ABSTRACT: The major discussions on altruism today, particularly in the area of sociobiology, give exclusive attention to altruism as an act that favors evolutionary or social benefits. That altruism is a phenomenon exhibited by a self is almost neglected. To understand altruism it is also important to look at the nature of ‘self-space’ that constitutes various levels of altruism. Self-space, as presented in the Indian philosophical literature, refers to a reified self-identity that would reflect ethical and spiritual concerns. Because of the emphasis on selflessness as a state of being the Indian philosophical literature offers a different perspective on altruism than sociobiological renditions. Selflessness is connected with transformation of consciousness, influencing compassion, empathy, and social good and hence could be described as having a spiritual mooring. In this paper I introduce and coin the concept of ‘spiritual altruism’ and juxtapose it with sociobiological altruism in order to emphasize the spiritual underpinnings of altruistic behavior, in contrast with sociobiological causes.

“Those who eat without sharing, eat veritable poison”

Bhagavad Gita: 3:13

Indian philosophical thought, in general, supports the collective co-existence of life. Its theories on art, metaphysics, soteriology, and even logic and epistemology favor the commonality in all life forms. This commonality is variously addressed but emphasized in the Upanishadic literature as ‘pure existence,’ ‘pure consciousness,’ and ‘pure bliss.’ The core of existence is identified with ‘benevolence.’ In contrast to this foundation of commonality, divisions based on gradations in degree of intelligence or evolution of life, as embraced from a sociobiological framework, are of a cultural, constructive nature and hence may be perceived as trivial and irrelevant. For the Upanishads, understanding existence in its truest sense cannot be found solely on degrees, divisions, and classes, which is just one way of classifying what we experience and rationalize.

BEYOND THE SOCIOBIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

From a sociobiological perspective, human thinking mostly strives for a ‘scientific’ and structured way of understanding and from those structures universally applicable theories are deduced. Degrees of this ability is referred to as one’s ‘degree of intelligence.’ It is interesting that, in spite of the oddities
human civilization and intelligence have given rise to, the focus is on building theories, patterns, and social mechanisms that have more stable and evolving degrees of survival. Survival seems to be the common ‘idea’ which we have built both biologically and culturally. The mechanisms – biological, cultural, psychological – we use may be entirely different, but in the history of ideas the idea of ‘survival’ tops the rank. One could argue at this point that ‘survival’ cannot be just an idea but a biological fact. Even if that be the case, I would contend that a sense of objectivity (for us as humans) could be heightened when we look from ‘above facts’ and see them as ideas. The grand theory of (genetic) survival, as we understand today, is a product not just of biological but also of cultural evolution.

Use of tools, making of tools, nurturing of self-awareness, building of self-identity and emotions – all these together (or singularly) are supposed to be responsible for what we today recognize as the most important characteristic of existence – intelligence; and, the first expression of intelligence lies in improving the scope and duration of existence. If we look closely at theories of evolutionary biology, as well as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, they are ‘built’ to explain how we could exist in an immortal sense – even though a single body, a single gene, or even a species, will have to die and disappear in the process.

Undoubtedly immortality of life has been our singlemost concern in the way we have built our theories in both the natural and social sciences. We strive to establish the immortality of genes, mind, body, and so on. This might be quite an obvious fact but not to be set aside as insignificant. To a survival machine, another survival machine is part of its environment, like a rock or a river or a lump of food (Dawkins, 1976). What separates us from the robot is the nearly instantaneous communication and interaction that takes place between the different parts of the human brain (Newberg & D’Aquili, 2001).

Another expression of human intelligence is the urge to exist, and accordingly minimize any process that works against existence. Human history of course has telltale stories of violence, hatred, and betrayal to narrate to our children. Paradoxically these stories are also stories of desperate means to ‘exist’ as an individual, family, community, or nation.

What is selfishness in the context of the selfish gene and selfish meme? It is an attitude or mechanism that works for self-promotion. The methodology for sociobiology is to arrive at the non-existence of any non-physical self by arguing that self is nothing but a bunch of memes and also to locate the intelligence behind the transmission of cultural traits. Therefore each of these memes has evolved its unique way with its own history and also each of them is using your behavior to get itself copied (Blackmore, 1999). Meme, if collectively termed therefore, is the ‘big self’ that tries to survive by all means. Central to these discussions are the questions of whether human actions are ever genuinely selfless, whether there is something in the moral life that transcends biological function, and whether one can sensibly
speak of an overall purpose to the course of evolution (Clayton & Schloss, 2004).

