

Being Selfish

by Dr Sue Knight

Topic objectives

This topic invites students to think for themselves about what it is to be selfish, and what, if anything, makes it wrong to be selfish.

More particularly, in this topic we aim to support students to think for themselves about

- The idea that being selfish involves ignoring the interests of others and acting only (or predominantly) in our own self-interest.
- Whether acting out of self-interest can sometimes result in good to others.
- Whether it is sometimes in our self-interest to take the interests of others into account. (For example, you want your friend to keep helping you with your maths homework. So it's in your self-interest to help her with her big HSIE [Human society and its environment] project when she asks you to.)
- What motivates us in our relationships with others: self-interest, others' interests, or a combination of the two?
- What, if anything, is wrong with acting predominantly in our own self-interest and paying attention to the interests of others only in so far as doing so is in our own self-interest?

Background to the topic for teachers

Almost without exception, we believe that it is wrong to be selfish. We are quick to voice this belief and to teach it to children. Following Lawrence Hinman¹, we can take John Galt, the hero of Ayn Rand's novel, 'Atlas Shrugged', as an exemplar of a thoroughly selfish person - one who believes he should always act only on the basis of self-interest. In one passage Galt says:

'Do you ask if it is ever proper to help another man? No - if he claims it as his right or as a moral duty that you owe him. Yes - if such is your own desire based on your own selfish pleasure....'² Galt appears to be making a general claim here - not just that it okay (or right) for *him* to be selfish, but that acting selfishly is 'proper' for everyone.

Hinman goes on to say that, 'in John Galt, Ayn Rand presents a portrait of a man who lives his entire life for himself alone. He asks nothing of other people and feels no obligation to help anyone else. Her hero..... [sees] every man.. [as] an island, responsible for himself and no one else...'³.

John Galt is a fictional character; his creator, Ayn Rand is not. As is well known, Rand herself held a view close to that of Galt, and attracted a significant following.

Some (but not all) philosophers take Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century philosopher, to have held a similar view. His biographer, John Aubrey, says that at one stage, when Hobbes was seen giving money to a beggar and asked why he was doing so, he replied that he was trying to relieve his own pain at seeing the beggar in such need.⁴

In this topic we raise a number of questions about selfishness:

- How easy is it to tell whether we are acting out of self-interest or out of concern for the interests of others?
- If acting predominately only out of self-interest is wrong, what, exactly, makes it wrong?

In doing so, we aim to encourage students to reflect on their moral motives and to consider the ways in which moral motives may coincide with self-interest.

Notes:

- ¹ Lawrence M. Hinman 'Ethics: A pluralistic approach to moral theory, 5th edition. Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage learning, 2013
 - ² Ayn Rand 'Atlas Shrugged', Random House, New York 1957 pp. 984, 993
 - ³ Hinman, op.cit.
 - ⁴ As cited in Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez, 'Unmasking the Motives of the Good Samaritan', www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/iie/v2n1/samaritan.html (Accessed Jan 3rd, 2016)
- See also A.P. Martinich, Hobbes, NY: Routledge 2005, p. 59

Topic Structure and Resources

Aim of lesson	Resources
<p>Lesson 1: Introduction to the topic</p> <p>This introductory discussion is designed to get students thinking about what it is to be selfish, and about why it might be that some people are selfish.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whiteboard and marker or printout of: 'The ... Giant' and 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' sign (optional)
<p>Lesson 2: Why we do things for others (part 1)</p> <p>Students are invited to consider what, if anything, is wrong with acting predominantly in our own self-interest and paying attention to the interests of others only insofar as doing so is in our own self-interest?</p> <p>By way of comparison, the second scenario considers in a relationship where the characters appear to genuinely care for each other.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image 1- crow • Image 2 – magpie • Image 3 – banyan tree • Scenario cards- Sarah and Milena
<p>Lesson 3: Why we do things for others (part 2)</p> <p>Students are encouraged to consider what the motivations are in another relationship, self-interest, others' interests, or a combination of the two?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image 4- Beehive • Masking tape • Numbers 1-10 • Two sheets of A4 paper (one white and one coloured) cut into pieces.

