

# Introduction

## Self, Selfish, Selfless

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I became interested in selfishness soon after I began studying single mothers by choice (SMCs). When I told my father that a close friend was planning to have a child on her own, using sperm she bought from a sperm bank, he replied, 'That's selfish'. How odd that of all the responses he might have had – 'Oh boy, she's got her work cut out for her!', or 'I wish her well', or 'She'll make a great parent', this is what he thought.

I came to discover that his was not an idiosyncratic view, but that 'selfish' was the most frequent criticism of women in the US and UK who choose to make families without a male partner. Why was this slur applied to women who were prepared to devote themselves to the raising of children under any circumstances, let alone without the help of a co-parent? Why 'selfish', and not some other label, 'foolish' perhaps, or 'naïve', or even 'irresponsible'?

Thus began our 'problematization' of selfishness, a 'stepping back' and presenting it 'to oneself as an object of thought . . . to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals' (Foucault 2000: 117). This initial puzzle led to a multi-year exploration among anthropologists and historians.<sup>1</sup> Together we asked: What work do these moral judgements do, and for whom? Do selfish and selfless always have a negative or positive moral charge? What does the rhetoric of selfishness and selflessness tell us about the nature of 'selfhood' at given moments in history? What role do these concepts play in social and cultural change? How does gender enter in? In addition to addressing these empirical questions, we forge a fresh, multi-disciplinary approach, something I discuss in the Conclusions.

Some of us focused on selfishness: What does it mean to be called selfish? How can one tell if one is, in fact, selfish? What are the criteria by which such judgements are made? When, where, about whom and by whom is the label applied? How do those so-labelled respond? What is the difference between

'selfishness', 'greediness', 'narcissism', 'self-absorption', 'self-indulgence', 'egoism', 'self-centredness' or simply 'individualism' and 'autonomy'? Are some cultures or eras more selfish than others?

Some of us explored 'selflessness': Is this the opposite of 'selfish'? Does it mean eradicating the self or simply doing things for others? Is altruism the same as, or an outcome of, selflessness? How does it compare with 'other-directedness', 'empathy' or 'consideration of others'? Are certain types of people more likely to be expected to be selfless? Do certain cultures or historical periods value or encourage selflessness more than others? What circumstances are needed to get people to do things for others that may not be in their own self-interest?

Some contributors address both notions; others reject the constraints of pitting selfishness against selflessness and propose alternative, more expansive lenses. Together, though, we all endeavour, as Nietzsche did in his *Genealogy of Morals*, to 'critically . . . assess the value of the values we think of as morality' (quoted in Laidlaw 2002: 316).

Though sharing the same starting point, the chapters provide an array of views and methods, focusing as they do on specific social worlds where people grapple with selflessness and selfishness and some of the moral challenges of selfhood. We have mothers deciding how long to breastfeed (Faircloth, this volume). Breastfeeding is recognized as a 'good', but how much is too much of a good thing? How and by whom is this to be determined? The volume also affords the opportunity to compare organ and sperm donation (Strathern, Mohr, this volume). Both enterprises involve large organizations, government regulations and marketing campaigns aimed at encouraging donations; both raise moral questions about the 'proper' relationship between donor and recipient, or even whether 'donor' is an appropriate label. But organ donors are considered virtuous, held up as prime examples of altruists; sperm donors are morally suspect.

Delap also addresses moral judgements specific to men. The anti-sexist British men she studied grappled with the question of whether one can be a moral self in a society where one is automatically, inevitably the recipient of unearned privilege that comes merely from having been born with male genitalia. Even if one has not consciously taken more than one's fair share, how can one justify having been the recipient of it?

Other chapters take us further afield – to the worlds of eighteenth-century British abolitionists (Barker-Benfield, this volume), and twenty-first-century Inuit and Oaxacans (Bodenhorn, this volume). These cases, fascinating in their own right, offer useful points of comparison that bring into relief elemental aspects of moral life in contemporary Britain and mainland US.

## Theoretical Approach

Each of the chapters contributes to 'the empirical study of moralities' (Howell 1997: 5). Together, the volume might be seen as in the tradition of Mauss

(1967, [1938] 1985), Douglas (1966), MacCormack and Strathern (1980) and Asad (2003), in its inquiry into cultural categories, whether they be ‘the gift’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘purity’ and ‘danger’, or ‘the secular’, all of which, it might be noted, are ethically charged. Our joint efforts provide the beginnings of a ‘social history’ (Mauss [1935] 1985: 1) of the categories ‘selfishness’ and ‘selflessness’.

Anthropologist James Laidlaw, drawing on the moral philosopher Bernard Williams ([1985] 2011), who in turn draws on philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche ([1887] 1956), makes a distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ (Laidlaw 2002: 316), suggesting that ‘morality’ is a ‘peculiar institution’ and should be understood as just one version of ‘the ethical’ (Williams [1985] 2011: 7), acknowledging that ‘there have been in the past and could be in the future systems of values other than “morality”’ (Laidlaw 2002: 316).

