

The Theory of 'Selfism' – Man as a Hero

Dr. Rajshri Jobanputra

Dr. Rajshri Jobanputra is presently on the faculty of Philosophy in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee, Uttaranchal; one of India's premier technological institutes. Dr. Jobanputra is also the Institute's students' Counselor, where she actively practices Philosophical counseling. She has completed her doctorate in Philosophy from IIT-Bombay, India and subsequently gained counseling training at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A), Gujarat, India.

Abstract: Based on my experience as a philosophical counselor for the last two years, in this paper I attempt to describe the perception of life a young mind carries with him when faced with the challenges of life and the typical approaches adopted by him in order to endure them. Subsequent to this I attempt to build the theory of 'selfism' explicating the humanistic essence that each individual is not just responsible for the realization of his aspiration but also possesses the power within him to achieve it. This power within an individual is identified by the survival kit he owns consisting of a rational approach to crisis situation, a central purpose vis-à-vis which all daily actions are aligned to and a strong sense of self-worth. Email Address: jrajifhs@iitr.ernet.in

Introduction

The song 'Hero'¹ by the American singer-songwriter Mariah Carrey is my all time favorite because it reinforces the fundamental humanistic perspective that no matter what the adversaries of life, we can always rise up to the challenges as all of us are "heroes" and all that we need to do is look inside ourselves and see our own inner strength. A look at the lyrics of the song will aptly clarify the point I am trying to make:

*There's a hero if you look inside your heart
You don't have to be afraid Of what you are
There's an answer If you reach into your soul
and the sorrow that you know will melt away*

¹ Lyrics by **Mariah Carrey**, Album: Music Box, 1993. Carrey released this song in the fourth quarter of 1993 and it peaked at number 1 in the US and went on to be nominated for the 1995 Grammy Awards for the Best Female Pop Vocal Performance, but lost.

*And then a hero comes along, with the strength to carry on
and you cast your fears aside and you know you can survive
So when you feel like hope is gone look inside you and be strong
And you'll finally see the truth That a hero lies in you*

*It's a long road, When you face the world alone, NO one reaches out a hand
For you to hold, You can find love If you search within yourself
And the emptiness you felt Will disappear*

*and then a hero comes along, with the strength to carry on....
you'll finally see the truth that a hero lies in you*

*Lord knows Dreams are hard to follow But don't let anyone
Tear them away Hold on There will be tomorrow in time
You'll find the way*

*And then a hero comes along, with the strength to carry on....
You'll finally see the truth that a hero lies in you*

This paper explicates the essence of Carry's above lyrics through development of the philosophical theory of *selfism*. However, before I begin to develop this theory, let me briefly describe how I arrived at the core concept.

The context:

In my drive to pursue the practical side of our very own philosophical enterprise, very early in my research years I chanced upon many websites that talked about this new concept of **philosophical counseling**. Of what I comprehended, it meant using philosophical techniques and insights in the field of counseling. Philosophical counseling makes departure from mainstream psychological counseling in the sense that while the latter operates on the premise that the mind is ill or sick and therefore needs to be treated; the former holds that individuals are basically conceptually confused about certain issues which need to be clarified.

Ever since I encountered this concept, I have gradually been absorbed into the field of counseling, but of course as a philosopher. With increased knowledge about how

to engage in Socratic dialogue² and practical mentoring sessions with trained psychological counselors, I gradually increased the reservoir of my counseling skills. With my professional and academic training I eventually established my role as a student counselor at my present workplace along with being a faculty of philosophy. This paper is a result of the cumulative experience I have had being a philosophical counselor for about two years now. Hence, the content of the paper is purely experiential in nature. In presenting my views I have refrained from using the pedagogical methods of narratives or descriptions of the various issues I have encountered during my counseling sessions and how I dealt with them. Rather, I focus on describing the perception of life a young mind carries with him³ when faced with the challenges of life and the typical approaches adopted by him in order to endure them. Subsequent to this I attempt to gradually build the theory of ‘selfism’ explicating the essence of Carrey’s lyrics “*that the hero lies in you*”.

The Humanistic basis of the theory of ‘Selfism’:

Humanism is a philosophy emphasizing human welfare and dignity. In its most fundamental sense humanism affirms the inherent worth of every individual. It asserts

² Socratic dialogue is one of the most widely used philosophical method in philosophical counseling. In its most general sense Socratic Dialogue is a pedagogical method that pursues clarity over any issue through analytical discussion. However, technically speaking Socratic Dialogue refers to the question and answer method used by Socrates often in conjunction with pretended ignorance, wherein a self professed expert’s over confident claim to knowledge is challenged. The beauty of this method lies in how smoothly it takes you from something so plain and simple to something so insightful and only at the cost of some seemingly simple yet apparently brilliant questions. Through these critical and reflective questioning process the inherent fallacies or the weaknesses of the individual’s views automatically surfaces. The emphasis is usually not on the solution as much as in having clarity of the issue at hand and pursuing this endeavor with rigor and vigor.

