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**Author(s):** Lehtonen, Tommi

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# Selflessness in wage work: A possibility or an oxymoron?

Tommi Lehtonen  
School of Management  
University of Vaasa

*Even though a mismatch between selflessness and the logic of wage work exists, selflessness can play an important role also in wage work. In order to give grounds for this judgment, a clear understanding of concepts like altruism and desirelessness is needed. This paper expounds upon these concepts by means of philosophical literature, the discussion on the prisoner's dilemma and the Bhagavadgīta, a classical Hindu text. On one hand, the basic rules of working life, such as a result orientation and the protection of one's own livelihood, often work against selflessness. On the other hand, maximising the common good and benefit of organisation speaks in favour of selflessness, which is argued for by the prisoner's dilemma and the ideal of desirelessness in the Bhagavadgīta. This paper concludes that selflessness is a situational virtue whose primary task in wage work is to advance the common good.*

**Keywords:** altruism, desireless action, goal-orientation, selflessness, wage work

## 1 Introduction

Selflessness is often, but not invariably, considered good and praiseworthy. Critics say that being selfless is useless or even harmful. Whatever the truth about this issue, wage work is not the first thing that comes to mind as a context where selflessness is greatly appreciated; volunteer work is a much more plausible context for considering selflessness as a virtue. Consequently, a mismatch between selflessness and the logic of wage work exists.

This paper will add to our understanding of selflessness with results that are based, first, on a conceptual analysis of the result orientation in business and work life and, second, from an analysis of desirelessness in the *Bhagavadgītā*, a classical Hindu text. This discussion gives a fresh perspective to selflessness and contributes to a new understanding of selflessness in an ever-more important economic and working life context. I will show that, contrary to sceptical intuitions, there is still room for selflessness in work and business life when selflessness is understood in light of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s notion of desireless action. Practical implications and outcomes follow from this understanding in terms of our self-concepts as individuals and employees.

## 2 Two strands of selflessness

Two strands of selflessness prevail in the philosophical literature: ethical and metaphysical. Ethical discussions on selflessness revolve around the concept of altruism or selfless concern for the well-being of others, especially as a guiding principle of action and in

opposition to egoism. The metaphysical strand of the discussion on selflessness concerns human nature and the ontology of the human person. The ethical strand and the metaphysical strand are intermingled in many ways.

Altruism is a classical topic that belongs to the context of broader topics such as moral virtues, empathy and compassion (Bennett 1996; Goldie 2002). More recently and strongly, altruism has been discussed in the context of the scope and benefits of humanitarian action, help and charity (Singer 2009; Ricard 2018). Through the concepts of humanitarian action and social responsibility, the recent philosophical discussion on selflessness also has an important political and economic dimension in addition to applications, for example, in international relations and international business. Such applications include impact investment and development financing (Lehtonen 2016). The metaphysics of selflessness, for its part, is strongly indebted to classical Indian philosophy, particularly the Hindu concept of desireless action and the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and no-self (Chakrabarti 2012; Siderits 2015).

### **3 Selflessness and neighbouring concepts**

Philanthropists, by definition, love humankind and yearn to help other human beings. They are, therefore, assumed to be altruistic and to shun egoism, also called greed. Although altruism goes beyond mere charity and donating one's time or money, conflicting attitudes about philanthropy express the more-general ambivalence towards altruism and selflessness.

The words 'altruism' and 'selflessness' are often used interchangeably. However, for the sake of conceptual clarification and exposition, the difference between altruism and selflessness can be formulated as follows: Altruism is about active actions by means of which an effort is made to help those in need, whereas selflessness is more like a passive restraint or predisposition not for advancing one's own interests.

Even though philanthropy is generally considered to be praiseworthy, the intrinsic goodness of philanthropy has been questioned for several reasons, such as the belief that it promotes the dependence individuals and organisations on external help and, thereby, prevents those in need from gaining economic and functional autonomy (Faber & McCarthy 2005). Surprisingly or not, philanthropy has even been claimed to fall into the same vice as greed: an egoistic self-assertion. Some people think that philanthropy is greed in disguise: greed to love, greed to care, greed to do good and greed to help others, all of which ultimately boost the greedy person's self-image and social status as a morally superior individual (Simler & Hanson 2018: 22).

