

The Parable of the Sadhu” (1983) presents a case for examining individual and group responsibility. Bowen H. McCoy shares that he and several others had spent months preparing to climb the Himalayan Mountains. At the point where this diverse group of hikers are exhausted and suffering the effects of altitude sickness, they encounter a sadhu--an Indian holy man--distressed and suffering from hypothermia. While they each attended to the man in some way, circumstantial constraints demanded that they decide to either stay with the sadhu and be assured of his fate or advance towards their individual goals. Ultimately, the group did not know “if the sadhu lived or died.” In his recounting, McCoy turns to his companion and asks, “where is the limit of our responsibility in a situation like this?”

<https://hbr.org/1997/05/the-parable-of-the-sadhu>

https://center.uoregon.edu/EFW/2025/CMS_CFP_Menu::pageIndex

In 1997, the Harvard Business Report published an article titled The Parable of the Sadhu by Bowen H. McCoy. The article recounts McCoy’s journey through Nepal and the Himalayas, where he was accompanied by an anthropologist, Stephen, who informed him of the cultural traditions and patterns of the places that they visited while in Nepal. While attempting to climb a pass in the Himalayas, a friend that had gone ahead brought the barely clothed and hypothermic body of an Indian Holy man or sadhu to McCoy and Stephen. The friend was irritated because he had to backtrack with the sadhu, and that had shortened the time he had to cross the pass before the snow melted. He told McCoy and Stephen, “Look, I’ve done what I can. You have porters and Sherpa guides. You care for him. We’re going on!” before he left them and the sadhu to continue climbing the mountain. McCoy gave the sadhu clothes, and passed him off to some other travellers close by that had a horse. McCoy told his companions that he had concerns about his ability to withstand the altitudes and wanted to get over the pass, so he left the sadhu with Stephen and the other travellers. When McCoy and Stephen met at the summit, Stephen glared at McCoy and said, “How do you feel about contributing to the death of a fellow man?” After McCoy left the sadhu, Stephen asked the travellers with the horse to carry the sadhu down, but they refused, then he asked a group of porters to carry the sadhu down but they insisted that it would be impossible for the porters to carry someone a great distance down the mountain and manage to get over the pass before the snow melted, they then pressured Stephen to not wait any longer. Finally, the Sherpas carried the sadhu down to a sunny rock and pointed out the hut to him a couple of hundred feet below. Stephen and McCoy did not know if the sadhu lived or died.

In the NBC sitcom *The Good Place* there is a scene where a character explains the point system that decides whether or not a person makes it into “The Good Place” or “The Bad Place”. As the point system is explained, it gradually becomes more and more apparent that making it to “The Good Place” is virtually impossible because of the ripple effect of one's actions. Even if your negative action was minor, the possible implications of that action on the people around you could exponentially increase the number of points deducted from your total. This concept is further reinforced by the fact that no one has made it to “The Good Place” in hundreds of years because of the increasing complexity of everyday life. By the time our main characters come in, all people that die are sent to “The Bad Place”, no matter the positive or negative impact that they make during their time on Earth. From *The Good Place's* perspective, being a good person is impossible. This fictional depiction of moral failure, directly mirrors the real dilemma that McCoy faced, where his personal goals strongly conflicted with the collective need to save a life.

The moral plight that McCoy was subjected to is a real-life example of the complexity that kept people with even the best of intentions out of “The Good Place”, and is common (albeit on a smaller scale) in the world today. It is extremely difficult to relinquish your individual goals and comfort for something that appears to have no benefit to you in the short term, or even seems like a lose-lose situation. A part of McCoy's story that sticks out to me is what Stephen says to McCoy after their group left the sadhu and reached the summit; “No one person was willing to assume ultimate responsibility for the sadhu. Each was willing to do his bit just so long as it was not too inconvenient.” In mainstream society, the anthropologist's sentiments have become very common and reflect hyper-individualism.