³ This is a gender neutral usage, and will be so used in the essay to refer to the entire human race and not just the male fraternity.

not only that individuals are responsible for the realization of their aspiration and that they have within them the power to achieve them, but also that the meaning of life can be understood by simply relying upon one's own reasoning capacity. As such, the philosophy of humanism upholds an attitude that individuals can make rational choices which eventually shapes their life and character.

The kind of humanism which I wish to advocate is the theory of 'selfism'. This theory does not subscribe to the view of man who is helpless and hopeless; one who will flee from his difficult circumstances. Man is viewed not as someone who is feeble or foolish. Rather, he is an individual with unquestionable capacity to reinvent himself in times of crisis because his spirit is resilient. Thus, at the basis of this humanistic theory lies the metaphysical assumption that life is precious, a sacred treasure that needs to be preserved.

But often when unpleasant incidents occur in the life of an individual he understands that preserving this treasure is not an easy task. In times of crises, life is viewed as being unfair, cruel and worthless and everything around seems to be just working against one's own wishes. The dejected individual begins to see life as a game in which he is only losing and every single failure only intensifying the misery felt within. Amidst this temporary but supposedly prolonged period of despair, an individual is continuously striving to strike a balance between his negative and positive disposition or thought processes about the way things appear to him. However, when pain exceeds the resources to cope with it, the individual gets involved in this loop of self-pity, self-doubt and self-accusation. Eventually, only negative thoughts about one's self emerge in a manner that life feels like a burden and an obligation from which there is no escape. In

times such as this an individual loses hope and often contemplates to end his life based on the assumption that death is a sure cure to all his problems.

Given every person's temperament, three different coping mechanisms are adopted to resolve individual personal crises. Firstly there are those who make a conscious effort to use their rational and emotional resource to strive towards turning a calamity into an advantage, then there are those who accept their fate and simply go along the course of life without affecting it, and finally there are those who feel so hopeless and helpless that they give up on life. If we were to personify individuals belonging to each of these categories, then the first category of individuals would be like the phoenix or a warrior, individuals belonging to the second category would be the defeatist and those belonging to the third category would be the escapist. Thus, individuals belonging to the first category aim to rise above their difficulties, the defeatist only aims at coping with his problems one way or the other, but for the escapist suicide is the panacea.

For those belonging to the second category, I have witnessed, just like many of you would have, in order to move forward in life in times of crisis the individuals rely on different things that enable them to cope with their pain, rejection or failures. Often, however, these individuals put their faith in or rely on the wrong object which offers only a temporary respite. Let me illustrate in some detail what it means to say that sometimes individuals invest their faith in the wrong object for coping with life's challenges.

Faith in the wrong object:

An increasing number of people resort to the use of drugs and alcohol to cope with their issues. Individuals low on coping with personal challenges seek comfort in the use of

cigarettes or substances like alcohol and other intoxicating drugs like cocaine, LSD, Crystal meth, etc. By intoxicating themselves with these substances individuals try to seek refuge in a make-belief reality which they falsely believe to be free of their pain or problems. Many statistical surveys reveal that an excessive use of these substances has not only resulted in damaging the person's mental stability and social status, but in some cases it has resulted in suicidal attempts as well.

A surprising percentage of individuals put their faith in the world of occult. Individuals facing tremendous misfortune try to gain their emotional and mental stability by going to astrologers, fortune tellers, palmists, psychic readers or tarot card readers. They somehow arrive at the idea that if they come to have any knowledge about their future good fortune then this 'good news' will salvage their dying spirit. Under the influence of the seers, troubled individuals unhesitatingly splurge on buying and wearing precious gems to ward-off the evil in their life or begin to rigorously practice religious activities like fasting on particular days or praying to particular deities etc.

Still others indulge in self- atonement / retribution with the aim to please god in order to resolve their miseries. A simple example of this could be promising to give up smoking or eating beef or some such thing. The assumption here being that the miseries experienced are a result of some earlier bad deeds. Thus, the belief on which individuals operate in this case is that if they obeyed a list of do's and don'ts and thereby paid their penance, the almighty would eventually forgive them for their sins. In this case an individual tries to cope with his trouble by offering compliance to someone over and above him and gaining his grace.