This is, of course, not the whole story. If one is an altruist and places the needs of others first, one's personal costs can still vary substantially. Thus, altruism comes with different

degrees. The most costly or extreme forms of altruism (such as the type of altruism exhibited by Mother Teresa) represent supererogation that is praiseworthy but not necessarily morally required or obligatory. This is especially so in contexts such as working life, where employees' roles are highly predetermined and unvarying.

Altruism is not usually requested, let alone required, in working life. If someone acts very altruistically in the workplace and puts his or her personal needs aside for the sake of others, the reaction of other persons can vary greatly. Some may consider altruism (or relinquishing one's benefit for the good of another) at work great and admirable, but others may think that altruism breaks some basic rules of work life, such as "take care of your own assignments, but do not interfere in others' business unless asked or required" and "work for your own salary and let others do the same for themselves". According to these rules, which are strongly self-centred and focus on personal gains, employees are expected to perform their assigned tasks but not necessarily more than that, at least, not without extra compensation.

What is interesting to note is that altruism or unselfish regard for the welfare of others may be a virtue, but it is not mentioned in the classical list of the four cardinal virtues – prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice – which are discussed in the fourth book of Plato's (2004: 110–122) *Republic*. In light of the cardinal virtues, one may think that altruists risk falling into imprudence and being unjust to themselves. However, according to Aristotle (1999: 84), the latter risk is nonexistent because it is impossible to be unjust to oneself. Aristotle explains this as follows: Injustice as wilful disobedience of the law cannot be conceived of as injustice to oneself because, being injustice, it must be voluntary, but being voluntary, it cannot be a harm to oneself because human beings do not willingly harm themselves (Winthrop 1978: 1211).

Even if doubt remains that altruism may be imprudent, it is still often considered beneficial in two possibly conflicting ways: Altruism promotes the common good and the good of other people but can also be personally satisfying. A well-known formulation of the conflict between personal satisfaction and common good is the prisoner's dilemma which is a fictional story and thought experiment that shows why two completely rational individuals might not cooperate, even if it appears that it is in the best interests of both to do so (Poundstone 1992; Peterson 2009). The dilemma precisely formulates the tension between the common good and individual good and between the good of each individual and that of his or her fellow individuals. The prisoner's dilemma can thus shed light on the conflict between altruism and selfishness – an issue to which this paper returns later.

As seen, altruism is not without problems. However, egoism is generally – with the exception of Ayn Rand (1964) and similar-minded people – so despised and altruism so well-esteemed that, despite its problems, who would not like to be selfless, or at least give

the impression of being so (Hampton 1993: 135; Irwin 2017: 69)? Moreover, new research has found – not so surprisingly – that being kind and giving to others can make our lives more meaningful (Aknin, Dunn, Whillans, Grant & Norton 2013; Baumeister Vohs, Aaker & Garbinsky 2013; Martela & Ryan 2016). Furthermore, in management literature, scholars such as Joel Podolny, Rakesh Khurana and Marya Hill-Popper (2005) have contended that the main task of a leader is not to enhance the economic performance of a company but to add to employees' sense of the meaning of the work they do in the company. Based on recent studies, what is common to both paid and volunteer work is thus the aspiration to make a meaningful contribution to something larger than oneself.

The idea that helping others is part of a meaningful life has been around for thousands of years. For example, Aristotle (1999: 145–146, 148–149) thought that finding happiness and fulfilment is achieved by loving rather than in being loved. Thus, he recommended engaging in active love of others rather than seeking love for oneself. The advisability of unselfishness is also confirmed by non-Western traditions, as can be seen in the following Buddhist anecdote:

A man asked the Buddha: "I want happiness." The Buddha said: "First remove 'I' that is ego. Then remove 'Want' that is desire. See now you are left with only 'Happiness'".