References

Lesson 1	A retelling of the children's story 'The Selfish Giant', written by Oscar Wilde
Lesson 2	<p>Image 1 – Magpie http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cracticus_tibicen_hypoleuca_male_domain.jpg</p> <p>Image 2 – Crow http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Corvus-brachyrhynchos-001.jpg</p> <p>Image 3 – Banyan tree http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Big_Banyan_Tree_at_Bangalore.jpg</p> <p>The first two paragraphs of the story are based loosely on the Indian fable <i>The Selfish Crows</i></p> <p>Information for teachers: In the Sarah and Milena story the abbreviation HSIE (pronounced 'hissy' is used. This stands for Human Society and its Environment. Students will know what this means when you read it in the story.</p>
Lesson 3:	<p>A retelling of Aesop's fable 'The farmer and the apple tree' (also known as the peasant and the apple tree)</p> <p>Image 4 – beehive http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Natural_Beehive.jpg</p>

Lesson 1: Introduction to the topic

For this lesson you will need

- Whiteboard and marker or printout of: 'The ... Giant' and 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' (optional)

The.....Giant

20 minutes

Don't tell the students the name of the topic.

We are going to start this topic with a story. The fable is called 'The.....Giant'. *Write that title on the board, if possible, or hold-up the printout.* At the end of the story, you will need to think of a word to fill in the gap- and I want you to explain why you chose that word. If you already know this story, I want you to keep quiet and let someone else have a turn. Everyone will need to listen very carefully because I'll be asking questions about the story as we go.

TheGiant

 Every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's garden.

-  Do you think this is a true story or a make-believe story? Why? What reason do you have for thinking this?
-  What is the difference between a true story and a make-believe story?

So, every afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's garden.

It was a large, lovely garden with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers that looked like stars, and there were twelve peach trees that, in the spring-time, broke out into beautiful pink blossoms, and in the autumn grew wonderful fruit. The birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them.

"How happy we are here!" they cried to each other.

-  What do you think the Giant might be like? Friendly? Fierce? What makes you think that?

One day the Giant came back. He had been to visit his friend, the ogre, and had stayed with him for seven years. After the seven years were over, he had said all that he had to say and he decided to return to his own castle.

When he arrived he saw the children playing in the garden.

"What are you doing here?" he cried in a very gruff voice, and the children ran away.

"My own garden is my own garden," said the Giant. "Anyone can understand that. And I will allow nobody to play in it but myself."

So he built a high wall all round it and put up a notice board with a sign that said: Trespassers will be prosecuted. *Hold up the sign.*

-  Now what would you say the Giant is like? How would you describe him?
If students miss 'selfish', don't worry - they will have another opportunity to think about this later in the story. Encourage students to comment on each other's suggestions.

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

The poor children now had nowhere to play. They tried to play on the road, but the road was very dusty and full of hard stones, and they did not like it. They used to wander round the high wall when their lessons were over and talk about the beautiful garden inside.

"How happy we were there," they said to each other.

Use your procedural questions to foster a discussion around the following questions. Remember to ask, after each question, 'What makes you say that?'

1. Do you think the giant thought about the children and about how they might feel? Or did he only think about himself?
2. Do you think the giant was selfish not to let the children play in his garden?

Children might find this part of the story difficult, as it involves personification of the seasons, wind, rain and hail. Try to read slowly, and ask the children whether they are able to work out what is going on. Encourage them to discuss their ideas and questions with each other. Allow some time for this.

Then the Spring came, and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. Only in the garden of the Giant it was still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom. Once a beautiful flower put its head out from the grass, but when it saw the notice board and sign, it felt so sorry for the children that it slipped back into the ground again, and went back to sleep.

The only people who were pleased were the Snow and the Frost. 'Spring has forgotten this garden,' they cried, 'so we will live here all the year round.'

The Snow covered up the grass with her great white cloak, and the Frost painted all the trees silver. Then they invited the North Wind to stay with them, and he came. He was wrapped in furs, and he roared all day about the garden, and blew the chimney pots down.