From the Indian perspective of spiritual psychology, however, one could meditate whether the core of existence is founded on body (biological), mind (experiential), or, something else that supercedes both (spiritual). In this context altruism becomes a perfect human trait to be studied because of its two distinct characteristics: (a) universal (pan cultural), and (b) transcendental nature. I use the description ‘transcendental’ with the assumption that whichever altruism we talk about (kin altruism, individual altruism, hedonistic altruism, utilitarian altruism, etc.) there is a supercedence that happens to the identity and values held by the individual, pointing to some degree of benevolence.

**FROM COMTE’S ALTRUISM TO SPIRITUAL ALTRUISM**

In the Western world, the term ‘altruism’ goes back to Comte, the father of sociology, who adopted it to describe those dispositions, tendencies, and actions which have the good of others as their object. Comte held the position that the goal is not to subordinate ‘egoism’ to ‘altruism’ but to develop ‘egoism’ to its proper proportions, in the belief that higher and fuller a personality is, the more he has to contribute to the happiness of humankind (Iverach, 1994).

To a great extent we have been able to build on Comte’s ‘altruism,’ but we have not succeeded in adopting a matching theory for his ‘egoism.’ The history of ideas on altruism that have focal points in Darwinian group theory and today culminate at the individual (selfish gene and selfish meme) theory only shows that our best explanations for a cultural and psychological phenomenon have been biological, catering to ‘adaptation.’ The ‘selfish meme’ approach to explain all of the past, present, and future of human mind and creativity is a tough but hasty epistemological strategy to demystify the human race from its uniqueness (Menon, 2002). The aspects of altruism capable of changing perceptions about existence drastically, considered from a humanistic point of view, such as transformation in values, self-identity, and group-identity, have been shadowed by an excessive interest in ‘adaptation.’ The ‘limited’ perceptions on altruism could be connected with one of the major constructs of Western philosophical tradition, the individualistic self (Kupperman, 1997).

Recognizing the subtler transformative aspects of altruism, I wish to take a few instances from Indian philosophical traditions and present another form of altruism which I wish to introduce as ‘spiritual altruism.’ Also, since it addresses a core characteristic of existence, it has a universality that could be focused to represent something basic to humans.¹

I wish to present a few cross-sections of what we could refer to as ‘Indian ways of thinking.’ These cross-sections taken from the foundational philosophical texts such as the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Mahabharata will have

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commonalities as well as differences, yet together they weave what could be considered as ‘spiritual altruism.’ These cross-sections will also help us to define the two components – ‘spiritual’ and ‘altruism’ – as developed in the diverse philosophies of India. Some of the key ideas I will be following through these cross-sections are the representation of self, construction of self-identity, and expansion of the self-space that constitute the core of identity. I hope that with a discussion of these ideas it could be shown that the duals of ‘selfishness’ and ‘altruism’ are notions far too limited to understand the complexity of human expression. To confine the ‘enlarging’ space of self to a more culturally and biologically defined paradigm (of selfishness and altruism) will not be helpful in appreciating the scope of human relationships and responses in its complexity. On the contrary, if we focus on self-space as the main factor then one of the noblest human expressions like altruism gets a definition not limited and exclusively defined by sociobiology. A focus on self-space(s) will also help us enlarge the scope of the concepts of ‘selfishness’ and ‘altruism.’ I introduce the new concept of ‘spiritual altruism’ essentially to broaden the scope for understanding selfish and altruistic behavior and to extend its discussion from a limited (but important) sociobiological stance to explanations that favor greater good of the body, mind and the spirit.

**SELF-DIALOGUE (SAMLADA) AND SELFLESSNESS**

There are four kinds of dialogues conceived in classical Indian philosophy – vada, jalpa, vitanda, and samvada. Here we focus on samvada type of discussions. Samvada is the discussion between the teacher and the taught. The discussion of this nature is usually a colloquy between the teacher and the student who are both learned and who have different social roles. The teacher-taught function is not made (in all cases) a visible one but for the presence of the instructive style of conversation. The subject of dialogue almost all the time focuses on psychological, social, and spiritual wellbeing. Without any rules or pre-planned structure the dialogue flows according to the queries and issues raised by both the parties involved.