The anecdote, not found in the classical Buddhist texts, states that if one is selfless and does not desire anything, at least not for himself or herself, then one is happy. Despite its seeming simplicity, this advice is complex and ambiguous. First, it can be pointed out that the anecdote does not explicitly refer to altruism, but instead focuses on human self-concept and the need to revise or even abandon it: "First remove 'I'". Thus, the anecdote assumes, contrary to Nietzsche's view, that the *I* or the ego is not inescapable. Nietzsche (1996: 71), for his part, doubted the possibility of absolute selflessness and maintained the following viewpoint:

No man has ever done anything that was done wholly for others and with no personal motivation whatever; how, indeed should a man be *able* to do something that had no reference to himself, that is to say lacked all inner compulsion (which could have its basis in personal need)? How could the ego act without the ego?

Nietzsche thus considered the ego as foundational for human beings. Second, the Buddhist anecdote seems to disagree with Aristotle's view of love, as well. According to Aristotle (2004: 66), love is wishing for someone to have things that he or she deems good, for the sake of that person and not oneself, as well as the accomplishment of these things to the best of one's ability. Understandably, Aristotle did not endorse the view that love is devoid of desire and wanting. Instead, he emphasized that love involves wishing another well for the other's own sake. This does not need to be in conflict with the Buddhist view, however, if the Buddhist advice to not want anything is interpreted to refer to selfish and self-regarding desires only, not to efforts and intentions as such. Moreover,

this interpretation has been particularly influential in the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism. The Mahāyāna emphasises the role of the bodhisattvas (“beings aspiring to enlightenment”), who are thought to do good not only for their own spiritual advance towards perfection (*nirvāṇa*) but also to relieve the suffering of others (Schumann 1973: 178). The vow of bodhisattvas obliges them never to refuse to help other people (Gombrich 1971: 204; Schumann 1973: 127, 130, 174). Yet, carrying out this obligation is not merely a question of obedience. The bodhisattvas are thought to be full of loving kindness (*mettā*) or a kind of philanthropy that is capable of abolishing the bad karma of those in need. Vasubandhu’s (1988: 691) *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, the most important text of Indian Buddhist philosophy and psychology (from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE), praises the role of the bodhisattvas eloquently:

The Bodhisattva: this great-souled one, who yet possesses the most sublime perfections, acts through pure compassion; he acts without egoism, like a dog, in the presence of all creatures; he bears, on the part of all creatures, outrages and bad treatment; he assumes all fatiguing and painful tasks.

Moreover, the Buddhist anecdote involves both a moral and a metaphysical teaching. The moral teaching states that one should be unselfish and not self-centred, while the metaphysical teaching is related to the Buddhist view of human nature. According to Buddhism, there is no permanent “I” or “self”. This view of the nonexistence of the soul is called *anātman* (“not-self”). As one might expect, the Buddhist moral teaching and metaphysical teaching go hand in hand. The correct view of human nature, namely that humans lack a permanent self, is believed to guide people to overcome selfish desires (Chakrabarti 2012; Siderits 2015): Being self-seeking is meaningless if there is no such thing as the self. In this way, Buddhism draws a sharp distinction between appearances and reality, which plays into the claim that humans suffer because they perceive things with deep ignorance, or because people do not see things as they truly are (Siderits 2007: 26). The necessary remedy to this malady is to abandon the wrong self-concept and root of selfishness, namely the idea of a permanent self. However, even if one can accept the impermanence of self as a metaphysical idea, everyday self-awareness (or “phenomenological self”), personal commitments (e.g. related to work duties and family responsibilities) and instinct for self-preservation prevents the average person from being free from self-centred thoughts and behaviours. It seems, therefore, that self-centredness is not only an issue of cognitive self-concept but is also based on various moral practices (such as thanking and blaming), self-conscious emotions (such as guilt, pride, shame and hubris) and assumptions about the moral autonomy and ethical responsibility of each individual.

