

IAA-04-IAA.1.1.2.09

NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO ENCODING ALTRUISM IN INTERSTELLAR MESSAGES

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Recently, significant attention has been given to methods for communicating concepts of altruism to extraterrestrial intelligence, as reflected by the international workshop held in Paris entitled *Encoding Altruism: The Art and Science of Interstellar Message Composition* <http://publish.seti.org/art_science/2003/>. While specific methods have been proposed for translating scientific accounts of altruism into formats that might be comprehensible to independently evolved intelligence, it has been less clear how to encode accounts of altruism that are not biologically based.

As scholars seek to expand beyond purely biological explanations of altruism in interstellar messages, it is important to consider diverse accounts of culture-specific influences on other-regard. Addressing the relevance of such expanded views of altruism at the Paris workshop, classicist Ulla Lehtonen contended that “Altruism as a solely human-to-human consideration of the good of others before one’s own benefit seems too narrow a concept to describe indigenous expressions of altruism.” Similarly, ecologist Abhik Gupta maintains that while notions of kin selection and reciprocal altruism may help explain altruism within a species, they fail to account for trans-species caring, widely espoused by indigenous Indian traditions.

Among the potentially fruitful sources for such alternative conceptualizations of altruism are folktales. Such tales, passed from generation to generation, provide access to widespread views of self-sacrifice that typify a culture’s belief system. In addition, they provide a reference point from which to understand more consciously formulated conceptions of altruism, as promulgated through written traditions. In the case of very early narratives, oral traditions that predate written records offer insights into understandings of altruism that would not otherwise be available.

This paper will examine narratives about altruism that may complement biological accounts in interstellar messages. Though these narratives will be examined from a broad, global perspective, special attention will be given to a comparison of narratives from India and narratives from other parts of the world. A preliminary examination of such narratives will be made through examples indexed in Thompson and Roberts’ (1960) *Types of Indic Oral Tales: India, Pakistan, and Ceylon* and Jason’s (1989) supplement to this volume.