'This is a delightful spot,' he said, 'we must ask the Hail to visit.' So the Hail came. Every day for three hours he rattled on the roof of the castle till he broke most of the slates, and then he ran round and round the garden as fast as he could go. He was dressed in grey, and his breath was like ice.

'I cannot understand why the spring is so late in coming,' said the Giant, as he sat at the window and looked out at his cold white garden; 'I hope there will soon be a change in the weather.'

But the Spring never came, nor the Summer. The Autumn gave golden fruit to every garden, but to the Giant's garden she gave none. 'He is too selfish,' Autumn said. So it was always Winter there, and the North Wind, and the Hail, and the Frost, and the Snow danced about through the trees.

One morning, the Giant was lying awake in bed when he heard some lovely music. It sounded so sweet to his ears that he thought it must be the King's musicians passing by. It was really only a little bird singing outside his window, but it was so long since he had heard a bird sing in his garden that it seemed to him to be the most beautiful music in the world. Then the Hail stopped dancing over his head, and the North Wind ceased roaring, and a delicious perfume came to him through the open window. 'I believe the Spring has come at last,' said the Giant; and he jumped out of bed and looked out.

What did he see? *This is a question for students to think about, not respond to.*

He saw a most wonderful sight. Through a little hole in the wall the children had crept in, and they were sitting in the branches of the trees. In every tree that he could see there was a little child. And the trees were so glad to have the children back again that they had covered themselves with blossoms, and were waving their arms gently above the children's heads.

The birds were flying about and twittering with delight, and the flowers were looking up through the green grass and laughing. It was a lovely scene, only in one corner it was still winter. It was the farthest corner of the garden, and in it was standing a little boy. He was so small that he

could not reach up to the branches of the tree, and he was wandering all round it, crying bitterly. The poor tree was still quite covered with frost and snow, and the North Wind was blowing and roaring above it.

Climb up! little boy,' said the Tree, and it bent its branches down as low as it could; but the boy was too tiny.

And the Giant's heart melted as he looked out. 'How selfish I have been!' he said; 'now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever.' He was really very sorry for what he had done. ##

So he crept downstairs and opened the front door quite softly, and went out into the garden. But when the children saw him they were so frightened that they all ran away, and the garden became winter again. Only the little boy did not run, for his eyes were so full of tears that he did not see the Giant coming. And the Giant stole up behind him and took him gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree. At once the tree broke into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant's neck, and kissed him. And the other children, when they saw that the Giant was not wicked any longer, came running back, and with them came the Spring.

"It is your garden now, little children," said the Giant, and he took a great axe and knocked down the wall. And when the people were going to market at twelve o'clock they found the Giant playing with the children in the most beautiful garden they had ever seen.

All day long they played, and in the evening they came to the Giant to bid him good-bye.

From that day onwards, every afternoon, when school was over, the children came and played with the Giant.

Discussion Plan



8 minutes

Conduct this question as a Think, Pair, Share.

1. Why did the Giant knock down his wall and let the children play in his garden again? Was it because he wanted the winter to end and the flowers and the birds to come back to his garden? Or was it for some other reason? If so what was the reason?

If you think it would help, you can re-read the relevant section of the text, beginning at '## He saw a most wonderful sight' and ending with 'He was really very sorry for what he had done ##'.

Encourage children to comment on each other's ideas, making sure students back up their views with evidence and reasons.

End the lesson

1. What do you think the title of the story should be? Can you fill in the gap with just one word? Think about why you have chosen that word. *Give them a few seconds to think and/or talk to the person next to them, then take responses, encouraging discussion about any differences.*
 2. The author called the story, 'The Selfish Giant.' Do you think this is a good title? Why?
- Next lesson you will be going on to think a bit more about being selfish.

Lesson 2: Why do we do things for others (Part 1)

For this lesson you will need

- Images 1, 2 & 3
- Scenario cards (Sarah and Milena)

Remember last lesson

1 minute

- 👏 What can you remember from last lesson? *Jog their memories where necessary.*
- 👏 Can you remember what made the Giant change his mind and knock down the wall?