#### **4 Selflessness in working life**

Selflessness can be an especially problematic feature in working life and other contexts and activities in which a goal orientation with measurable results is required from each individual or employee. Many if not most people find it natural to think that the general

duty of employees, as well as their supervisors, is to strive for good results and the success of the organisation they represent. This is the “rule of intentional action in business and wage work”. Therefore, one may be willing to suggest that selflessness should be understood in an organisational context as focussing on the benefit of one’s organisation rather than on self-interest. Eventually, the result orientation in wage work is expected to benefit the employees themselves as well: They can keep their jobs and possibly receive a wage increase or bonus. For example, an employee may desire to gain respect and a reputation as an agreeable and diligent worker and, thereby, earn a good livelihood for his or her family. Obviously, these desires do not need to conflict with the interests of the employer, but the interests of the employer and the employees can be met through the “liberalist maxim of invisible hand”: Work for yourself, and by doing so, contribute to your company and society, as well. A rival “communist maxim” urges one to work primarily for the community (company/organisation) and, in the process, help oneself as well. Depending on the case, the average person appears to follow both maxims by turn: Sometimes one focusses on one’s personal gain and sometimes on the success of one’s organisation or society.

In a highly results-oriented working life, a possible disadvantage for individuals – while possibly an advantage from the employer’s perspective – is the psychological pressure caused by the competition and struggle for success among employees. The competition can be both between individuals and between organisations, and it can be oriented according to both the “liberalist maxim” and the “communist maxim”, as stated above. Thus, one can compete for self-interest or for the success of one’s organisation.

When work (or business) life is interpreted in terms of a game, one can identify the following features. The constitutive rules of the working (or business) life game include that employees should work for the benefit of the organisation they represent while also working for their own benefit. Thus, work-related duties are basically collective and, therefore, a suitable maxim for working life runs like this: “Either we all flourish together or no one will”. Obviously, this maxim shakes hands with the “communist maxim”. However, the benefit of an organisation and the personal benefit of an employee are intertwined in a number of ways. In many jobs, the performance of the organisation is directly dependent on the personal performance of individual workers. In such jobs, it is important for the work to be personally rewarding (often in terms of economic satisfaction as measured in money but also in terms of meaningfulness or psychological satisfaction), and therefore, different incentive and reward schemes are used to motivate staff to “go the extra mile” and, thereby, benefit the company or organisation as a whole.

Bengt Holmström has developed an incentive theory specifically for stock corporations since the 1970s. Incentive studies usually assume that individuals attempt to maximise their own benefit. Therefore, it is important to consider how different organisations can urge their managers and employees to act in desired ways. Holmström has explored the

“moral hazard” that is created when the advantages for the employer and employee do not align. A manager or an employee may want the maximum salary with a minimum of effort, while the employer expects maximum value for his or her investment. However, the employer often has very limited means for overseeing employees’ activities. For example, it is difficult to assess how much a managing director has influenced the company’s share price by his or her accomplishments and omissions. Furthermore, while recent international assessments on the role of managing directors in company performance have expressed much variance, they are sometimes embarrassingly low (Bolland & Lopes 2018: 5). Holmström’s theory (1979) explains how in situations like this, agreeing upon incentives is profitable: Managing directors should be rewarded based on their company’s share price in proportion to the share price of other companies. This and many other incentive schemes are insensitive to unselfishness, which is like an anomaly or something that is irrelevant: Unselfishness does not align with the logic of reward and incentive schemes in general.

Based on the aforementioned cases, we can conclude that there is no room for unselfishness in the constitutive rules of reward-scheme-based working-life games. In this way, the rules of working life institutionally prevent, or discourage, the selflessness of employees. Of course, one can be unselfish in the sense that one is conscientious and hard-working rather than lazy and self-indulgent. In that case, it is assumed that being hard-working refers to a goal-orientation for one’s organisation, not for oneself (cf. the “communist maxim”). One can also be unselfish in the sense that one can suggest a promotion or pay increase for another employee instead of for oneself, but such behaviour must be exceptional and not the norm. If all employees were selfless and declined a promotion or pay raise for the benefit of another employee, it would be intolerable from the employer’s point of view. The whole incentive and reward system of organisation would suffer from inflation (Elster 1989: 53–54). Instead, celebrating, or at least not envying, others’ success should be encouraged in the work places (even if it is easier said than done). In fact, the ability to celebrate the success of others can be considered a specific form of selflessness.

