



Selfishness and Its Antidotes

One of the biggest problems with our culture is that we've gone too far in our focus on the self. A process literally hundreds of years in the making, we now celebrate individualism like no other time in history. For the most part, this is a great achievement but in the process we've lost touch with some really important principles and practices necessary to lead a truly fulfilling life.

We have a rather intractable psychological problem, a sort of default orientation to be selfish. The problem with selfishness is that while it just feels so completely rational and justifiable—if we aren't going to look after ourselves, who will?—ultimately it leaves us feeling unfulfilled. To make things worse, we have this other intractable problem—our tendency for automatic thought. Something in our minds is constantly producing thought, with or without our conscious consent, and the issue is that without serious effort the contents of this automatic thought is always selfishly oriented. But if you ever seriously study religion, spirituality, philosophy, and even now science you cannot help but see that selfishness is the ultimate problem of life. Not only is selfishness an irritating personal characteristic, it somehow damages your soul. In a sense it imprisons you in an artificially constructed subjective world which blinds you to the truth and meaning of your existence.

The Western Ancients formulated a comprehensive philosophy for life based on the idea that you could overcome selfishness by developing virtue. They came-up with an idea that they called “arete”—which meant something like “excellence in all things” or “being your absolute best” or “living to your full potential” or “virtue.” This is an idea that has absolutely captivated me over the years. I even have a tattoo of arete in Ancient Greek on my rib cage, which I only slightly regret!

Anyway, Socrates and Plato were particularly concerned with whether something like arete was actually teachable. This is a super important question because if it’s not teachable then it cannot really be a guide for the conduct of life. As always with Socrates it’s not obviously clear, but I think he settled on the thought that it was indeed teachable. Incredibly difficult for sure but possible at least!

The arete framework was centered around 4 key sub-virtues:

Wisdom	Knowing the difference between good and evil
Justice	Not doing anything that undermines the bonds of humanity
Courage	Engaging in selfless acts while remaining indifferent to circumstance
Temperance	Practicing moderation in all things

Obviously, with words and definitions like these it’s no joke to live your life with arete. Think of how hard it is just to be temperate let alone know the difference at all times between good and evil! The Ancient way demanded an enormous amount of will-power and discipline and implied a real seriousness to how one should think about the challenges of life. I think the Ancients got it right though in the sense that this demanding framework, if applied correctly, actually works.

Here’s something really fascinating: the Eastern Ancients came to the same exact conclusion—that selfishness was the ultimate problem of life—and formulated an answer which kind of looks different but ultimately is exactly the same idea as arete. They came up with a framework based upon 3 “yogas” (paths) to overcome selfishness:

1. Jnana Yoga (the path of knowledge)	Training the mind to see the truth
2. Bhakti Yoga (the path of love)	Devoting your life to love
3. Karma Yoga (the path of action)	Devoting your life to the selfless service of others

When I first came across the yoga framework it seemed like a much different answer to the problem of selfishness, one that relied more on psychology and spirituality than action, will and reason. But as I’ve studied it more and more, I’ve realized that karma yoga in particular and arete are essentially the same idea. By the way, both Jnana and Bhakti Yoga have close analogs in the Western tradition too but that’s a story for another day!

What I realized when I started studying karma yoga was that it relied on the exact same set of sub-virtues as does arete. In the Bhagavad Gita—my main source for understanding karma yoga—there is a long conversation where Krishna, an incarnation of God, tells Arjuna, a warrior hero who has fallen into despair, all the secrets of the path to the good life. And here Krishna is talking about this exact some stuff: our duty to know the difference between good and evil, our duty to pursue the good no matter what and to make sacrifices to defeat evil and injustice in the world, the importance of temperance and getting control of our unruly senses, how we must be indifferent to external circumstance and how we must act selflessly in support of all of humanity. The similarities in the messaging are almost unbelievable.

I’ve always been inclined to look for the connections between things rather than the differences. None of the doctrines based upon exclusion ever made any sense to me, that’s for sure. I guess you could say I have an intellectual predisposition for synthesis and it’s pretty clear from neuropsychology that you basically experience what you are looking for. So, I shouldn’t be surprised that I “discovered” this connection. That being said, this was a staggering find for me. It was the proof I was looking for, not only that there was a way but that this was the way. It couldn’t just be a coincidence that these two Ancient civilizations just happened to formulate the exact same solution to the challenge of life! □