

The Fallacy of Worshipping Selflessness

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4 Pages (Including Bibliography but not Title Page)

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What constitutes “selfless service” in 2014? In a society dominated by technology, connectivity, and constant judgments, is it possible—or even advisable—to act without an awareness of the implications upon oneself? No one doubts the courage or honor of Admiral Daniel Callaghan’s actions in November of 1942, but we must keep in mind both the discrepancies between his era and modern society as well as the labels we hastily place upon soldiers’ sacrifices. Traditional moral standards rest on shaky ground in our evolving world. With the complete media coverage and drone warfare of today, even war itself has drastically changed. We cannot simply assume that antiquated and untested standards of virtue hold true against our modern reality. The swindling thought of any action occurring away from the public eye only solidifies the impossibility of conscientiously extolling selfless service as a virtue.

By labeling an act “selfless” we call attention towards it, which fundamentally contradicts the word’s denotation, rendering our label obsolete. The Army interprets selfless service as “doing [one’s] duty loyally without thought of recognition or gain” (*Living the Army Values*). However, while the Army praises those who work with no intent to reap personal benefits, it bestows accolades such as the Spirit of Hope Award. This award “recognizes individuals or organizations who have ‘selflessly contributed an extraordinary amount of time, talent, or resources to significantly enhance the quality of life of service members around the world’” (Garamone). Before the dawn of luxuries such as cable television and the internet, these awards and ceremonies would likely never reach the greater public. They occurred out of the limelight, providing no incentive for selfless service bar the fulfillment of one’s own moral code.

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Yet nowadays our media outlets are littered with dedications and tributes to those who allegedly work without thought of recognition, thereby undermining the integrity of any such honor. With so many possible ulterior motives, I must be skeptical of the notion that true selfless service even exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And in my mind, virtue leaves no room for grey areas.

While I am critical of both the claim and actuality of selfless service, I do not want my message morphed into a condemnation of all service, especially of that to a greater cause or organization. Service itself is intrinsically good. I do not dispute that; instead, I see the further classification of service as “selfless” both false and irreconcilably oblivious. Too many possible motives exist for me to applaud the unlikeliest of deontological utopias, one that characterizes humans as more machine than animal in our evaluation of self-interests. As Ayn Rand writes in *Atlas Shrugged*, “By the grace of reality and the nature of life, man— every man— is an end in himself [and] exists for his own sake.” Those critical of my beliefs may point towards laying down one’s life, often considered the ultimate sacrifice, as an inherently selfless service for the common good. How can the literal forfeiture of one’s self be anything but selfless? Quite to the contrary, I see dying for something greater than oneself as the strongest case against “selfless” service. Along with the further contradictions the glorification of “death in the line of duty” espouses for those who dub it “selfless,” sacrificing one’s life has, historically, been the surest way to accrue self-fame and ensure immortalization. Who can forget King Leonidas and the 300 Spartans? Hollywood sure hasn’t. Catholicism has immortalized hundreds of saints for their martyrdom. Even in the movie *Forrest Gump*, Lieutenant Dan Taylor sees dying in battle as his destiny and believes that his death is the only way to uphold his family’s honor. Selfish interests

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do not nullify service; they are natural catalysts. Furthermore, even the claim of selflessness in regards to service emerges from the hope of greater recognition, thus eliminating the humility of virtue.

Not only do I refute the existence of selfless service, but I believe claiming it arises from the hypocritical hope of social distinction. To be “selfless” in a society where every event can be transferred to a wider audience through video, journalism, or social media is impossible. Those who label others “selfless” contradict the word’s meaning. Those who label themselves so only seek greater attention than others who act out of natural, selfish instincts. This attempted subjugation of others who work diligently in their line of service comes nowhere near virtue, but borders on vice. With modern society enveloping us, any possibility of truly selfless service, which neither seeks nor occurs with the chance of self-glorification, has all but disappeared.

## Works Cited

- 1) Garamone, Jim. "Hope Award Recognizes Selfless Service to Servicemembers." *Armed Forces Press Service*. United States Department of Defense, 19 Nov. 2007. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.
- 2) "Living the Army Values." *GoArmy.com*. United States Army. Web. 23 Mar 2014.
- 3) Rand, Ayn. *Atlas Shrugged*. 50th Anniversary. Signet, 1996. Print.