Furthermore, one can demonstrate selflessness in the workplace by occasionally or regularly taking on “housekeeping” tasks like making coffee or emptying the dishwasher. An employee can also show selflessness by helping someone else (succeed), acting as a voluntary substitute (e.g. for an ill employee) or undertaking an unpleasant additional task. Even if such considerate and selfless persons can make others’ lives easier, an equal division of tasks among staff members may be better for making a workplace flourish. Some special groups at a workplace, such as newcomers and those in the lowest positions (e.g. interns, trainees and unskilled labour), may be required to undertake tasks that others (more qualified or experienced employees) do not want to do or cannot perform. This division of labour may be a common and established tradition, but a good workplace, and a wise boss, is also sensitive with regard to sharing or assisting in not-so-pleasant tasks.



Wrong and unfounded assumptions, be they established or incipient, regarding the division of labour and specialisation on certain tasks can embitter employees and poison the workplace atmosphere. Therefore, selflessness (or self-sacrifice, for that matter) cannot be automatically and constantly encouraged at a workplace, let alone required. Nevertheless, it can be good and praiseworthy occasionally and on a case-by-case basis. One may feel inclined to say that selflessness is a “situational virtue” in wage work and requires an “ethical sense of situation”. Thus, selflessness should be an option for an individual and not a social obligation. Moreover, some individuals may even need supervision and special protection against their tendency to be overwhelmingly selfless and helpful, as such highly altruistic persons may eventually become exhausted or fall ill.

Table 1 summarises the above discussion and distinguishes the benefits of selflessness in working life in terms of the selfless individual. These benefits partially overlap but are conceptually discernible.

**Table 1.** Benefits of selflessness in working life

1.	A pro-social attitude and the ability to take other people into consideration
2.	The ability to cooperate with colleagues and customers
3.	The ability to rejoice in others' success
4.	Goal orientation for one's organisation, not primarily for oneself

What is typical for the characteristics mentioned in the table above is that they do not necessitate selflessness as a constant characteristic of an employee, but rather encourage occasional and “situationally smart” altruism.

## **5 Desireless action**

Various problems (such as psychological pressure caused by competition, the necessity of success and the fear of failure's consequences) that are included in results-oriented and self-centred action – especially typical for working life – pave the way for a different approach that can be called desireless action. In classical Hindu teaching, desireless action (or *niṣkāmakarma*) refers to actions performed with no expectation of rewards or results. This concept helps orient us in what is important in an activity in regard to its content rather than in regard to competition or an attempt to win. Thus, the concept of desireless action directs our attention to other motives for action apart from personal benefit or reward. To attempt to understand what those other motives may be, the concept of *niṣkāmakarma* may be of assistance.

Although the term does not appear in the *Bhagavadgītā* itself (Fowler 2012: xliii–iv), *niṣkāmakarma* is arguably the central teaching of the text (Chakraborty 1996; 1998). The *Bhagavadgītā* calls that idea “inaction in action and action in inaction” (4.18). In the second chapter, the deity Kṛṣṇa proclaims that humans have rights only to actions and not to

their results, whether good or bad (2.47–48); therefore, they should not desire any results. Of the utmost importance in such thinking is that humans are not doomed to idleness or inactivity but instead should act according to the requirements of morality and decency. At the same time, they are not entitled to the results of their actions and, as such, should not be selfishly concerned about them. Although it is admirable to perform good deeds and participate in well-intentioned activities, the outcomes of those actions should not be associated with their actors. Instead, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, the positive outcomes of actions should be understood to represent the common good (*lokasaṅgraha*: ‘the holding-together of the world’, ‘the welfare of the world’) (3.19–20), which should be accessible to every member of society. Thus, humans have the right to use the outcomes of their actions for good, but they do not own those outcomes. This interpretation conveys a certain idea of humbleness and serenity: Humans should not take the outcomes of their actions as rights or something to which they are entitled but should rather accept positive outcomes as (undeserved) gifts and not complain about negative outcomes.

Situations in which one takes action without considering its outcome(s) include the following:

1. One does not wait for anything related to acting but simply acts (e.g. out of duty or gratitude);
2. One is in a state of flow or so deeply immersed in an activity that he or she performs an action without thinking about its results or consequences; and
3. One acts like an automaton and does not know or understand what he or she is doing.

The first two – not waiting for anything before acting and acting in a state of flow – are more-plausible interpretations of Kṛṣṇa’s advice, as the deity does not make any reference to acting unconsciously.