I find this distinction of heuristic value and would argue that the concepts ‘selfish’ and ‘selfless’ form the bedrock of ‘morality’. ‘Morality’ for these three thinkers is intimately linked to Christian traditions and, as I will show, so too is the history of selfishness and selflessness in the US and the UK (though in both countries, counter-cultural versions of selflessness are informed by Eastern religions). Explicit Christian rhetoric is much more prevalent in the US than in the UK (Chapter 1). Nonetheless, Christian premises inform notions of selfishness and selflessness on both sides of the Atlantic, even if not always acknowledged as such. Laidlaw reminds us that ‘Nietzsche was powerfully aware that the morality he railed against was not dependent on Christian belief. God is dead, and still Europeans go on reaffirming Christian morality’ (Laidlaw 2002: 318). Historian of Christian ethics Michael Banner writes: ‘the story of ethics in the West has been, at its core, the story of Christian ethics. This is not . . . a claim about the present authority of Christianity or about its hold on contemporary intellectual and moral allegiances, but rather about the part it has had in shaping the practices, attitudes, and values of everyday life’ (Banner 2009: 5; see also Roy 2019). In Mauss’s social history of the categories ‘person’ and ‘self’, he credits Christians with having made ‘a metaphysical entity of the “moral person”’ and, writing in 1938 France, maintained that ‘our own notion of the human person is still basically the Christian one’ ([1938] 1985: 1, 19).

Despite the fact that Christianity is ‘the world’s largest religion’, representing nearly a third of the world’s 6.9 billion people (Chappell 2015), anthropologists have shown something of an ‘aversion to Christianity’ (Robbins 2004: 29; see also Cannell 2005, 2006, n.d.; Fernandez 1982; Huber 1988; Layne 1999: 5–9). ‘Ethnographic accounts were under-developed, and theoretically speaking, it was assumed that it was obvious what kind of an object Christianity might be’ (Cannell n.d.). When they have studied Christianity, anthropologists have tended to do so in colonial or postcolonial settings, or focused on denominations that were, in comparison with mainline Protestant churches, considered to be on the cultic fringe (Harding 2000; Klassen 2011). If one is to understand ‘selfishness’ and ‘selflessness’, Christianity must be taken into account.

My survey of contemporary usage in Britain and America (Chapter 1) points to the importance of certain teachings of the Bible (esp. 'Love your neighbour as yourself'; 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you'; 'It is more blessed to give than receive'; the parable of the Good Samaritan; and 'Greater love has not man than to lay down his life . . .') for making moral judgements about how one ought to treat others, or as importantly and perhaps more commonly, for judging whether others are treating us as they 'ought'.

According to Laidlaw, a salient feature of 'morality' is its focus on 'self-denying values' (Laidlaw 2002: 318). 'Ascetic ideals', according to Nietzsche, is the defining characteristic of Judeo-Christian 'slave morality', in contrast to the 'noble morality' of Greek aristocrats that was based on 'triumphant self-affirmation' (Nietzsche [1887] 1956: 170). Nietzsche did not believe that 'the ascetic "moral" values' were exclusive to Christianity, but that they dominated it. Laidlaw introduces Jainism as another religious tradition that prizes self-renunciation. But the British evangelical reformers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries do exemplify such dispositions.<sup>2</sup> According to the historian Ian Bradley, both Anglican and non-conformist evangelicals were 'determined to impose on others the rigorous regime of self-denial and abstinence from pleasure to which they subjected themselves'. Their efforts, though unpopular, 'produced effects in terms of social habits and legislation', which, writing in the mid 1970s, Bradley claims continued to be 'still felt in Britain' (1976: 94).

Several of the historical and ethnographic examples presented in this volume illustrate elements of asceticism, but they also reveal other aspects of Judeo-Christian morality that cannot be reduced to this. In fact, I would say, to borrow a phrase, that Nietzsche's is a rather 'peculiar' reading of Christianity. If one begins with the three dictates – to love God, to love one's neighbour, and to treat others as you would wish others to treat you – an anthropologist might be inclined to characterize Christianity as a system more focused on giving, as a means of forging and maintaining social relationships, than on 'negative' self-denial.

The other characteristic of 'morality' singled out by Nietzsche ([1887] 1956: 194–98), Williams ([1985] 2011: 193–218) and Laidlaw (2002, 2014), also germane to our subject, is the role that 'obligations' play.<sup>3</sup> According to Nietzsche ([1887] 1956: 197), the origin of 'the moral universe of guilt, conscience and duty' was 'the sphere of contracts and legal obligations'. Moral judgement is made in terms 'of moral obligations. . . . All ethical considerations tend therefore to be phrased in moralized forms of judicial language – rules, rights, duties, commands, and blame' (Williams, parsed in Laidlaw 2002: 316).

In the twenty-first century, a focus on obligation may strike readers as anachronistic, something more readily associated with Victorian or Edwardian morality. Indeed, during the cultural revolution of 'the sixties', some American Christian theologians endeavoured to distance themselves from the confines of obligation-centred morality. For example, the Reformed theologian Smedes

explained in *Love within Limits: Realizing Selfless Love in a Selfish World* (1978: x) that ‘love is a power . . . that . . . enables us before it obligates’. Recent work in the anthropology of moralities, too, has shifted emphasis from the constraints of social norms, to focus on the opportunities for freedom.

Nonetheless, obligation and duty are still present in moral discourse today. English speakers often draw on the tropes of economic obligation in accounting for their own or others’ motivations. Nietzsche ([1887] 1956: 202) attributed the origins of ‘feelings . . . of personal obligation’ to what he maintained was ‘the oldest and most primitive relationship between human beings, that of buyer and seller, creditor and debtor’. Indeed, the metaphor of debt is commonly used today to explain motivations for giving. For example, one of the mothers studied by Faircloth (this volume) explained her choice to breastfeed long past the period of time considered normal thus: ‘I owe it to my child’. These types of moral obligation derive from ‘a role, position or relationship’ (Williams [1985] 2011: 8), and it is precisely this type of obligation that undergirds notions of selfishness and selflessness.