Some of the famous and interesting instances of samvada are that between Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, Draupadi and her friend Satyabhama in the Mahabharata, Dharmaputra, and the celestial being Yaksha in the Mahabharata. The instances below will present ideas from these texts.

**Giving Up ‘Giving Up’**

It is interesting that there is more than one kind and level of dialoguing in the Gita. The prominent one is that between Krishna and Arjuna. The dialogue that happens like a shadow in the background is that between Sanjaya the minister and Dhritarashtra the father of Kaurava siblings. The multiple dialogues in the Gita could be seen as the creation of multiple self-spaces. Also, the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna as portrayed in the Bhagavad Gita is
an example of how dialogue is not only a means for effective teaching but also for candid self-expressions starting from self-abnegation to self-recognition.

In the Gita dialogue there are instances where the God as well as the warrior hero gets into a discussion of complex emotions that brings out metaphysical, psychological, and transpersonal components. One such interesting component is sanyasa, ‘renunciation.’ What exactly is given up? Why is it given up? And, for what for is it given up? Does sanyasa mean complete self-abnegation? These questions, encountered in the dialogue and the conclusions, in short, lead to a theory that renunciation is a state of being and not necessarily an act or idea.

‘Giving up’ according to the Gita is neither a mere physical act or mental intention, nor abjuration of a social role. It is the ontological core of a person. The idea of ‘giving up,’ in the Gita has had many controversial interpretations of which the most popular is that of renunciation as a completely physical act. This interpretation is based on a conjured and hasty philosophy that ‘everything is illusory.’ If we move further from such a juvenile philosophy it can be understood that physical giving up might not be so difficult. The cumbersome part is to give up the feeling that ‘something is given up’ – the ‘attachment’ to the mental intention or the physical act. The act of giving up can also be like a struggle in the whirlpool – the more you try to give up the more effortful it becomes, and more dense that which is intended to be given up.

This difficulty relates to mental and spiritual renunciation which is based on another philosophy that giving up is not a negative act but a positive state of being. In this sense, by ‘giving up’ we acquire something. This something is described by the Gita as – brahma karma samadhi (Bhagavad Gita: 4.24) – a meditative state of being which is neither gained nor displaced by a mental or physical act. To translate such a metaphysical state to empirical correlates, the Gita says a true renunciant will be one to whom ‘pleasure and pain are same’ (sama dukha sukham), who understands that ‘sense contacts that cause heat and cold, pleasure and pain will come and go and are impermanent’ (agamopayinah anitya). Therefore ‘the true renunciant treats alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, success and failure’ (sukhadhukhe same krtva labhalabhau jayajayau). S/he will be ‘free from the pairs of opposites’ (nirdvantvah).

There are occasions when Arjuna breaks down and uses the context of dialogue to create a self-space defined by his fears and conflicts. The dialogue as it evolves constructs a new self-space for Arjuna leading to the recognition of a renewed self-identity, the core of his being. The initial skepticism raised by Arjuna is a typical example of how moral conflict arises in times of crises when in our ordinary intuitive moral thinking we rely on utilitarian principles (Agarwal, 1989). Samvada in the Gita, in contrast to a psychoanalytic method of deconstructing the past, follows an Atmanisation path of constructing the future. The crux of the dialogue is on ‘building up’ the ontology of (Arjuna’s) self and its non-contextual and limitless existence.

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What is Worthy to Give up, my Dear?

The dialogue that takes place between a husband and wife in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad is very significant for both the context in which it takes place and also for the subject matter of discussion. Yajnavalkya is the sage husband who in order to pursue a secluded life decides to take leave of his two wives Maitreyi and Katyayani. Maitreyi seems to be not so sure of his decision and makes an effort to stop him with the help of a philosophical warrant. The second reason why this dialogue is interesting is the subject of dialogue: when does the other give you up and what makes the other desirable.

To Maitreyi’s query what use is wealth if wealth cannot ensure immortality for her, Yajnavalkya gives a series of instances for ‘cherishability.’