Based on the aforesaid, Kṛṣṇa’s advice that people should not desire any results from their actions should be interpreted either as an obligation to act out of duty and unselfishly or as the wisdom to concentrate on performing an action rather than on its outcome; a suitable motto for such an outlook might be “True love is giving, not receiving”. At the same time, both interpretations are compatible and not exclusive; people can both act altruistically and concentrate on performing actions.

## **6 The prisoner’s dilemma**

Formulated in 1950 by Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher and later formalised by Albert Tucker (Poundstone 1992; Peterson 2009), the prisoner’s dilemma is a fictional story of a decision-making situation in which individuals seeking their own benefit each end up with a worse outcome than what they could have achieved by cooperating. Used to demonstrate decision-making in the face of risk and uncertainty, the dilemma has inspired numerous discussions and various analyses among game and decision theorists.

In the story, John and Mary, accomplices to a crime, have been apprehended and threatened with imprisonment for their wrongdoing. Because neither is able to communicate with the other, they can remain silent or they can expose each other. If both remain silent, then each will receive a one-year prison sentence. However, if one of them confesses, then he or she will go free while the accomplice is incarcerated for three years. If both confess, then each will receive a two-year sentence. Furthermore, both John and Mary are aware of the consequences of all three options (cf. Peterson 2009).

The true dilemma of the situation is that, whatever one chooses, the other had better confess, even though the common good, at least for John and Mary, would be for both to remain silent. Written as two Nash equilibria, the dilemma implies that neither prisoner has anything to gain by changing his or her strategy alone. The situation can be conceived as shown in Table 2, in which the left-hand number indicates the prison sentence, in years, that John will receive, whereas the right-hand number indicates the sentence, also in years, that Mary will receive. If both confess, then the sentence for each will be two years. However, if both remain silent, then each will receive a sentence of only a year.

**Table 2.** The strategies and outcomes available to John and Mary

	Mary confesses	Mary remains silent
John confesses	2, 2	0, 3
John remains silent	3, 0	1, 1

If John remains silent, then Mary will be sentenced to a year in prison if she also remains silent. However, if Mary exposes John, then she will be set free. In another scenario, if John exposes Mary, then Mary, if she remains silent, will be sentenced to three years; if she confesses, she will be sentenced to only two. Thus, the prisoner who acts in the interest of his or her best outcome would expose the other and, thereby, ensure a shorter sentence for himself or herself, instead of remaining silent and inevitably receiving a sentence. Although John and Mary could each act rationally by seeking his or her own best outcome, as a twosome, they face a worse outcome by acting rationally than they would by cooperating (Myerson 1991; Peterson 2009).

The collectively suboptimal outcome depends on either the absence of an enforceable agreement or intrinsic trust between the prisoners and a lack of information about each other's intentions. Rationality and self-interest would force each prisoner to betray the other and, thus, choose an outcome worse for both of them than the outcome afforded were they to cooperate and, thereby, minimise their total number of years in prison. The dilemma showcases that what is optimal for each risk-averse individual need not coincide with what is collectively optimal (Peterson 2009). The prisoner's dilemma also presents and illuminates the two basic strategies of decision-making: focussing on self-interest

versus pursuing the common good. Moreover, it suggests that those strategies do not necessarily go hand in hand, which is exactly what Kṛṣṇa indirectly points out in the *Bhagavadgītā* when the deity warns against acting for personal gain (2.47, 6.1).

In the prisoner's dilemma, a prisoner who wants to follow the principle of desireless action would theoretically follow one of two decision-making strategies: be indifferent and leave the decision to chance (e.g. by arbitrarily drawing lots) or either pursue the common good or the other prisoner's benefit (e.g. by remaining silent) instead of seeking to benefit himself or herself (e.g. by exposing the other person). Not only is the second strategy ethically more appropriate, but it also follows Kṛṣṇa's advice in the *Bhagavadgītā*, at least assuming that individuals who want to act without desire (i.e. followers of niṣkāmakarma) can be goal-oriented, pursue unselfish goals and remain both indifferent and uncommitted to personal benefit. Readers such as Christina Chuang (2015) have espoused that interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's advice and dubbed it "benevolent action". By contrast, Christopher Framarin (2009) has effectively problematised prioritising unselfish desires. He has observed that contemporary readers almost unanimously contend that, since all action is motivated by desire, desireless action is an oxymoron; consequently, such action is performed without selfish desire, meaning that unselfish desire is permissible. Framarin has also pointed out, however, that arguments for that view are unconvincing since the doctrine of desireless action should be taken literally: as advice not to act without any desire at all (Chakrabarti 1983). Following such a doctrine would require people to act as automatons without wanting or waiting for anything before acting, which, from a psychological standpoint, is a highly unintuitive, implausible perspective.