A moral obligation ‘applies to someone with respect to an action – it is an obligation to do something – and the action must be in the agent’s power. *Ought* implies *can*’ (Williams [1985] 2011: 194, emphasis in original). But the fact that someone ought to do something that is within her/his power to do does not mean that s/he will do so. It is precisely when someone fails to do what s/he ‘ought’ that s/he is likely to engage in ‘self-blame or remorse’ and/or be ‘blamed’ by others (Williams [1985] 2011: 197); it is in these instances that one might judge oneself or others to have behaved selfishly.

As moral subjects, we evaluate our actions and adjust our behaviour based on such evaluations routinely, automatically, countless times a day. In addition, we judge other people, their actions or inactions. They may be known to us personally, for example family members, friends, guests; or those we encounter casually in the course of our lives, such as people working in a shop, riding a bus or speeding past us in their car; or they may be people who are remote to us but that we learn of in the news or through fiction. When we encounter people whom we deem to be selfish, they are not behaving as we believe they ought; they are breaking moral obligations that derive from their ‘roles, positions or relationships’. The kinds of actions that are subject to such evaluations are often mundane, not the ‘hard cases’ of professional ethical deliberation, but ‘the ethics of everyday life – the practice of appraising ourselves and others against notions of the good, or the right, or the fitting’ (Banner 2014: 7). In fact, attention to selfishness inevitably leads us, as Fassin (2015: 201) would have us do, to engage not only in ‘the anthropology of the good’ (Robbins 2013) or ‘the anthropology of evil’ (Parkin 1985), but to include ‘trivial negative expressions’ which engender not only the Smithian ‘moral sentiments’ of ‘sympathy’ and ‘gratitude’ but also ‘resentment’.<sup>4</sup>

As Williams notes, ‘obligation works to secure reliability, a state of affairs in which people can reasonably expect others to behave in some ways and not

in others' ([1985] 2011: 208). Why, then, do we so often encounter people who do not behave as we think they ought? There are several possible explanations for this, but the one that does the best job of accounting for the empirical cases assembled in this volume is cultural change. In the next two sections, I discuss historical moments when Britain and the US have evidenced heightened concern with selfishness, and include the present, moments during which shared expectations about who owes what to whom are changing.

A structuralist theory of cultural change proves helpful. Robbins defines culture as 'a set of values and categories . . . and the relations between values and values, categories and categories, and values and categories' (2004: 6). Cultural change occurs when existing categories are stretched to encompass new referents, or when the relations between categories change, or when the values associated with cultural categories change (Robbins 2004; Sahlins 1985). In this volume, we see the categories 'humanity' and 'Christian' being expanded to include 'Africans', and new categories, such as 'freed', coming into being. We also have many cases where the values associated with the cultural categories and the relationships between the categories 'woman' and 'man', 'father' and 'mother', 'wife' and 'husband' have changed or are changing. When such change takes place, people 'are able to maintain a sense that their familiar categories are still in play. But on a very fundamental level, their culture has changed by virtue of the fact that the relations between its elements have been reorganized' (Robbins 2004: 8–9). This, I suggest, is why we feel a sense of disbelief and outrage when people do not behave as we think they should; why we so often encounter people we deem to be selfish. Many of the cases presented in the volume involve instances where norms about when, to whom and what one should give are in flux. Whenever this happens, accusations of selfishness ensue. It is not too far afield to draw a comparison with outbreaks of accusations of witchcraft, which peaked in England during the same years that the term 'selfish' entered the English language. The British historian Keith Thomas noted that 'accusations of witchcraft are normally levelled against those persons whose traits are condemned as anti-social, and a belief in witches thus becomes a sanction against undesirable social activity'. He proposes that 'the peak of the witch-scare in England . . . occurred at the end of the Civil War when the consequent political and social instability bred unusual tensions and when the normal means of social control' no longer had the power that they had previously (Thomas 1963: 9).

In Chapter 1, I use this structural approach to get some purchase on a slippery topic. Barker-Benfield and Delap show that cultural changes don't just happen to people but emerge from sustained individual and collective effort. Their chapters contribute to the 'social history of ethical reform' (Keane 2016: 5). Faircloth, Graham and Layne, and Mohr focus on women and men who are innovating, and challenging social categories and the values associated with them. Strathern and Bodenhorn offer the possibility of radical cultural change enabled by shifting perspective.

## The Introduction of ‘Selfish’ and Related Terms into the English Language

Selfishness is an entirely familiar concept, part and parcel of everyday life, but when one tries to define it, one discovers that it is impossible to pin down. A simple starting point should be the dictionary, but one encounters problems from the get-go. Dictionary.com, the largest online dictionary, defines ‘selfish’ as being ‘devoted to or caring *only* for oneself; concerned *primarily* with one’s own interests, benefits, welfare, etc.’ (emphasis added). But ‘only for oneself’ and ‘primarily for oneself’ are quite different things. Which is it? This ambiguity is reproduced in *Collins English Dictionary*, the largest online dictionary devoted to British words and definitions, which defines ‘selfish’ as ‘*chiefly* concerned with one’s own interest, advantage, etc., esp. to the *total exclusion* of the interests of others’ (emphasis added). As shown in Chapter 1, selfishness is sometimes understood in terms of a continuum with gradations of severity, ranging from ‘a little bit selfish’, ‘really selfish’, ‘excessively or pathologically selfish’ to, presumably, some hypothetical endpoint of totality. Placing an act or person on that continuum requires moral judgement. The range of synonyms – egocentric, egotistic, egotistical, egomaniacal, self-centred, self-absorbed, self-obsessed, self-seeking, self-serving, wrapped up in oneself, inconsiderate, thoughtless, unthinking, uncaring, uncharitable, mean, miserly, grasping, greedy, mercenary, acquisitive, opportunistic (Dictionary.com) – also point to its lability. To be ‘unthinking’ is different to being ‘greedy’; to be ‘uncaring’ is not at all the same thing as being ‘opportunistic’. Selfishness, one might say, covers a multitude of sins, despite the fact that ‘selfishness’ is not one of the seven deadly sins, nor is ‘selflessness’ considered one of the ‘virtues’ (Tucker 2015; see Table 0.1).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the word ‘selfness’, defined as ‘self-centredness, egoism, selfishness’, was first recorded in 1586, that is, during the Elizabethan era (1558–1603), at the height of the English Renaissance and Reformation. It was also during this period that ‘self’ is first used as a prefix in compound words, many of which relate to selfishness, for example self-flattery (1586), self-seeking (1586), self-conceited (1595),