Finally there are those who indulge in a psychological game of self-pity. They keep musing and lamenting over their actions by constantly reminding themselves about their past mistakes. They get into this habit of worrying about what went wrong in the past and about why they did not take the right decision, etc. Rather than learning from their past and being more proactive and positively disposed in future, by excessively concentrating on their past mistakes individuals further trap themselves in a maze “I wish I had done this, I wish that had not happened”, etc.

Effectively, if an individual is inclined towards one of the approaches mentioned above to cope with his personal crisis, there barely seems to be much scope of improvement in the situation he is experiencing. For, in any of the cases mentioned above the problem either resurfaces after the effect of the drug has worn out, or it is simply entrusted to some precious gem or supreme power, or else it is reformulated and further intensified by draping it in a psychological garb. What would a long term solution be that will effectively resolve an individual’s personal crisis?

Having the right kind of faith: Theory of *Selfism*

The right kind of faith or reliance that one should have in time of crisis is that on one’s own self. This confidence in one’s own self or the ability to be self-assured can be witnessed in the kind of response one delivers to a given crisis situation. So a typical response to a situation like losing a prestigious job would be “I guess such things happen in life. Let me call my consultant and ask him if there are any vacancies available for me” or it could be “well, good now I can look out for some new kind of a job” or it could be “I needed this break for a long time. Let me go on this trekking trip I always wanted to go to, later on I’ll worry about finding a new job”. As such, the self-assured individual

harbors no self-doubt and feels completely in charge of his situation; testing times are rather opportunities in disguise for him. The individual so composed of positive disposition, perpetually seeks mental and emotional growth – all directed towards what Abraham Maslow calls self-actualization.⁴ Such individual, as Maslow rightly points out, embrace the facts and realities of the world rather than denying or avoiding them.

It may be argued here that not every individual is so disposed to rely on himself in times of crisis, a claim that can be easily validated by citing numerous cases of suicide. Suicide cases strongly counter our basic tenet of selfism that man is intrinsically valiant and fearless. The tenability of the theory of selfism thus lies in its ability to explain why suicide cases surface if man is fundamentally not a feeble creature.

In order to answer the above question the theory of selfism is further qualified by way of introducing the concept of ‘survival kit’⁵. However, a brief backdrop that would substantiate our qualification would be of value here. It would be safe to assume that we humans are the only specie who can act consciously in two opposing directions; we can either take ourselves on the road of self-destruction or self-improvement. An individual is always in possession of two choices - choose to face the adversaries of life or succumb to it; reconstruct his life or destroy it. I contend that though the individual is free to act in either of the ways, i.e., act towards self-improvement or self-destruction these choices are entirely guided by his survival kit. Let me now outline what this concept of survival kit

⁴ Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) uses this term to capture the view that it is the instinctual or intrinsic need of humans to make the most of their unique abilities. It refers to man's desire for fulfillment; the tendency for him to become actually what he is potentially - to become everything that one is capable of becoming.

⁵ This is Rand's concept which I borrow along with other key concepts related to it from her most celebrated work on *Objectivism* and try build on it to strengthen my own views of selfism.

is and what it means to say that an individual's response of choosing flight over fight or vice versa for a given crisis is guided by his survival kit.

A survival kit is a set of belongings or supplies on which an individual's survival is dependent. This is akin to say, carrying certain essential things with me when I am going for a mountaineering trip. What I select as important or unimportant to carry with me on my trip in turn depends upon my ability to foresee certain inevitable circumstances. Having a foresight in itself is a result of a way of thinking and analyzing a possible experience, the datum for which could be gathered from my very own past experience, a narration of such a trip from some other individual, etc. At the second level it is also a result of having knowledge of what my purpose is – it could be simply to have fun, or if I am a geologist my concern could be more professional and so I will equip myself accordingly. At the final level my main concern is my self-preservation – whatever is my purpose the main focus of the entire trip would be to safeguard my own life in all circumstances – for without it there is no enjoyment or no professional gain. All acts of precaution are particularly undertaken to help me survive and enjoy an outing, which if ignored may hinder my enthusiasm for the entire journey. Our life, however, is not a one-day journey and hence our survival kit needs to be appropriately stocked. Let me hasten to add here that there is absolutely no doubt that it is but impossible to conceive of all the contingencies of life that one's survival kit could take care of. Nevertheless, from many of my counseling sessions I comprehended that individuals who have had the basic supplies of rationality, purpose and self-worth in good measure,

emerged as archetypal of the theory of selfism, as against those who were low⁶ on these supplies.