The Crows and the Magpie

16 minutes

In this lesson we will all be thinking and talking a bit more about being selfish. I am going to start the lesson by reading another story. It's a fable.

- 👏 Does anyone know any fables? Has anyone ever read any? *Take a few responses.*
- 👏 What is a fable? *Take a few responses.*

Fables are very short stories that make a moral point, and have animals or mythical creatures as characters that talk like humans. Many fables are very old, and have been told over and over again for thousands and thousands of years.

This fable is about some crows and a magpie.

Show Image 1 – crow and Image 2 – magpie.



Divide the class into two groups. This half of the circle are going to be the crows and the other half are going to be the magpie.

The Crows and the Magpie

📖 Once upon a time, there was a great forest, and in that forest there was a great banyan tree. *Show Image 3 – banyan tree.*



And on the banyan tree, lived some crows.

As the rainy season started, the clouds gathered in the sky and soon huge raindrops began to fall through the air. At just this time, a magpie was returning to her nest. When she saw the great tree, she thought, 'I will take shelter in this banyan tree until the rain stops'. *You can ask 'magpies' to say this line.*

And the magpie sat on a branch of the banyan tree.

But the crows saw her and one of them shouted, 'Magpie, get off the tree! This tree belongs to us!' *Ask Crows to repeat this line.* The magpie replied, 'The weather is bad and my nest is far away, on the other side of the forest. I would be grateful if you would let me rest here until it stops raining.'

And then the crow that had spoken said to the others, 'Why should we give the magpie shelter?' *Choose one crow to repeat this line after you.* And no one could find a single reason why they should help the magpie.

1. Crows: Can you think of a reason - or more than one reason - why you should help the magpie?

Encourage and broaden discussion with the following questions, as needed:

- *Would you expect to be helped if you found yourself in the magpie's position? If so, what is it that makes you more deserving of help (more 'special') than the magpie?*
- *What would your world be like if you all behaved in this way? Would it be the sort of world you would like to live in?*

2. Magpies: Why didn't the crows give any of these reason?

Encourage and broaden discussion with the following questions, as needed:

- *Did they try to imagine how you (the magpie) was feeling?*

3. Everyone: Do you think the crows are being selfish?

No one could find a single reason why they should help the magpie.

'Then we must chase her away,' said the crow who had spoken. 'We must chase her away! We must chase her away', the crows all called. *Ask the crows to repeat the line after you.*

Well, not all the crows. All except one. The oldest of the crows was just waking up from his afternoon nap. And now he spoke up.

'Wait', he said. 'There is a reason why we should help the magpie.' And the other crows caw-caw- cawed in disagreement. Then the oldest crow banged his beak loudly against the branch he was sitting on. And the others knew he was very annoyed.

'Listen to my reason', he said. 'If we let her stay, the magpies will be grateful to us. They will allow us to hunt for worms and lizards on their territory and they will tell all the other birds how generous we are. And when it is time to choose a new Leader of the Birds, they will choose a crow from this banyan tree. So we must let the magpie stay. But we must not tell anyone of our plans - not even the kookaburras.'

'How clever he is', the younger crows said. And so the magpie stayed on the tree until the rain had stopped.

Then she said, 'Thank you for sharing your tree with me. I had heard that the crows of the banyan tree were selfish. Now I know better'. And with that, she flew away.

It all happened just as the oldest crow had predicted. And now he is Leader of the Birds.

4. Crows: Did you help the magpie? (If so) What was your reason for helping her?
5. Crows: Did you let the magpie stay in order to help her, or did you do it in order to help yourselves. Or do you think it was a bit of both?
6. Everyone: If a bit of both, what do you think mattered more to the crows: their own good, or the good of the magpie? Or was it even?
7. Magpies: Did you know the reason why the crows decided to let you stay?
8. Everyone: Did the crows trick the magpies? If so, was it okay to do that?

Encourage and broaden discussion with the following questions, as needed:

- *Did the crows trick the magpies into thinking they were generous?*
- *Was it okay?*
- *Did the birds vote for their leader based on correct information?*
- *Did they elect an honest leader?*

A new scenario**12 minutes**

Now I have a different scenario for you to think about. You will be working in small groups.

