

Explaining an Act of Self-Sacrifice: An Introduction to the Play-Acting Theory of Action

Hitoshi TAMURA

A self-sacrificial action is not consistent with rational decision-making. If an agent decides to take the rational course of action, that is, the best action among the options, the decision is not truly self-sacrificial. The agent has sought the best option and, therefore, nothing is really sacrificed. We need, then, a scheme other than that of rational decision making to explain self-sacrifice. I propose a theory which explains a self-sacrificial action as a kind of play-acting. In a play, an actor may take a role that is undesirable in real life. In a social situation involving self-sacrifice, the agent must accept such a course of action as undesirable but inevitable for anyone in the same situation. In a sense, the agent is coerced into playing an undesirable role. We cannot but see the agent as accepting it as an actor would. In instances of sacrifice, such as the sacrificial rite of the Ainu Bear Festival (IYOMANTE) or the legend of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, there is a traditional, social scenario that prescribes proper action. The self-sacrificial agent accepts such action in the same way that an actor accepts an unattractive role. The agent will intentionally perform the action; however, this is only in response to the prescription of the scenario. In other words, it is not based on an *authentic* decision, but on a *play-acting* decision. In this way, we can explain an act of self-sacrifice that implies a moral split for the agent. Contemporary theories of action, such as G. E. M. Anscombe's intellectualist theory or Donald Davidson's voluntarist-like theory, take it for granted that in any situation an agent is an integrated person with no moral split in principle. Moral splits, or dilemmas, are not, however, rare in everyday life. I put forward the play-acting theory of action as an alternative to contemporary theories.