It is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is cherished, my dear but for one’s own sake. It is not for the sake of the wife that the wife is cherished but for one’s own sake. It is not for the sake of wealth that wealth is cherished but for one’s own sake... It is for one's own sake that everything is cherished. And it is that self which is to be discerned, be heard, be pondered on and be meditated on...

The worlds give up the one who knows the worlds as different from her. Everything deserts the one who knows everything as different from her. Everything is the Self...

Just as when a drum is beaten, it is not possible to grasp the specific sounds but only the drum or the drummer... Just as a lump of salt dissolves in water, there would not be anything one could grasp and extract other than salty water, the Self is a mass of awareness...

For where there is duality there one smells another, there one sees another, there one hears another, there one speaks to another, there one thinks of another, there one understands another. But if everything has become one’s own self then by means of what would one know, and whom?

The significant issue that is discussed in this dialogue is ‘is there something that could be discretely possessed and also given up.’ 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, etc. What is given up, according to Yajnavalkya, is never given up in the truest sense since the ‘other’ is not a real entity. Other than being a fashion of the mind the sense that something is possessed because of its own discrete value is not wholly true since the ‘possessor’ gives the value for it. For this reason the most valuable possession is that Self that is inclusive of everything including the ‘little self’ that makes the demarcation between the other and herself.

This dialogue is another instance of Atmanisation where the futility of pride in an act of possession or giving up (for) the other is demolished by constructing a larger self identified with consciousness.
The plot for another instance of samvada is the confrontation between a demi-god (Yaksha) and the most moral person Dharmaputra, as portrayed in Yaksha Prasna (Iyer, 1989) in the Mahabharata. The set of puzzles on ‘giving up’ in this confrontation is followed by certain poignant questions on human folly that substantiates the right things to be given up.

Yaksha:

By giving up which thing does one become lovable?

By giving up which thing does one never suffer grief?

By giving up which thing does one become wealthy?

By giving up which thing does one become happy?

Dharmaputra:

By giving up pride one becomes lovable.

By giving up anger one never experiences grief.

By giving up desire one becomes wealthy.

By giving up avarice one becomes happy.

Yaksha:

Who is joyous?

What is the wonder?

What is the way and what is the news?

Dharmaputra:

O! Spirit living in the water! The man who cooks vegetables in his own house on the fifth or sixth part of the day, but who is not in need and who never goes out from his house is truly happy.

Day after day beings are entering the abode of Yama [death], yet those that remain believe that they will live forever. What can be more wonderful than this?

Logic is uncertain. ...There is not one Rishi [saint] whose opinion is authoritative. Truth about Dharma is hidden. That alone is the path which great men tread. In the frying pan of this illusory world time is cooking the
beings in the fire of the sun with fuel of days and nights and with the ladle constituted by months and seasons. This is news.

_Yaksha Prasna_ presents, in an apparent sense, a set of simple puzzles put to Dharmaputra by Yaksha. But as we read through the dialogue we see that the questions raised by Yaksha are influenced also by the responses of Dharmaputra. The questions begin with celestial objects, social status and code, philosophical issues, and finally a mockery on certain frail sentiments of human mind.

The most interesting part of this dialogue is the reason why Dharmaputra is there to answer Yaksha’s puzzles. It so happened that once during one sojourn in the forest the five brothers in search of water find a lake and decide to quench their thirst. The Pandava brothers go one by one to the lake only to be confronted with the possessor of the lake – the Yaksha – who demands that they could take water from the lake only if the puzzles he raises would be answered. The penalty for inaccurate answers would be death itself. The first brother could not answer and faces the penalty of death. None of the remaining four brothers gives up and each confronts the Yaksha only to die unable to answer questions and rescue the rest of the brothers.

What exactly drove the brothers to Yaksha in spite of the death of the rest surely extends from a physical need of thirst and goes beyond a psychological need to defeat the opponent. Was it pride? Was it the absence of a judgment to save at least the rest and not to have a collective death? What forced each brother to confront the Yaksha forsaking the strong possibility of death is another story for ‘altruism.’