The moral struggle that McCoy faced during his time in Nepal highlights the challenge of prioritizing collective responsibility over one's personal goal, an issue that is amplified by the hyper-individuality that is pervasive in American society. Our cultural emphasis on one's individual gain can cause us to overlook the importance of shared responsibility, and Recently, I was reminded of a story my mother had told me about her time as an ESL teacher. She mentioned always having to reprimand her students for sharing answers with each other, but when they were confronted, some of the students said that sharing answers was just the norm to them, because in their respective cultures most things were shared. The prioritization of the collective good over individual interests was a strong belief, as it is in many other collectivist cultures. In the Chinese language, people are referred to by their last name or family name first, instead of their first names. Some Native American tribes did not believe in land ownership because they believed that the land was sentient, and that one couldn't own land but could live alongside it. These ideologies contrast with the teachings of John Locke, who believed that individual freedom would provide great opportunities to compete for material wealth, and would

benefit from the limitation of the government's power to interfere with said individual. Locke thought that these ideas would be balanced by a general concern for the good of all people and a sense of common purpose that would keep American social institutions intact. However, these safeguards have become scarcer with the passage of time.

Currently, an unhealthy individualism is common in mainstream culture. More concern for the gain of the individual and less for the gain of the people. There is a willingness, almost eagerness to cut down a neighbor if it means furthering personal goals. Also, most notably a lack of empathy given to other people. I see many of these characteristics in my everyday life, in the news, and in the people around me. Many people are too concerned with reaching the top or just simply surviving to be concerned with the plight of their fellow man. This can be seen in the trend-like manner that social justice issues move through the collective consciousness of the public, most recently, the Israel-Palestine conflict. Many of my peers have been very outspoken on this issue, they organize protests, encourage boycotts, and participate in online advocacy. But recently, less attention has been devoted to this issue. This confused me until I came across a tweet about how many people treat important social issues as trends. They would spend two weeks sharing Gofundmes, and posting infographics on their Instagrams until people got bored or started finding the news too depressing, and eventually moved on, without the resolution of the issue. I have always seen myself as an advocate for social justice, but have begun to wonder if I really am devoted to the cause. Am I fulfilling the anthropologist's sentiment and only an activist when it is convenient for me? Am I so comfortable in my privilege that I refuse to fully acknowledge the suffering of countless people around the world?

These thoughts have forced me to rethink my position in the social hierarchy. I have realized that to truly be the activist that I want to be, and to be the person that I want to be, that I have to do what McCoy couldn't do. I must let go of the individualistic ideals that have been taught to me all my life, and think outside the binary that I have become used to. For too long, I have been taught that there can only be one winner. That there will always be the haves and the have-nots and that there is not much that can be done about that. But to accept that philosophy is to fulfill the anthropologist's sentiment. To truly fulfill the moral of The Parable of the Sadhu, I must understand a simple concept. That the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, my parents would always tell me stories about the towns that they grew up in. They would tell me stories about prejudiced teachers, and classmates that had relatives in the Klu Klux Klan, and how they were constantly underestimated academically. They eventually left their small communities but came back to teach at their alma mater. I always asked them why they would come back to a place that had treated them so harshly. What they told me will stick with me forever. They told me that knowledge is nothing if it is not passed along. They told me that being

the ones that “got out” meant nothing if you did not come back to take more people with you. They told me that they returned to uplift the people around them, and to teach them that the only real confines are the ones in their minds. Their intentions were to pass along the lessons that you have learned along the way, and to be the person that takes responsibility for everyone’s success and wellbeing instead of just your own.

I feel that my parents’ philosophy is essential to my core values. Being driven to improve myself, but also the people around me, no matter the inconvenience or the uncomfortability of the feat, will spell the difference between leaving my individualist mentality behind and embracing a collectivist one. To close, I will leave with a simple quote, “When I eat, everybody eats”. To truly make this world a better place, we must let go of the idea that there can be only one person at the top, that our institutions, and our flaws as humans are just “the way that things are” and can’t be fixed or remedied. That someone else will come along and carry the man down the mountain, I have done all that I can. Real progress will only happen if we lift up the people around us as we rise.