1) ***Being Rational:*** Reason is a source of knowledge and guide to action and as such it seems most appropriate to apply reason to every aspect of our life and concerns. According to Rand being rational implies continuous and systematic involvement in the process of “integrating every event and every observation into a conceptual context; of grasping relationships, differences, similarities in one’s perceptual material and of abstracting them into new concepts of drawing inferences, of making deductions, of reaching conclusions, of asking new questions and discovering new answers and expanding one’s knowledge into an ever growing sum”.⁷ Thus, the aim of using reason is to seek to understand anything that one does or what happens to him and then connecting the new to what is already known and thus discovering new knowledge. The point here is that an individual always needs to be AWARE or CONSCIOUS in the sense not only knowing that “X’s action hurts me” but also knowing “what about X’s action caused me the hurt”. The aim is to increase one’s knowledge and expand the power of one’s consciousness to the extent one can.

Being irrational would then imply the refusal to know, see and think about things happening to you or around you. In simple words it means suspending consciousness. It is a state of mental stagnation wherein the individual experiences no meaning in any work or plan, or lacks purpose and focus in any activity he takes up or is assigned. Therefore, individuals who are at the brink of mental stagnation find it preferable to follow orders rather than being in charge of a situation. Such individuals are labeled as

⁶ By low I mean individuals who barely had these basic supplies in place.

⁷ Rand, A., (1964), p. 20.

irrational simply because underneath their mental practices lie the attitude of evasion or blanking out some fact of reality which they dislike. Unlike a rational person, an irrational individual mentally stagnates simply because his method to deal with reality and facts is piecemeal i.e., he randomly receives and comprehends only bits and pieces of content from the things happening to him or around him and leaves it at that. Hence, there seems to be very little scope for a systematic integration of any content that he is in custody of.

In a crisis situation then, an irrational individual fails to comprehend the situation because the basic premise on which his mental faculty functions is unreliable – he has suspended his consciousness – he refuses to be curious, to think, to question, to be aware. He has shunned his mind. An individual's choice of action based on such a frame of mind resulting from a piecemeal perception about the things around him, would be defective in ways that could lead to adverse consequences like committing suicide. Let me give an example to illustrate this point. A person, for instance, say a lawyer by profession, has worked very hard to get into his profession but for some reason he is unable to get clients and thinks as a result that he chose the wrong profession. His thinking then continues in the direction of listing all previous situations in which he made wrong choices and eventually concludes that he has failed in 'all' spheres of his life.⁸ While the basic premise of the thought process may be somewhat acceptable, the conclusion arrived at is highly unwarranted as it is invalidly inferred. The point being made here is simply that the rationality part of the survival kit will help the individual to

⁸ See Cohen (2003), p. 35. He calls this kind of reasoning the fallacy of 'hasty generalization' wherein we jump to conclusions about 'all' from only a few cases that we have witnessed. He identifies many such reasoning patterns in his book, indicating how faulty reasoning such as this can often put us to risk in living a happy life.

see the appropriate track on which one should proceed while thinking about one's situation. If one's reasoning is tangential, as seen in the example mentioned above, it is likely to psychologically hamper the individual's capacity to take appropriate decisions in future. Hence, reasoning appropriately is a vital ingredient not only for one's personal growth but also for one's survival as it enables us to stay away from self-pity, self-doubt and self-accusation and thus helps us to view things objectively and clearly. Individuals who value their life and do not want to wallow in self-pity or faulty thinking actively seek counseling.

2) *Having a Purpose:* Another important supply of life is to have a goal, a future or a purpose. However, while it is just not essential for man to have an objective in his life, it is also equally essential for him to fulfill it. Purposeful life means conscious goal directedness in every aspect of one's existence where choices apply. This means that an individual is not merely aware about the objects he is seeking but is also aware of the means by which he would gain them. A person whose life is goal oriented is one who does not resent the effort which purpose imposes. He enjoys the fact that the objects he desires are not given to him but must be achieved. As such, having a purpose for him is neither labor nor a obligation; it is a process of pursuing that which is of value to him. The man without a purpose is a cipher, one who evades his responsibility towards living a wholesome and meaningful life by abandoning his power to make choices. Purpose is not just the essence of human life rather it is a means to preserve it.