_Extending the Self to Nature and Social Ideals_

In a strict sense the monologues presented by poet Kalidasa (6\textsuperscript{th} c. AD) in his masterpieces like “The Cycle of Seasons” and “The Cloud Messenger” do not involve a partner. But the degree of anthropomorphisation present in his work, where subtle emotions and erotic sentiments are given a form with the help of conversing with different components of nature, makes these monologues honest self-dialogues and sharing of intimate concerns. The monologues might not strictly fall in the class of _samvada_. But there is an interesting manner in which a communication is done by the poet with nature. In the process a transpersonal self is actualized. The sense of eroticism and specularity that pervades his poetry is closely related to the idea of a transpersonal self (Dissanayake, 1998).

Except for the dialogue between Sathyabhama and Draupadi the rest of the instances mentioned above relate the reader to a transpersonal self through discussion of different themes but each transcending the known contents of a self-identity. The dialogue between Draupadi and Sathyabhama, which is a pal-talk, constructs a more acceptable (more ‘righteous’) ideal of wifehood. The reason why this dialogue could also be grouped under the class of dialogues relating to a transpersonal self is because the subject of an ideal wife
is attested by the subject of divine love (to Lord Krishna) which has a transcending effect on the self-identity of Sathyabhama.

**SELF-DIALOGUE, SELF-SPACE AND SELF-EFFACEMENT**

I translate *samvada* as self-dialogue not because they are monologues. They are self-dialogues since all of these instances are essentially a dialogue with the self of the person through a process of transferring or identifying the contents of a habitual social self to the components of nature (as in Kalidasa) or wellbeing (as in the case of Maitreyi) or frailties of life and death (as in the case of Dharmaputra and Yaksha). The end gain of these dialogues is a new perception and fulfillment leading to a transpersonal self-identity. The past, present, and future of the self of the person/s in dialogue, with the help of the mechanism of dialogue, gets reviewed in total. Meanings of various levels of existence, of the person/s in dialogue and inter-relations, knit together in the process what we could call as ‘self-space.’ The self-space is reinforced by social, psychological, and transpersonal factors.

The basic premise of ‘altruism’ assumes self-effacement to a certain degree. To do something for the other that involves a sacrifice from the doer’s point of view can be considered an altruistic act. In the altruistic act the focus is on the loss of the doer and the gain of the receiver and not necessarily the mutual benefit that is involved. This is the reason why the ‘feel good’ factor of the doer of the altruistic act is not considered as essential for discussion in juxtaposition with her sacrifice in the act. The not-so-fast progress we have in explaining the non-kin altruism using the kin theory also demonstrates that the focus in understanding the nature of altruistic behavior cannot be solely driven by the theory of natural selection. The division of altruistic and selfish acts is based on a discussion of how much loss and how much gain is accrued to each party. It will be a different focus and perspective if we can examine how much difference it involves for the self-space of the doer and the receiver of an altruistic act.

The instances described in these dialogues posit situations where ‘losing oneself’ is a healthy sign and not antagonistic to self-preservation. *Samvada* also presents a ‘self-space’ that promotes higher degrees of self-recognition and self-existence. Dialogues leading to conflict resolution, involve at least to some extent a ‘sacrifice’ of ideas and identity. But in the process they also present a gain of collective being. There is a progressive perception of existence and recognition of identity in the dialogic hymns on nature in the early Vedic literature; with the method of negation, as presented in a variety of Upanishadic dialogues between the old teacher and the young student, husband and wife. *Samvada* upholds the tradition of positive (spiritual and social) gain involved in selfless perceptions and activities, exemplified by the focus on a transpersonal self ‘conversing’ with nature in the works of Kalidasa. It is also noteworthy that the complexity involved in the relation between self-space and selflessness is presented through not one conversation or story but nested conversations with nested stories as in the case of many classical Indian philosophical texts like *Yoga Vasishta.*

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Desirelessness and Selflessness

The Bhagavad Gita discusses the concepts of desire and desirelessness 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 be perturbed by the results. The root of desire is the attachment of mind to objects in the form of expectation for happiness or contentment. Attachment to objects marks a chain of psychological mishaps, according to the Gita. The Gita cautions that ‘when a person think of objects, attachment for them arises; from attachment arises desire; from desire arises wrath; from wrath arises delusion; from delusion, failure of memory; from failure of memory, loss of conscience; from loss of conscience he is utterly ruined.’ Also, ‘From the delusion of pairs caused by desire and aversion,... all beings are subject to illusion.’