**Table 0.1.** Vices and virtues.

Vice	Virtue
Lust	Chastity
Gluttony	Temperance
Greed	Charity
Sloth	Diligence
Wrath	Patience
Envy	Kindness
Pride	Humility

Source: After Pope Gregory’s list, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_virtues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_virtues).

self-boasting (1599). Several of these new terms are attributed to Shakespeare, who was inventing words at an unprecedented rate (Shapiro 2005: 286–87). As Henrietta Moore, following Foucault (2000), notes, ‘the ethical imagination is one of the primary sites of cultural invention’ (2011: 16). It ‘deals with the self in its relations with others, and . . . is brought into play by the advent of new . . . ideas, new ways of being and acting’ (16).

During this era, understandings of moral selfhood were manifestly changing. In the theatre, medieval Catholic morality plays had been allegorical, with the hero being ‘a symbol of humanity’ who ‘proceeds on the highway of life usually accompanied by certain abstract domestic virtues’ until ‘met by the figures of various abstract vices or sins who represent temptation’. The hero succumbs to temptation readily and predictably, without any ‘struggle of conscience or weighing of reasons’ (Craig 1950: 64), typically moving back and forth between salvation and various temptations and vices during the course of the play/life.

By contrast, Shakespeare found a ‘way to internalize contesting forces’ within a single individual (Shapiro 2005: 300). Influenced by Montaigne’s personal essays, also a historical invention of that period, Shakespeare introduced essay-like soliloquies in *Hamlet* (1599), which include the iconic question, ‘To be or not to be?’ We can see Hamlet’s ‘inner life’ as he ‘wrestle[s] with a series of ethical problems’ which speak to ‘unresolved post-Reformation social, religious and political conflicts’ (Shapiro 2005: 301). In this way, the self could be dramatically depicted as the site of recurrent moral choices, ongoing ethical struggles with unpredictable outcomes.

Self-portraiture and the glass mirror with which to regard oneself were also developed during this period. The self-portrait ‘is both externally self-contemplating, as if the artist were “someone else” and at the same time typified by self-staging, self-scrutiny and masquerade’. It can express, ‘This is how I see myself and/or “This is how I want other people to see me’ (Crenzien 2012: 6). This aspect of self-portraiture is in line with the Renaissance ‘self-fashioning’ described by Greenblatt: middle-class and aristocratic men began to feel they possessed the ability to fashion their characters, but given the duplicity required of those who participated in court life or wanted to stay alive during vicissitudes of the religious wars and unchecked monarchs, there was a keen awareness of self-presentation as a fiction. The capacity of the self for duplicity contributed to the ‘grave spiritual anxiety, an intense feeling of being in a false or sinful relationship to God’, that motivated Luther and those attracted to Protestantism (Greenblatt 1980: 13, 52).

Judging by innovations in the English language, the next period of moral tumult and new questions about how a moral self should live was the seventeenth century, especially during the religious and political upheavals of the English Civil Wars and Restoration (1642–1660). The term ‘selfish’ (also spelled selfeish and selvish) was first recorded in 1640. The word ‘selfist’ (also spelled ‘selfeist’), meaning a person who is selfish, was introduced in 1649, the same year that the English monarch, King Charles I, was beheaded by order of a Puritan-controlled parliament. Not coincidentally, that is also when the word



'selfhood' (1649), 'the quality by virtue of which one is oneself; that which constitutes one's own self or individuality', entered the language (*OED* 1971: 2717).

The word 'selfish' is attributed to 'the Presbyterians' "own new mint" (*OED* 1971: 2717). The first two recorded entries in the *OED* illustrate the entities before which selves should subordinate their own desires, or put another way, entities to which one had moral obligations – God and the Publique: 'A carnal selfeish spirit is very loathsome to what is spirituall' (1640) and 'When you are so selfish in your designs and undertakings, and so far prefer your self-ends before the Publique' (1645).

Just two years after the introduction of a term to describe a person who is selfish (1649), Hobbes published *Leviathan* ([1651] 1968), where he made the case for man's essential selfishness – his passions, appetites and desires, every man's natural 'right to every thing', and the conditions needed to regulate these desires, and to entice men to lay down this right so as to live 'in Society, not in Solitude' ([1651] 1968: 118–30, 190, 189).

From the middle of the seventeenth century, compound words joining 'self' with a qualifier that describes a person's relationship with her or himself increased, often introduced 'in theological and philosophic writings' (*OED* 1971: 2717). Many of these are opprobrious; they describe improper or immoral attitudes and behaviours: self-concerned (1644), self-ended (1645), self-liking (1651), self-applauding (1654), selffull (1654), self-interested (1656), self-admiration (1661), self-glorification (1672), self-exaltation (1677), self-pleasing (1681), self-weening (1683), self-regarding (1695), self-congratulation (1712); self-important (1775).