Organise students into groups of three and hand out scenario cards. Read the scenario to the whole class, and then read out the questions. Give students 2 minutes to think and talk about the questions and to formulate their answers. Then ask the groups to feed back their ideas to the class.

📖 Sarah and Milena have known each other for as long as they can remember. They live in the same street and, before they started school, they used to play together almost every day. Now they go to the same school and still spend a lot of time with each other. They like many of the same things: playing basketball and Minecraft, reading *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and watching *Adventure Time* on TV.

Last Christmas, Sarah was standing on a chair, trying to reach the top of the Christmas tree, when she lost her balance and fell. She broke her arm. She had a big plaster cast on it for weeks and weeks and couldn't play basketball or computer games. So Milena kept her company during the holidays and tried to cheer her up. And when Milena had her tonsils out and her throat was really sore, Sarah took her mum's iPad into the hospital and they played games together.

Although Milena and Sarah are alike in many ways, there are other ways in which they are different. Sarah loves Maths and she's really good at it, but Milena isn't so keen and finds it harder. But Milena is really good at art and she knows lots about science - and her HSIE projects are always fantastic.

When Milena is having problems with her Maths homework, Sarah always gives her a hand. Sarah doesn't do Milena's homework for her, but she helps Milena understand how to do it herself. And Milena helps Sarah with her HSIE projects. Milena is teaching Sarah how to draw and Sarah is getting much better at it. So Sarah helps Milena and Milena helps Sarah.

Use procedural questions to facilitate a discussion around the following questions. For example 'Does anyone agree with X/ disagree? Can you tell me why you think that? Would anyone like to build on that?'

1. Do you think Sarah does things for Milena just because she wants Milena to do things for her?
2. And what about Milena? Do you think she helps Sarah just because she wants Sarah to help her? ...What makes you think that?
3. If you have answered 'No' to Question 1, why do you think Milena and Sarah help each other?
4. So do you think that Milena cared about Sarah for Sarah's own sake?
5. And is it the same for Sarah? Did she care about Milena for Milena's own sake?

End the lesson

Next lesson we will all be looking at some other scenarios about being selfish.

Lesson 3: Why do we do things for others (Part 2)

For this lesson you will need

- *Image 4: beehive*
- *Masking tape or a length of ribbon*
- *Numbers 1-10*
- *Two sheets of A4 paper cut into pieces (one coloured and one white)*

Remember last lesson

1 minute

Who can remember what we were talking about last lesson? *Jog their memories if necessary. The story that follows raises the same issue as did 'The Crows and the Magpie', so it's important that they recall the discussion about the reason why the crows helped the magpie.*

Tom and Jake

14 minutes

This week we are going to be starting with another story - this time about children who are much the same age as you.

 Tom and Jake are both in Year 4 and they live in the same street. Tom's dad works in the movie theatre just around the corner from the school and he sometimes picks them both up at the end of the day.

Tom is really lucky - he gets into the movies for free. Jake likes to hang out with Tom, and Jake's mum often takes them both to the park on the weekends. Sometimes when they take Tom home - in fact, lots of times, especially in the school holidays - Tom's dad says, 'Hey Jake, how would you like to go to the movies?' Guess what Jake says then?

One day, Tom's dad is driving them home from school, and he says, 'I've got some news- I've changed jobs. I'm leaving the movie theatre and going to work in a big hardware shop. I'm going to be the manager!'

'That's great dad', says Tom. 'But I'll miss the free movies', he thinks to himself. Jake doesn't say anything.

The next day is Friday. At lunchtime, Tom says to Jake, 'Are we going to the park tomorrow?' 'I don't know', says Jake. 'I think Mum has something on.'

The same thing happens the next week... and the next. And after a while, Jake starts playing with a different group of kids at lunchtime and hardly even talks to Tom. Tom can't work out why.

'I wonder what's up with Jake', he asks himself. But he doesn't want to ask him. And after a while, Tom and Jake just aren't friends any more.