The Gita is emphatic that a person of deluded intelligence, who mistakes his/her real Self to be the agent and the enjoyer, understands the truth of neither the Self nor the action. ‘A person who is untrained in understanding, looks on the pure Self as the agent, that person of perverted intelligence sees not.’ He becomes bound by ‘the threefold fruit of action, – evil, good, and mixed.’

But, ‘The one who is free from egoistic notion, whose mind is not tainted, ... s/he is not bound.’ To such a person work is a medium for creative expression.

According to the psychology of the Gita action and renunciation are not two antithetical processes. Action is not the mere movement of the body. Neither renunciation is the abstention from action. Also, action is not discussed solely as an ethical concept, but in the context of psychological significance. For this reason the exact nature of action can be understood only in relation with renunciation and vice versa. Renunciation is not the physical giving up of work but is defined as the essential attitude for the performance of work. It is also a state of being, subtle awareness that springs from the discrimination of the ‘other’ and the core of the Self. Renunciation, is not a negative outcome or act. It is the quality of mind which promotes true action. 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, even a supposedly altruistic conduct will not give the taste of freedom anticipated from such an act.

The self-space defined by the Gita in this discussion is based on psychological detachment from desires generated by a ‘small self’ and not mere giving up. The Gita notes, that ‘not by abstaining from action do you win actionlessness, nor by renunciation do you attain perfection’ (na karmanam anarambhat...na ca sanyasanadeva ysidhkim samadhigacchati). And also, ‘none, verily, even for an instant, remains doing no action; for everyone is driven helpless to action by the energies born of Nature’ (nahi kascit ksanamapi jatu tistatya karmakrt). To act, promoted by the goals and priorities that are defined by social, psychological, and cultural values, is considered a normal process and in this sense ‘selfishness’ is a natural disposition of human mind, according to the Gita.

Nevertheless, to see the constant change that is happening in the field of objects and experience is significant to keep in align with the processes of
detachment. When *Gita* speaks about freedom what is emphasized is not freedom from action by its non-doing, but *freedom in action* whilst doing. Freedom is presented as the very essence of the Self.

There is a poignant situation described in the last chapter of the *Mahabharata*. Though in a mythical context, compassion and selflessness are glorified through a narrative of events leading to the recognition of selflessness as the highest good.

The story, as described in the last chapter of *Mahabharata*, “The Great Travel,” (Subramaniam, 1990) is centered on the final exit of the five Pandava brothers and their wife Draupadi. On their way towards the northern mountains, all the four brothers and Draupadi fall dead one after the other. As the eldest brother Dharmaputra walks forward in anticipation of his death, he is startled by the advent of Indra the God of heaven, with the invitation to take Dharmaputra to heaven in his human form. Dharmaputra’s first demand is that he would go only if his brothers and wife will also have a place in heaven. Once this demand is agreed upon, Dharmaputra takes to his second demand. A dog has been following the brothers all the way since they left their kingdom. Dharmaputra did not want to leave the dog who followed him and surmounted equal amount of obstacles. In the debate which follows Indra persists on his dislike for taking a *dog* to the heavens, and Dharmaputra’s declining to accompany Indra for the heaven without the dog. Even at the cost of losing the invitation to heaven Dharmaputra stays steadfast on his decision: “All the acts of mine which have earned this heaven for me will be destroyed if I behave without compassion towards this dog. It has been my rule never to abandon one who is dependent on me. This dog is a dependent. I cannot leave it and go.”

We could say that in this epic story Dharmaputra’s character symbolizes the epitome of righteousness, which would have been the norm of the day during the epic period of history, and hence had to even include the worst situation for selflessness. If we go further from this contention of historical interpretation then we see that there is more to the complexity of Dharmaputra’s self-space as defined by this story. The self-space of Dharmaputra is influenced not only by his social role and value perceptions but also his transpersonal need to renounce something even if that would make him divested of the highest placement. This story presents an argument and a case straight against the common utilitarian rationalization of human altruism as that which does not exist outside the purview of being only a tool for benefiting the individual in some way.