The 'reformation of manners' to which William Wilberforce and other late eighteenth-century evangelicals devoted themselves continued into the Victorian era, a period known for its preoccupation with behaving in a manner that was 'fit and right', as the young Victoria privately pledged to do on the day she ascended to the throne in 1837 (Bradley 1976: 94, 13). The evangelical emphasis on piety and self-denial is evidenced by the introduction of the terms self-idolater (1844), self-indulged (1846), self-aggrandizing (1856), self-partiality (1865), self-love (1875) and self-advertising (1891). During this period, as both the US and the UK underwent evangelical revivals (Bebbington 2012; Bradley 1976), there was also a steep rise in the use of the word 'selfish' in the British written word (see Figure 0.1).

The nineteenth-century evangelical revivals were populist movements associated with the democratization of Christianity, that is, based on the premise of equality before God and emphasizing a personal relationship with Christ. During Tocqueville's 1831 visit to the US, he recorded his concerns that the democratic experiment taking place in this new nation might result in unprecedented levels of selfishness. He distinguished between 'individualism', which was at the time a 'novel idea' stemming from democracy, and 'selfishness', 'a vice as old as the world which does not belong to one form of society more than to another'. He defined selfishness as 'passionate and exaggerated love



**Figure 0.1** Graph of trends in usage of ‘selfish’, 1708–2008. *Source:* Google Books Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams>.

of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself and to prefer himself above everything in the world’. ‘Individualism’, he believed, ‘disposes each member of the community to sever himself off from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends so that he . . . willingly abandons society at large to itself’ ([1840] 1990: 98).

Tocqueville thought individualism would have a corrosive effect on morals: it begins by ‘sap[ping] the virtues of public life’ but then ‘attacks and destroys all other’ virtues ([1840] 1990: 98). He concluded this chapter with the bleak view that:

Not only does democracy make each man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants from him, and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens, in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart. (Tocqueville [1840] 1990: 99)

Historian Christine Levecq (2008: 3) describes this as the liberal worldview that coexisted in ‘complex, always evolving ways’ along with republicanism on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The liberal tradition (though it was not called this at the time) ‘denotes a Lockean philosophy grounded in the individual, freedom, and natural rights; “Republicanism” . . . emphasizes civic responsibility and a devotion to common good’.

Today, as in the 1830s, cultural critics see an alarming trend towards increasing individualism and selfishness. One of the contributions of this book is to show that such concerns have a long history, and to remind us that so too does a commitment to the common good and to intermediate-scale social relations such as the family or community.

### **The Introduction of ‘Selfless’ and Related Terms into the English Language**

‘Selfless’ is defined as the opposite of ‘selfish’ – ‘having *little* or *no* concern for oneself, especially with regard to fame, position, money, etc’ (Dictionary.com, emphasis added); *Collins English Dictionary* defines selfless as ‘concerned *more*

with the needs and wishes of others than with one's own; unselfish' (emphasis added). The 'less' of selfless seems to point to a matter of degree (less, not more), rather than to the absence of a self. In usage, however, selfless is often used to describe the annihilation of a self through death or nirvana.

Many synonyms exist: unselfish, altruistic, self-sacrificing, self-denying, considerate, compassionate, kind, noble, generous, magnanimous, ungrudging, charitable, benevolent, open-handed, though notably fewer than for 'selfish' (Dictionary.com).

In contrast with the flowering of terms related to 'selfishness' during the Elizabethan period (see Table 0.2), there was nothing comparable in terms of 'selflessness'. It would not be until the Victorian era that the term 'selflessness' was introduced, even though the concept, as a goal to be striven towards, is apparent in Christian theology much earlier. For example, *The Imitation of*

**Table 0.2.** Introduction of terms into the English language.

<b>Selfish</b>	<b>Selfless</b>
selfness (1586)	
self-flattery (1586)	
self-seeking (1586)	
self-conceited (1595)	
self-boasting (1599)	
selfish (1640)	self-denial (1642)
self-concerned (1644)	
	self-annihilation (1647)
self-ended (1645)	self-nothingness (1647)
selfist (1649)	
self-liking (1651)	
self-applauding (1654)	
selffull (1654)	
self-interested (1656)	self-abasement (1656)
self-admiration (1661)	self-abnegation (1657)
self-glorification (1672)	
self-exaltation (1677)	
self-pleasing (1681)	
self-weening (1683)	
self-regarding (1695)	self-abdication (1690)
self-congratulation (1712)	
self-important (1775)	self-renunciation (1791)
self-idolater (1844)	self-sacrificing (1805)
self-indulged (1846)	selfless (1825)
self-aggrandizing (1856)	self-giving (1850)
self-partiality (1865)	
self-love (1875)	
self-advertising (1891)	

Source: Oxford English Dictionary.

*Christ* (1418–1427) (Book III, Chap. 25) counsels ‘offering oneself to the divine will and not seeking oneself in “anything either small or great, in time or in eternity” . . . The sooner one resigns wholeheartedly to God and no longer seeks anything according to one’s own will or pleasure’, the sooner one will find happiness and peace.<sup>5</sup>

One also finds an exposition on the concept of selflessness in the work of the English Protestant reformer William Tyndale (1494–1536). His book *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), published two years after his English translation of *The New Testament*, illustrates how identification with Christ problematizes any simple notion of self: ‘In Christ there is neither father nor son, neither master nor servant, neither husband nor wife, neither king nor subject; but the father is the son’s self and the son the father’s own self’ (Tyndale, quoted in Greenblatt 1980: 110).

