

Selfish

To be selfish is to put yourself before others. It is natural to be selfish. As infants we are all desire, and throughout our lives desire for what is good for us persists. At a certain stage, in most maturing, the individual realizes that what is good for him sometimes coincides with what is good for others. It can be good for me to sacrifice my desire for a vacation in the Caribbean, so that you will have enough money to visit your aging mother. Selfishness interacts and competes with helpfulness and generosity throughout our lives. Toward the end of life, when we realize for sure that we cannot have everything our way, we may be troubled with remorse, bad conscience for a life too full of the self. By then, however, we will have a full arsenal of explanations, for ways in which our own good coincides with that of the world.

Examples

1 Portrait of a selfish guy

I know a pretty successful financial accountant bachelor, who seems to be selfish. (Seems is an essential here: one can never know the hidden generousities or basenesses of others. So **seems**.) Mr X lives alone in a dream-house which he had built for him twenty years ago, with the appointments he desired: a large Jacuzzi just off the living room; a spacious walled in patio behind the house; color and design co-ordinated wall papers. Mr. X is very careful to keep himself in good shape—the highest favor we can offer ourselves—and to all appearances leads a satisfying and routine existence, the usual middle class amusements, a little bit to drink now and then, participation in local groups like Kiwanis—which of course play their own charitable roles in local culture. Mr. X likes it quiet and comfortable; he likes his own company; he is selfish, no better no worse.

2 A selfish inlaw

I have a distant family member who is selfish. She is not a scrooge, not unfriendly, not contrary: just selfish, putting herself first in her thoughts, desires, and feelings. When my wife came to the United States to join me, her sister was injudiciously forward in pressing her claim to join us. The effect of this fervor was clearly to alienate us as potential hosts, and yet Mary showed no understanding of this dynamic. Every time we saw her she referred to her desire to come to the United States, but never to her role in buying herself a ticket, and acquiring some source of income in the States. The upshot of this selfish emphasis was that my wife and I were turned off any idea of inviting my sister in law to the U.S. Our reaction was normal—if not admirable—and in the end we shelved our potential interest in inviting Mary to visit us.