**Non-Substantiality, Buddhist Nirvana, and Yogic non-Possession**

A counter-argument for the sociobiological position on altruism is exemplified by the Buddhist metaphysics and moral principles. Buddhist ontology is founded on the non-substantiality of things. The theory of dependent origin and nonsubstantiality of entities is also the theory on which is founded the
Buddhist notion of nirvana closely related to the idea of compassion. Maintaining an extreme case for self-effacement, even benefit from a supposedly altruistic act, is not considered virtuous since it goes against the fundamental Buddhist teaching of dana “the virtue of giving.” An action does not become noble by the sheer qualification of being altruistic, but is to be evaluated on its own, not in relation to anything else (Kalupahana, 1994). Self-sacrifice or unrestrained altruism is neither a means or a goal. The Buddha considered the rightness or wrongness of an action or a rule not in having only a situational or contextual validity. For him the value of an action is determined by what it does to the person or a group of people in a particular context (Kalupahana, 1994). If we extend this rule to the case of an altruistic act, a supposedly altruistic act does not qualify as a noble one just because it falls into such a case. It is the influence of the action on the total personality that gives it a moral character (of being altruistic). Here the definition for altruism crosses the boundary of both the loser and beneficiary and gains a transpersonal dimension. The Buddhist literature is full of examples of people who have taken the altruistic ideal to its logical conclusion, in the sense of leading calm, even lives with no personal attachments (Kupperman, 1997).

In Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra the discussion on non-possession is presented in the context of a set of rules prescribed for restraint – yama (Dasgupta, 2001). The practice of the eight limbs of yoga is suggested as leading to the perfection of yoga that is kaivalya or oneness. Altruism is not a concept discussed in isolation in Yoga. Selflessness is the complementary component of the essential experience of yogic excellence. Non-possession (aparigraha) is an intrinsic value to be observed in conjunction with other values like nonviolence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), non-stealing (asteya) and celibacy (brahmacharya). Yogasutras also add that when one is established in non-possession, knowledge of past lives arise. Another interpretation for aparigraha is abstention from greed (Swami Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 1994).

The self-space defined by the five yama (values for restraint) and five niyama (practices) relates to an identity in a social context at the same time suggests an ontological self-transcendence through the yogic practices. From this point of view, altruism is not an attitude governed entirely by certain values but is an ontological disposition driven by the recognition of a new self-identity perfected by yoga. The yama values get redefined for a mind perfected by yoga so as to experience ahimsa (non-violence) as non-exploitation of the other for selfish benefit; satya (truthfulness) as honesty about one's feelings and thoughts; asteya (non-stealing) as not consuming more than what is required, brahmacharya as being passionate about the existential ‘truth’ and aparigraha (non-possession) as sharing and trusteeship (Swami Bodhananda, 2004).

**Emotion, Love, Detachment and Selflessness**

The idea as well as the experience of selflessness receives greater attention in the literature on and the philosophy of love and devotion cohesively entwined with the notion of self-perception. The body, mind, and consciousness are presented
both within and without an interactive context. Experience, transformation of experience, and transcendence of experience become essential paradigms.

_Bhakti_ in Vaishnavite and Shaivite traditions represents an intense experience which includes not only the phenomena involved in/connected with ‘love’ but also that which goes beyond them through a transcendental ‘divinizing’ of the emotions. Human frailties and emotions are situated within a divinized context and are directed towards self-effacement. A lover of God, _Bhakta_, with her intense devotion (towards chosen deity), unconditional love, undaunted trust and an open state of mind, is ultimately interested in absolute selflessness. The self-space of the _Bhakta_ has two interesting features: The ontological state of her love is integrated with a trans-cognitive I-ness; the relation between her and the experienced world transcends the duality of the self and the ‘other.’ According to a classical text on divine love, _Narada Bhakti Sutras_ of BC years, the experience of _Bhakti_ happens to a desireless mind (_na kamayana_). Desire is always for the other. For a _Bhakta_ there is no ‘other.’ Her devotion is that which intensifies every moment and springs from her inner self (_atmaramo bhavati_). The impersonal involvement, but supreme love, produces selflessness that increases ‘sensitivity to the divine’ (McDaniel, 1997). Detachment is key to such a state of love-experience (Menon, 1999), as exemplified by instances from the _Mahabharata_ where Kunti asks for more pain so that she could love her lord more intensely, or in the _Bhagavata Purana_ where the cowherd girls, not a bit hindered by the (lower) self-identities, readily scrap the mud from their soles if that would serve cure for Krishna’s ailment. Self-preservation in these cases has a totally different meaning and purpose, but for self-effacement leading to self-fulfillment.