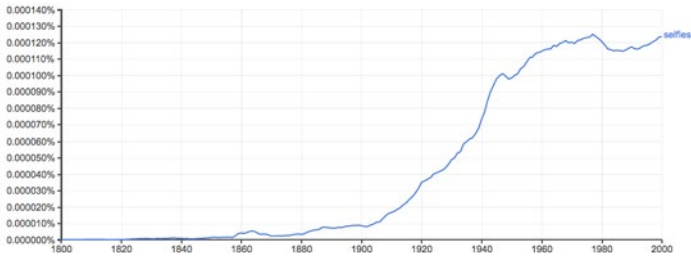
Greenblatt observes that from this perspective:

Human actions . . . must constantly be referred to an inner state that must, nonetheless, be indeed alien to the self. The man of faith is seized, destroyed, and made new by God’s Word. He gives up his resistance, his irony, his sense of his own shaping powers, and experiences instead the absolute certainty of a total commitment, a binding, irrevocable covenant. (1980: 111)

The Christian model of ‘simultaneous affirmation and effacement of personal identity’ (Greenblatt 1980: 77) continues today and complicates the popularly accepted, secular notion of ‘the modern Western sense of self’ – ‘as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes’ (Geertz 1984: 59).

As was the case with words relating to selfishness, many new words relating to selflessness were introduced during the religious conflicts of seventeenth-century England.<sup>6</sup> These include self-denial (1642), self-annihilation (1647), self-nothingness (1647), self-abasement (1656), self-abnegation (1657) and self-abdication (1690). The term ‘self-renunciation’ (1791) was introduced at the end of the eighteenth century; ‘self-sacrificing’ was introduced in 1805.

It was not until 1825, nearly two centuries later than the word ‘selfish’, that the word ‘selfless’ finally entered the English language. It did so in a clearly gendered fashion. The first recorded use is by the English poet Coleridge (1825): ‘Holy instincts of maternal love detached and in selfless purity’. The term ‘self-giving’ was introduced in 1850, and shortly thereafter ‘selfless’ appears again in the work of an English poet – Tennyson (1859): ‘They never mount as high as a woman in her selfless mood’. The third entry in the *OED* refers to exemplary men. Lord Wolseley used ‘the noble, selfless word, “duty”’ (1894) to describe three patriotic servants and military heroes: Marlborough, Nelson and Wellington. The association of selflessness with military service, particularly when the result is death, is apparent in the upsurge in usage during World War II (Figure 0.2) and is still prominent in the twenty-first century (Chapter 1).



**Figure 0.2** Graph of trends in usage of ‘selfless’, 1708–2008. *Source:* Google Books Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams>.

## The Chapters

In the opening chapter, Layne maps the place of selfishness and selflessness in the moral landscape of late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century, English-speaking residents of the US and UK, illustrating the social worlds these terms inhabit. The sheer amount of ink spilled and products sold relating to these subjects since the turn of the new century suggests that both countries are going through a period when the taken-for-granted norms about the ‘proper’ relationship between self and other are undergoing conscious re-evaluation and exploration. Layne argues that these are foundational cultural categories, as important as those of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, and that they deserve the same degree of anthropological and historical attention, especially in these morally challenging times.

Self-denial is central to the efforts of British antislavery reformers that Barker-Benfield presents in Chapter 2. Members of the British public enjoyed the fruits of slave labour, not just the wealthy bourgeoisie families or sailors and shipbuilders who were directly involved in the slave trade, or the settlers who returned from stints in the Caribbean with new wealth, but ‘common folk’ who enjoyed slave-produced goods. Abolishing the slave trade and slavery meant willingness to refrain for the sake of others.<sup>7</sup> Boycotts were staged against slave-grown sugar, rum and cotton. The word ‘abstention’ was used by British Baptist, Methodist and Quaker reformers to emphasize ‘the self-denial involved in the refusal to eat slave-grown sugar’ or wear ‘slave-grown cotton’ (Midgley 1992: 35–36, 137). In addition, there were lobbying efforts, printed pamphlets, letters to the press and to the queen, and petitions to parliament signed by thousands of British citizens, eventually including women, who were themselves struggling for greater freedom, which ultimately led to momentous changes in British law. This case, then, draws our attention not just to the moral problem of the individual will (Banner 2009: 36), but also to the public, political stage on which moral struggles take place – the problem of collective will.

The pleasure derived from doing good was one of the major arguments used by antislavery reformers to convince the British public to be good. The challenge was to convince people to be ‘willing to sacrifice . . . amusements or

... pleasures to obey the cause of humanity'. Reformist clerics preached: 'No sensual Pleasure in the world . . . is comparable to doing good' (Ramsay, quoted in Barker-Benfield, this volume).

The association of men with selfishness and women with selflessness is also a theme in Delap's historical study of anti-sexist men in Britain circa 1971 to 1991. The thirty-eight activists she interviewed tried to combat and compensate for their perceived selfishness vis-à-vis women by actively renouncing patriarchal privilege, engaging in acts of self-denial by giving up their name, their money and their labour.

These anti-sexist men, like the selfless strivers to whom we were introduced in the chapter by Barker-Benfield, grappled with the thorny, seemingly inevitable issue of motives. Like the antislavery reformers, their selfless efforts were labelled as selfish by some. In the end, most anti-sexist men adopted a strategy like those of eighteenth-century antislavery reformers, who felt the most promising route for overcoming injustice was to convince others that doing good was in their own self-interest.