While I did encounter some individuals who failed to have clarity over the ultimate purpose of their life, they did have certain short term goals, so to say, which they relentlessly believed in pursuing. Then there were those as well who had multiple goals

and their need was not clarity over how to prioritize them but how to align each of these to a central purpose which they seemed to be actively seeking. Finally there have been those as well who simply had an assortment of goals but had no clue why they could not be achieved. Cross examination with these individuals revealed that their goals could not be rationally pursued as these goals were random pursuits to which they had tactlessly allocated their time and other resources. It thus follows that it is not just sufficient to have a purpose driven life but also that the individual establishes a hierarchy among his goals, a scale of relative importance, by reference to which long-range actions can be initiated and daily choices guided. This kind of hierarchy is possible only if a man defines a central purpose – which is the ruling standard of man’s daily actions. Where such purpose is not identified or is missing, the individual fails to perceive the worthiness of living.

3) Possessing Self-worth: In its most basic sense the term means how much an individual values himself and how important he thinks he is. It is about how he sees himself and how he feels about his achievements. It is a positive evaluation of the self wherein the individual feels proud of who he is and what he does. An individual so self-assured experiences no shame or timidity, rather he acknowledges the mistakes he made and believes in drawing positive lessons from it. As such, individual low on self-worth are those who don't think very highly of themselves or seem to criticize themselves too much. As a consequence, individuals with low self-esteem do not usually feel good about themselves and continuously seek to affirm the insignificance of their life to themselves and to others.

The important question here is how does one get or develop one's self-esteem? In many of my sessions, after a detailed cross examination I realized that there was a distorted sense of self-esteem that individuals carried. By this I mean that for many individuals who were low on self-worth, getting approval or acceptance from their role models or some such significant individual in their life validated their existence. Worthiness of the self was derived by offering obedience to others to the extent that they were willing to sacrifice their own cherished dreams in order to fulfill those of others. In order to gain a sense of self-worth these individuals thus relegated to a secondary position any thinking that concerned their own welfare or wish fulfillment. As such, very often the altruist who for some reason failed to live up to the expectations of those significant others in his life felt immensely guilty and ashamed of his act and eventually labeled himself as worthless and insignificant. Thus we see that an individual low on self-worth overestimates the worthiness of others in comparison to himself simply because he has come to believe somehow that the merits of the other people outshines his own in all possible respect.

Yet another form of measuring one's self-worth against improper standards is evaluating one's worth in terms of material possessions or professional achievements or certain other socially revered intangibles like family status. Again, since the self-esteem is measured against improper standards, when these intangible or tangible possessions are lost the individual feels disheartened and forlorn. In times such as this the options for the irrational mind is clear – choosing flight over fight.

In this sense it appears that Maslow is right in claiming that humans have a need for a stable, firmly based, high level of self-respect, and respect from others. When these needs

are satisfied, the person feels self-confident and valuable as a person in the world. However, when these needs are not met individuals feel inferior, weak, helpless and worthless. Though I find myself lacking in strong statistical data, from the numerous counseling sessions that I have carried out, it would not be an unwarranted claim for me to make that one of the major reasons underlying the cause of depression is the individual's low self worth.

The survival kit thus also needs to have a sufficient supply of this third basic ingredient of self-worth that preserves life and promotes self-growth. When the individual is in possession of this vital element of self-esteem, the individual is strongly anchored in the belief that he has the capacity to achieve whatever he considers worthwhile and the sense of being worthy to benefit from the results produced by those efforts. In the words of Rand, having self-worth is a unison of two conclusions "I can achieve the best and I deserve the best I can achieve – I am able to live and I am worthy of living".⁹ Thus, following from our basic understanding of what self-esteem is, we find individuals who greatly value themselves carry no self-doubt about their ability to face any adverse situation in life, while at the same time a person low on self-worth inevitably carries with him the perception that he is incapacitated to deal with any difficulty life has to offer.

Conclusion:

Individuals who take life's adversaries in their stride are the ones in possession of a survival kit consisting of a rational approach to crisis situation, a central purpose vis-à-vis which all daily actions are aligned to and a strong sense of self-worth. Individuals with

⁹ Peikoff, L., (1993), p. 306.

such a complete survival kit make a straight entry into the first category of warriors who never chose flight over fight, and thus rightfully deserve to be called a 'hero'.

While I have witnessed only a few individuals with the kind of the survival kit I am talking about, in the majority of the cases of counseling, the young minds needed to be 'directed' towards identifying the resources within them to cope with personal challenges. I certainly do understand that that not all individuals are endowed with the courage to rely on their own 'self' in times of crisis, the ones who do not see this power in themselves can be trained to think in ways that are compatible with their well being. With the facilitator's constant guidance it is possible for individuals to edify their mental and emotional resource. In accomplishing this process of edification counseling in general and philosophical counseling in particular is a very helpful tool which empowers a despairing soul to see how he is mistakenly clinging on to a claim that his 'self' is incompetent to cope with challenges of life.

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