Indian philosophy of love employs the disciplinary role of emotion in producing more detachment and selfless deeds and thoughts. The self-space defined by divine love though focuses on ‘self-merge’ and self-effacement curiously gains firmer ground in both the individual and social context. The depth and strength of the mind of a divine lover surpasses that of an individual plainly focused on self-preservation and self-continuity. The divine lover’s experience of selflessness is caused not by the ups and downs of love-hate emotions.

Another strong case for the relation between selflessness and use of emotions is the aesthetic theory of _rasa_ (pure emotions) and _bhava_ (mental moods). The transference of emotions from the actor to the spectator ‘without losing oneself’ aims at a gain for the spectator and no-loss for the actor in relation to their self-spaces. _Rasa_ involves a dynamic production of emotions both for the actor and spectator. The theory of _rasa_ emphasizes a dynamics of emotional transference and aesthetic joy. This is ensured by both kinds of self-spaces (of the actor and the spectator) being enriched by a sense of detachment as well as intense engagement (Menon, 2003).

**Presenting ‘Spiritual Altruism’**

The major discussions on altruism today (especially in the area of sociobiology) give exclusive attention to altruism _as an act_ favoring evolutionary or social
benefits. That altruism is a phenomenon exhibited by a self is almost neglected. To understand why altruism is to be discussed at all, it is important to understand the ‘self-space’ that constitutes altruism. At least three questions arise from this point of view: (a) Is there a rationale for altruistic expressions and behaviors? (b) Is there an ‘emotionale’ for altruistic expressions and behaviours? (c) What drives altruistic perceptions and behaviors? The exclusivity given to altruistic acts will land us not only in an artificial epistemology but also a limited framework to precipitate the advantages of altruism. To limit altruism to psychological hedonism and sociobiology is to blindfold oneself towards the complexity of this phenomenon. It is essential to look at the psychological process whereby we are able to go from a drive for our own pleasure to a belief that we will gain this pleasure by benefiting others (Ablondi, 1996). Because, if all are naturally self-preservationists then each person’s possibility for the fulfillment of her self-interest is less. This could offer a response to Schlick who said the processes whereby the general welfare becomes a pleasant goal are complicated...[and] take place chiefly in the absence of thinking. (Schlick, 1939). Even from a utilitarian point of view, the only way to maximize the possibility for fulfillment of self-interest is by being altruistic to another.

The presentation of the above cross-sections from Indian ways of thinking focuses on altruism in the context of selflessness and self-space. The reason I wish to qualify the nature of selflessness and self-space defined in these cross-sections as spiritual altruism is essentially because of the emphasis on selflessness as a state of being. It is directly connected with transformation of consciousness, influencing compassion, empathy, and social good. The question is whether altruism and selfish behavior are better understood if we make a deliberate shift of focus from the act, as articulated in preservationist, hedonistic theories evidenced in the sociobiological literature, to formation of self-identities, group identities, and the process of self-transformation. It is hoped that the concept of ‘spiritual altruism’ introduced through this article will help fathom the deeper facets of selflessness.

Notes

1 I do not discuss altruism in the non-human world in this paper.

2 Vada involves discussion between two (open-minded) people so as to lead to a conflict resolution or an establishment of truth to the satisfaction of both parties involved. Jalpa is the discussion between the two who are convinced that each one is right and the other party is wrong. In Vitanda type of discussions neither party will have a conviction other than to prove that the other is wrong.

3 Bhagavad Gita: 2.15 Translations of verses from the Bhagavad Gita are of the author

4 Bhagavad Gita: 2.14

5 Bhagavad Gita: 2.38

6 Bhagavad Gita: 5.3

7 Bhagavad Gita: 2

8 Brahadaranyaka Upanishad: 4.5 www.philo.demon.co.uk/yajnaval.htm

9 Bhagavad Gita: 2.62-63
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