A point of comparison is who is the subject of reform. Whereas antislavery reformers trained their sights on others – slave traders, owners and overseers, as well as members of parliament – profeminist men attempted to reform themselves. Delap's fascinating study highlights some of the pitfalls of self-effacement as a political strategy. The reaction of those who were on the receiving end of these men's charitable acts also differs. The sacrifices and offerings made by these anti-sexist men were 'greeted with hostility and seen as inadequate' by the revolutionary feminists they so admired. This is very unlike what the abolitionists would have encountered from the slaves on whose behalf they worked.

'Self work' is the focus of Faircloth's study of British La Leche League members, 2006–2007, who 'breastfeed to full term', typically until their children were three or four but sometimes until they were eight. Much as we see in the counter-cultural, quasi-movement studied by Delap, Faircloth's study shows 'identity' to be 'a political project in which individuals and groups engage' (Giddens, quoted in Faircloth, this volume). Both chapters illustrate 'the active process by which selfhood is constructed, as well as the inherently social nature of this enterprise' (Faircloth, this volume). Anti-sexist men and 'militant lactivists' are acutely aware of the negative judgements of others, and they asseverate the morality of their actions in this light.

When profeminist men are accused of being selfish, they respond: '*Mea culpa*'; long-term breastfeeders counter: 'I'm not selfish. You are!' It is mothers who care more about going out drinking, or having careers, or getting their bodies back, than doing what is best for their child who are the selfish ones. Turning the tables like this, with a counter-accusation, is a rhetorical move also deployed by the slave owners and the single mothers by choice described in this volume.

Breastfeeding entails self-denial, and long-term breastfeeding represents a commitment to protracted self-denial – less sleep, less sex, less freedom. It

is striking that both anti-sexist men and long-term breastfeeders sometimes describe their 'selves' as 'shattered'. But Faircloth's informants are wary of embracing the trope of self-sacrifice.

Her chapter also provides ethnographic evidence for the ongoing currency of 'obligation' in contemporary moral discourse. Faircloth quotes Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's view that 'having children is no longer primarily understood as a service, a kind of devotion of social obligation . . . [but] a way of life in which one pursues one's own interests' (this volume), but the language of obligation appears in the narratives of her informants. Alice, for example, is a 47-year-old mother who explained that she nursed her three children until the age of five because she felt she 'owed it' to them not to 'withhold the best'.<sup>8</sup>

Long-term breastfeeders can enjoy the satisfactions of self-righteousness and moral superiority, as well as the intimate, sensual, not to say sexual pleasures, and gratification of being needed and wanted that breastfeeding affords. These enjoyments make them vulnerable to accusations of selfishness. We are back, once again, to pleasure as a moral disqualifier.

Motivations, needs, desires and rights all play a role in the moral judgements of and about the single mothers by choice studied by Graham and Layne. The fact that these women 'want' to have children, 'desire' them, and that their children bring them pleasure, sets these women up for charges of selfishness. To defend themselves, SMCs point out that all 'good' parents want their children and enjoy them.

SMCs also invoke the rhetoric of biological drive marshalled by long-term breastfeeders. In some ways, biology takes the issue out of the realm of morality; instinctual drives are different to individual choices. A person cannot be faulted for being human. Furthermore, for some, God is immanent in nature; for others, goodness is. Either way, the trope of nature casts the wish to have children as morally sound, with or without a man.

Sources of pleasure are also ranked morally. The pre-parent pleasures of single career women – travel, holidays, dining out, luxury purchases, the ability to sleep in – are deemed selfish in comparison with the pleasures of child-raising.

Single mothers by choice provide one of the clearest cases of the ongoing importance of the trope of moral obligation. SMCs are much more likely to be deemed selfish than are gay parents or heterosexuals who become single mothers through bereavement or even divorce. Graham and Layne suggest that this is because of heterosexual men's sense of entitlement to heterosexual women. Such women, they believe, are duty-bound, morally obliged, to offer themselves to men for impregnation and parenting. To withhold themselves is selfish.<sup>9</sup>

The final three chapters of the volume offer alternatives to the recurrent rhetorical tug of war over whether certain actors or acts are selfish or selfless. The first of these is by anthropologist Sebastian Mohr on Danish sperm donors, who are looked at askance because of the polluting effects of both masturbation and

money. This holds even though the reason Christianity condemns masturbation is because it is nonprocreative, and procreation is the *raison d'être* of sperm donation. Rather than spilling one's seed upon the ground, one must take care to collect it in a sterile cup. Money has been an issue since the beginning, but whereas Onan<sup>10</sup> (Genesis 38:8–10) stood to gain financially by withholding his procreative powers, these men profit by sharing/selling theirs. The apparently morally problematic nature of paid masturbation leads sperm banks to mobilize the rhetoric of 'the gift of life' to make it more attractive to both 'donors' and 'recipient/patients'.

Ironically, given the association of masturbation with illicit pleasure, self-denial looms large in the experience of sperm donors. To maximize semen samples, that is, to maximize efficiency/profits for the company, men are required to abstain from ejaculation for forty-eight hours before each donation. Mohr's interlocutors found this curtailed their freedom to engage in any other sexual activity, whether it be to masturbate simply for pleasure, or to enjoy sex with another. Mohr's ethnographic account shows how much is missed by the either/or of the selfish/selfless lens. What is missed is 'selfhood' or, more particularly, how these individuals go about being men, itself a moral matter. This case, along with those of Barker-Benfield and Delap, provides intriguing comparative material for thinking about morality and manhood.