In the context of the prisoner's dilemma, the desirelessness of an action has to be addressed in relation to the following options:

1. Acting out of self-interest (i.e. in opposition to the common good) and, thereby, either maximising one's personal benefit or minimising harm to oneself; or
2. Acting collaboratively (i.e. generously towards others) or altruistically (i.e. benevolently and with concern for the wellbeing of others) and, thereby, maximising either the collective benefit or the benefit of others.

Confessing and remaining silent are the concrete actions by which those options can be realised in the prisoner's dilemma. An indicator of indifference, by contrast, would be that none of the given options is considered to be eligible and that neither is sought.

According to the "indifference" interpretation of niṣkāmakarma, action without desire means that one's personal benefit, the collective benefit and the benefit of others are not goals. However, if a choice has to be made, then an indifferent means or a method free of desire is to either draw lots or leave the decision to chance. Evidently, neither the *Bhagavadgītā* nor the principle of niṣkāmakarma recommends making decisions regarding hu-

man action by resorting to chance. Thus, the *Bhagavadgītā* does not recommend the freedom of indifference or arbitrary randomness but rather exhorts people to act according to duty (*Bhagavadgītā* 3.19; 18.9).

The question remains, however, whether another way for an action to be desireless is possible. In response, with reference to the principle of *niṣkāmakarma*, people should act collaboratively and altruistically (i.e. with concern for the well-being of others) instead of acting out of self-interest. Such an answer means that, even if people should not aim to receive the fruits of their actions for themselves, they should aim for the common good and for positive consequences for others. Advice from Chapter 3 of the *Bhagavadgītā* reiterates that answer clearly: “Let thy aim be the good of all, and then carry on thy task in life” (3.20).

## **7 Conclusion**

This paper has examined the concepts of selflessness and altruism and, finally, has arrived at discussing the *Bhagavadgītā*'s doctrine of *niṣkāmakarma*, or altruistic action, performed with no expectation of reward. This issue (i.e. interpretations of Kṛṣṇa's advice on desirelessness) has also been considered in light of the prisoner's dilemma. The paper has concluded that the idea that people have rights only to actions and not to their results should be interpreted either as the obligation to act unselfishly and out of duty or as the wisdom to concentrate on acting and not its outcomes. The prisoner's dilemma reveals that, of those two interpretations, the interpretation prioritising duty or the common good is more advantageous than the alternative because it maximises the collective benefit.

When these considerations are extended and applied to working life, one can say that selflessness is possible to the extent that it is about dutiful and benevolent action that seeks to maximise the common good and collective benefit. It would be problematic in wage work, as well as in other goal-oriented activities, to concentrate solely on doing and not at all on outcomes. Therefore, there is reason to propose an alternative solution according to which one should concentrate on doing also in working life – even enjoy and be absorbed in that doing – but still keep in mind that the relevance condition for this doing is its outcomes. Thus, the point of work is to get something done in a productive and successful way. However, to achieve an optimal result in a job, the doer should wholeheartedly focus on doing and not engage too much in anticipating results. To the extent that results are anticipated, the focus should be on advancing the common good.

Thus, the primary task of selflessness in wage work is to advance the common good. Moreover, selflessness is a situational virtue, meaning that it cannot be automatically and constantly encouraged in the workplace, let alone required. This paper has considered

selflessness primarily, but not exclusively, from the point of view of individual employees. To what extent and in what ways organisations and other collectives (e.g. trade unions, civic action groups and governments) can be selfless is worthy of further discussion.

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