



THE KENAN  
INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS  
at Duke University

*Teaching Caselettes*

# THE GIVING TREE

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This case study examines the ethics of altruism through the lens of Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*. Is altruism always good? Do moral agents ever truly behave altruistically?

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Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* is about a tree and a little boy who love each other. When the boy is young, he is content to play in the tree's branches, and the tree enjoys both the boy's company and the fact that she can make him happy. As the boy gets older, he visits the tree less frequently and usually only when he wants something. The tree is happy to continue fulfilling the boy's desires, even though doing so becomes increasingly costly for her. She gives him her apples to exchange for money, her branches to build a house and her trunk to build a boat and sail away from his mid-life problems. When the boy takes her trunk and goes away for a long time, the tree is "not really" happy. The boy eventually returns an old man and the tree tells him that she has nothing left to give. However, all the old man needs is a place to rest, and the tree's stump is a perfect resting place. The story concludes with the tree and the old man happy together.<sup>1</sup>

Some people see the tree as a positive example of altruism. Other people see the tree as destructive of both her own and the boy's wellbeing. What do you think? Consider the following questions:

Terms for Discussion:

Altruism: unselfish concern for the welfare of others<sup>2</sup>

Egoism: the habit of valuing everything only in reference to one's personal interest<sup>3</sup>

Discussion Questions:

1. Is this a good outcome for the tree? Why or why not?
2. Is sacrificing her trunk a sign that the tree is especially good or a sign that the tree lacks sufficient concern for herself?
3. Is this a good outcome for the boy? Would it be wrong for the tree to provide gifts to the boy without considering whether those gifts are good for the boy?
4. Altruism and egoism are often viewed as opposing and fundamentally incompatible behaviors, with altruism being equivalent to ethical action and egoism being equivalent to unethical action. Why might this be a problematic framework for thinking about ethics?

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<sup>1</sup> Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree* (Harper Collins, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 2000), s.v. "altruism."

<sup>3</sup> *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 2000), s.v. "egoism."