Strathern, too, chafes at the limitations of thinking that opposes self-interest to other-interest, selfishness to selflessness. Whereas Mohr frees himself from these constraints by way of ethnography, Strathern's contribution is theoretical. She brings the notion of 'the commons' to bear on the case of organ donation as a means to side-step the persistent logic of supply and demand in which scarcity is always assumed. What if instead of conceptualizing organs as the property of the individual, even after death, one thought of them as belonging to the commons: individuals would have usufruct rights to them while alive, and at death they returned to the community, as a national resource? With this question in mind, Strathern draws attention to a particular strand of existing public policy, using the example of the Welsh system, in which everyone is automatically assumed to be an organ donor unless they make the effort to explicitly opt out. A consequence of such a system is that motivations and pleasures, which loomed so large in the other chapters of this volume, are removed from the equation. If organs automatically return to the realm of natural resources, 'motivations . . . are irrelevant'. Strathern confounds the antithesis between selfish and selfless in another way too, by noting that in the realms of kinship and friendship, 'thinking of others and thinking of oneself run together'. Where the relations between relatives or friends 'are perceived as being intrinsic to the person' (Carsten, quoted in Strathern, this volume), the antithesis between other-interest and self-interest is untenable.

Bodenhorn, too, shifts the discussion away from a selfish/selfless antithesis. She does not simply substitute 'civic' or 'generous' for 'selfless', but shows how an 'either/or' model does not reflect lived reality. To open up our thinking,



she draws on extended ethnographic field research among two communities that have communal ownership and shared management of key resources, and concludes with brief reflections on volunteerism in upstate New York. She proposes that we should not reject ‘rational choice theory’, but that we expand it by entertaining the idea of an ‘expanded self’. Among the indigenous foresters of Ixtlán and the whale-hunting Inuit of Barrow, ‘to be “selfish” does not suggest an excess of self, but rather implies an incomplete one’. Nor is Bodenhorn suggesting that these ‘exotic’, communally oriented societies are conceptually opposed to the self-oriented US or UK. In small-town, upstate New York, as in the Alaskan Arctic, two places that prize individual autonomy, people have a ‘capacity for realizing a strong sense of self, not only through autonomous action, but through collective action as well. Selves can be both ‘expansive’ and ‘concentrated’.

The expanded selves that Bodenhorn presents from Alaska and Mexico include not just other people, but other species. In both communities, ‘the universe of social membership and social responsibility is explicitly understood to extend beyond the realm of the human’. Taking nature into account not only reflects Bodenhorn’s ethnography, but is a strategic effort to counter ‘the relentless pressure to naturalize the selfish individual as the main driver of social life’.

With Strathern and Bodenhorn, the volume ends with some concrete suggestions, not to say prescriptions. Their cases help ‘keep not just the idea, but the existence, of . . . alternatives [to brutal competition or heroic altruism] in view’. Doing so does not simply improve our scholarly understanding of selfishness and its various counterparts, but may have effects in our wider worlds. They also show how national policies and group activities can help foster a sense of “us”, not “I” (Bodenhorn, this volume).<sup>11</sup>

Strathern’s case demonstrates the power of ‘enabling infrastructures’, using the example of a policy that makes helping each other the default position. Another example might be the derelict telephone booth on the main road through the village where I live that has been repurposed as an informal lending library. Not only do the many people who deposit and borrow books relish this amenity, but this type of sharing does more. I often find myself wondering as I read a book from the booth, how many other villagers have also enjoyed it, or when I see someone selecting a book, whether it is one I have left for them there.

Bodenhorn reflects her Ixtleco interlocutors when she suggests that we can ‘learn the value of expanded selves’ through practice. Two of the examples she was given from Ixtlán are joining one of the bands or dance groups that perform at fiestas, weddings and funerals, both of which require practising as an ensemble. Dancing and making music together are a far cry from the morality of self-denial. Enjoy.

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## Notes

1. These questions prompted two interdisciplinary workshops held at Cambridge. Three of the original nine participants are included in the volume, as are an additional three from the second workshop. One contributor was subsequently recruited.
2. One example being the son of a member of the Clapham Sect who ‘once smoked a cigar and found it so delicious that he never smoked again’ (Bradley 1976: 28).
3. See Sykes (2009) on the importance given to obligation by Durkheim and Mauss in terms of a state’s obligation to its citizenry.
4. This is similar to the approach Collier (1989, 1997) has taken in her focus on disagreements.
5. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Imitation\\_of\\_Christ](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Imitation_of_Christ) (accessed 13 November 2019).
6. Strenski (2002) shows how the issue of sacrifice became a matter of heightened religious and political concern during the same period (early seventeenth century), in response to Protestant attacks on the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist. Self-immolation was the goal, modelled on Christ’s sacrifice (2002: 18).
7. See also Keane (2016: 185–87).
8. Another mother uses the metaphor of investment to make a utilitarian argument: ‘People don’t see that investing now will save time later’. Bryan Caplan (2011) provides another example of this logic in his book, *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*, in which he encourages people to enjoy the economies of scale by having many children.
9. Compare with the accounts of the decision not to have children of the sixteen writers presented in *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed* (Daum 2015).
10. Onan would inherit twice as much if his elder brother’s widow remained childless. Onan, the source of Christian dogma against masturbation, was, we are told in Genesis, ‘evil in the sight of the Lord’ because he ‘spilled his seed upon the ground’ (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onan>, accessed 13 November 2019). The fact that he did so via coitus interruptus, rather than masturbation, did not stop this story from being used as a rationale for condemning masturbation, the use of birth control and homosexuality as sins.
11. Tallbear’s and Benjamin’s pieces in the volume *Make Kin Not Populations* (2018) also provide helpful perspectives. See also Mattingly’s focus on first-person virtue ethics, which foregrounds ‘an “I” not as an autonomous actor but in relationship to a prior intersubjective “we”, that is ‘an “I” connected to significant others’ (2014: 204–5).

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