Use procedural questions to facilitate a discussion around the following questions:

1. How do you work out who to be friends with? Or does it just happen?
2. Do you sometimes go out with your friends - to the park or on a picnic - or do you have sleepovers at each other's place?
3. Suppose your friend wasn't allowed to have sleepovers any more, or go to the park any more or... do one of the things you like to do together. Would you stop being friends with him or her? Why or why not?

4. Jake stopped being friends with Tom. Why do you think he did that?

Encourage and broaden discussion with the following question, as needed:

- *Do you think it could have been because he couldn't get free movie tickets anymore?*

5. If Jake had really liked Tom, would he have stopped being friends with him just because he couldn't get the movie tickets anymore?
6. Is that a bit like the crows and the magpie? Why did the crows help the magpie out?
7. Is it possible that the main reason that Jake was friends with Tom was that he got free movie tickets?
8. Suppose that it was the only reason Jake was friends with Tom. Do you think Tom knew that?
9. Has Jake done anything wrong? Is there anything wrong with being friends with someone just so you can get free movie tickets?

Encourage and broaden discussion with the following questions, as needed:

- *Could you say that Jake is 'using' Tom? Is this a good way to treat another person? – Would you say that Jake is also being dishonest? Is that a good way to be?*
- *How will Tom feel if/when he realises that Jake never really cared much about him for his own sake, but cared more about the movie tickets?*

The Farmer and the Apple Tree

14 minutes

There's time for one more fable. This time it's one of Aesop's fables. It's very old and comes from Greece. The fable is called, 'The Farmer and the Apple Tree'

 Once there was a farmer who had a big garden, and in one corner was an apple tree. No apples ever grew on it, but it provided a home for the sparrows and the grasshoppers.

One day the farmer decided to cut the tree down and, taking his axe in his hand, he struck the tree at its roots.

The grasshoppers and sparrows begged him not to cut down the tree that sheltered them. 'If you spare the tree', they said, 'we will sing to you all day.'

He paid no attention to their request, but gave the tree a second and a third blow with his axe. And he uncovered a hollow in the tree, and in the hollow, was a hive full of honey. *Show Image 4 – beehive.*



The farmer tasted the honeycomb, and then threw down his axe and, from that moment on, took great care of the tree.

-  The sparrows and the grasshoppers begged the farmer not to cut down the tree. Did he listen to them?
-  What made the farmer change his mind?

1. If the farmer had cut down the tree, the sparrows and grasshoppers would have lost their home. Can you imagine how you would feel if you lost your home? On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is 'hardly bad at all' and 10 is 'very, very bad', where would you put losing your home? I want you to think quietly about this question while I put some numbers on the floor.

Make a line on the floor in the middle of the circle with the masking tape, marking it evenly 1-10.

Hand out the pieces of paper (one per student). Make sure that half of the class gets a coloured piece and the other half gets a white piece.

2. Suppose we asked the sparrows and the grasshoppers the same question. Where on the line do you think they would put 'losing their home'? *Ask students with white paper to place their pieces of paper on the line.*
3. Now think about the farmer. How bad would his life be if he didn't cut down the tree. People with a coloured piece of paper, would you now go and put your marker on the line to show how bad you think it would be for the farmer.
4. Do you think the farmer was selfish to ignore the requests of the sparrows and grasshopper?
5. The farmer changed his mind. He decided not to cut down the tree. Does that mean that he wasn't selfish in the end?

Follow up question – ask if students haven't raised this important issue:

- When the farmer made his decision, was he thinking about how important the tree was to the sparrows and the grasshoppers?
6. Let's think about the farmer some more. The story doesn't tell us why he wanted to chop down the tree. What reasons might he have had?
Encourage and broaden discussion with the following questions, as needed:
 - *Do you think he may have needed more space to grow more crops?*
 - *Do you think he may have needed it for firewood?*
 - *Do you think he may just not have liked the look of it?*
 7. Would the farmer's reasons or cutting down the tree make a difference to whether you think he was being selfish?

End the lesson

You might like to continue to think about these issues and perhaps to talk about them with your families and friends.

~~~END OF TOPIC~~~

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