love and the joy of making her beloved happy. The discussion leader might ask participants to consider whether the tree is behaving in a completely selfless manner.

- If the tree is happy, does this mean that she gave well?
In many cases, moral agents are the best judges of their own wellbeing and there are reasons to be cautious about assuming that we know what is good for others, particularly if we have not consulted them.

Yet, we can all think of circumstances in which actors fail to understand what is good for them.

Perhaps the tree thinks only of her immediate happiness and fails to consider the long-term needs of both herself and the boy.

Perhaps the tree is made happy for the wrong reasons. For example, she might have low self-esteem and thus needs to feel needed by the boy in order to have any sense of self-worth. In this case her happiness at being needed by the boy is not a sign of wellbeing, but rather signifies an unhealthy mental state.

2. *Is sacrificing her trunk a sign that the tree is especially good or a sign that the tree lacks sufficient concern for herself?*

This question encourages participants to articulate their intuitions as to what goodness entails. The discussion leader should ensure that participants understand that there are multiple conceptions of goodness and thus many possible answers to this question. The answer to this question will also depend upon whether one believes that the tree did sacrifice her wellbeing.

Several possible answers:

- Goodness entails altruism or prioritizing other people’s welfare above one’s own, and thus the tree is especially good
 - Goodness requires concern for both our own flourishing and the flourishing of others, and thus the tree should be faulted for failing to consider her own wellbeing
 - Goodness entails giving people what they deserve, and the tree is wicked because neither the boy nor the tree gets what they deserve
 - Goodness entails taking pleasure from helping others, and thus the tree’s behavior is exemplary not because she sacrifices her own welfare but because her welfare is completely intertwined with that of the boy
3. *Is this a good outcome for the boy? Would it be wrong for the tree to provide gifts to the boy without considering whether those gifts are good for the boy?*

There are two sides to this question. On the one hand, indiscriminate giving is problematic if it discourages recipients from learning how to fulfill their own wants or if the gifts are not good for the recipient. By many interpretations, the tree’s gifts are not good for the boy; because the tree gives the boy everything he wants, the boy never learns to provide for his own needs, to distinguish between genuine needs and passing desires or to consider the happiness of others.

Yet, while indiscriminate charity can harm recipients, heavy-handed giving can be controlling and coercive. For example, the parent who is willing to pay for college, but only if her child pursues a medical degree is trying to control her child’s future. Moreover, it is not always the case that parents know what is best for their children or that givers know what is in the interest of recipients. *The Giving Tree* appeals to some ethicists precisely because the tree does not seek to control the boy. Amy Kass explains approvingly that the tree “knows that she must understand and accept the choices the boy makes even when they seem unwise and misguided. She knows that she cannot predict or arrange the boy’s future.”¹

The discussion leader should ensure that the participants understand both of these perspectives and encourage participants to consider whether a middle ground between indiscriminate and heavy-handed giving is possible.

4. *Altruism and egoism are often viewed as opposing and fundamentally incompatible behaviors, with altruism being equivalent to ethical action and egoism being equivalent to unethical action. Why might this be a problematic framework for thinking about ethics?*

This question encourages participants to re-think the tendency to view altruism as the opposite of egoism and to assume that altruism is good and egoism is evil.

Altruism might be criticized from a standpoint of justice. At the most basic level, justice entails giving “everyone his due.”² People who practice excessive altruism may give others more than their due and give themselves less.

Another problem with altruism is that it does not always promote human flourishing. First, selfless behavior does not always contribute to the flourishing of others. Second, altruism does not necessarily contribute to

¹ Amy Kass, from “The Giving Tree: A Symposium,” *First Things*, January 1995, 36-7.

² David Miller, “justice,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, ed David Miller et al (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002): 260-3.

the flourishing of the person who is behaving altruistically. Indeed, in some cases altruism is indicative of an unhealthy mental state. For example, altruism might result from excessive guilt about one's own good fortune or from poor self-esteem.

Make sure that participants understand what human flourishing means. It might be useful to list some of the things that human flourishing is usually considered to entail, such as friendship, mental health, a sense of purpose, and a capacity for growth and development. At the same time, the discussion leader should emphasize that there are different understandings of human flourishing.

The discussion leader should also encourage participants to consider how individuals can be good without being selfless in ways that completely compromise their own flourishing. First, individuals can ensure that the sacrifices they make are worthwhile. Second, individuals can cultivate selves that want to be good. If one's happiness is intertwined with the happiness of others, such as is the case with parents and children, then helping others may also be in one's self-interest. Likewise, concern for one's integrity is not a disinterested concern, but it is one that can lead to ethical action. For example, many Holocaust rescuers describe their behavior as affirming a commitment to human rights that was a core component of their own identity.³

Participants should understand that rejecting the idea that altruism is always good does not mean that it is never good to make sacrifices. Most people will agree that Holocaust rescuers who were sent to the concentration camps were sacrificing things that were essential to their own wellbeing, though they may have regarded failing to help others as a greater threat to their wellbeing in the sense that it would have compromised their integrity. Rather the point is that sacrifice is not *always* good and that sacrifice need not be completely disinterested.

Discussion inspired by "Generous to a Fault: Altruism and Psychic Health," from ed. Ruth Grant's *In Search of Goodness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

5. *The tree is a "she." Would you react differently if the tree were male? Is altruistic behavior particularly expected of women? Should it be?*

This question encourages participants to consider whether gender roles shape their understanding of altruism.

The kind of altruism exhibited by the tree (selfless love for a child) is more commonly expected of women. Mothers particularly are frequently idealized as selfless people who care more for their children's happiness and wellbeing than for their own.

The discussion leader should encourage participants to consider whether it is desirable to expect women to be particularly selfless when the happiness or wellbeing of children is at stake. Is it fair to expect greater selflessness from mothers than from fathers?

The discussion leader should stress that parenthood always requires sacrifice (time, money, career goals, etc.). At the same time, the leader should encourage participants to consider whether parents who make their children's happiness their sole priority risk raising children who have little respect for other people's needs. The leader might raise the point that a little boy who grows up having his needs instantly gratified by maternal figures might expect all of the women in his life to be attentive to his needs without getting anything in return.

³ See Neera Kapur Badhwar, "Altruism vs Self-Interest: Sometimes a False Dichotomy," from Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr. and Jeffrey Paul eds., *Altruism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 114.

Participants might also consider whether certain kinds of selflessness are more commonly demanded of men. While men may not be expected to sacrifice their careers for the sake of their children, they are often expected to risk their lives defending the honor and wellbeing of their countries, communities, and families. Norms of chivalry may require men to make the ultimate sacrifice, such as when the men on the Titanic were asked to give up their seats on the life boats so as to ensure the safety of the women and children. Participants might reflect upon whether traditional gender roles demand unhealthy forms of altruism from men as well as women.

In summing up the discussion, the leader should note that one's attitudes toward gendered notions of altruism may be influenced by one's beliefs about the appropriateness of traditional gender roles. If one believes that gender equality requires doing away with the traditional gender division of labor, then one is likely to object to norms that require men and women to make different types of sacrifices. But whether considering women as mothers and men as warriors or thinking about parents and soldiers, we need to ask whether self-sacrifice is always morally praiseworthy.