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GIVING AND TAKING WITHOUT RECIPROCITY
Conversations in South India and the Anthropology of Ethics

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Abstract: This article contributes to the anthropology of ethics through an analysis of conversations among Muslim and Hindu householders in Tamil Nadu, India, about instances of alms/charitable giving where there is no expectation of direct reciprocity and where both giving and taking make reference to religion. I argue, first, that people make certain kinds of giving or taking ethical or unethical through talk and, second, that instances of 'ethical talk', which constitute reflections on and evaluations of action, point to questions concerning freedom and choice in people's efforts to lead lives that are good or 'good enough'. Such conversations also reveal a striving toward accepted forms of societal attachment and detachment while considering the claims that people can or should make upon each another.

Keywords: alms, ethical talk, ethics, freedom, Hinduism, India, Islam, relations and connections

This article constitutes an intervention in the anthropology of ethics through a discussion of conversations about instances of religious alms/charitable giving where there is no expectation of direct reciprocity. I argue that this kind of 'ethical talk' (Venkatesan 2014b) comprising reflections and evaluations generates 'ethical moments' when people grapple with questions of how one ought to live and engage with others. They point to questions of freedom and choice in people's attempts to lead good or 'good enough' lives. They also point to the striving toward appropriate forms of attachment and detachment in social relations. The ethnography that informs this article is drawn from two distinct research projects, both in Tamil Nadu, a state in South India: the first between 1997 and 2003 among Muslim householders, and the second, ongoing from 2006, among Brahmin Hindu temple priests who are also householders. I thus bring South

Asian Islamic understandings of charitable gifts and almsgiving into conversation with the large literature on similar giving in Hinduism. Notwithstanding key differences between Hindu and Muslim ideas about such gifts, there are important commonalities, partly based on Tamil ideals about what constitutes a good and dignified life for a householder. It is these commonalities that this article addresses, while remaining sensitive to the different religious ideologies and practices.

As householders, the people with whom I work are concerned with the maintenance, well-being, and reproduction of the household and its members, as well as their social standing in milieux of similar households. They are also concerned with doing the 'right' or 'good' thing. Further, all the people with whom I work, notwithstanding their understanding of 'other-worldly' orientations, are firmly geared toward 'this-worldly' concerns with "such solid goods of this world, as health, wealth, and long life" (Weber 1946: 277) and the approbation of others.

For Tamil householders, Hindu and Muslim, being in relations with others, both kin and non-kin, is an important aspect of sociality. This involves valuing and being valued by others with whom one enters into lasting, even if asymmetrical, relationships of give and take. Also, most Tamils (Hindu or Muslim) would rather be recipients of gifts of esteem than of altruism (Heim 2004), respectively, gifts given to those who are deemed worthy and gifts given to those who need them. This is because, as Mines (1996: 19) points out, attributes valued in Tamil culture—generosity (*vallanmai*), trustworthiness (*nambikaiyaanavan*), prudence and intelligence (*buddhisalithanam*), having dignity and honor (*maanam*)—both reveal the kind of person an individual is and reflect the fact that definitions of character express a relationship between the private life of an individual and the wider society. Being needy is never as good as being worthy as the former implies a lack of the attributes discussed above. Mines shows how older Tamils are given to reflecting on their lives, choices, and actions and evaluating these (ibid.). Where I work, too, people talk about what they do and why, what they would like to do, and what they could and/or should do or have done. Similarly, they also talk about other people they know or have heard of. This talk is simultaneously evaluative and exploratory. They often couch these conversations in terms of constraints and ideals, bringing to mind Isaiah Berlin's (1969) distinction between negative and positive freedoms, that is, 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', which I will discuss in my conclusion.

I must note that freedom is not an emic concept deriving from my fieldwork, but focusing on ethical talk reveals how people conceptualize their ability to act in situations where there is, at least in theory, more than one choice. This then leads us to questions of the freedom to act—as one ought, as one likes, as is felt necessary, or as subject to the actions or projects of others—and the justifications, consequences, and considerations thereof. Here, freedom is conceived of in social terms. While evaluations focus on the acting and decision-making individual, this person is enmeshed in various kinds of relations—kin-based, with co-religionists including religious experts, neighbors, and so forth—and has various obligations that are pressing to different degrees. All of the above factors

not only impinge on the freedom to act, but also define, however loosely, the normative social field, which posits different kinds of actions for different kinds of persons—male, female, householder, renouncer—and within which ethical evaluations, criticisms, and approvals are made and voiced.

Greenspan (2010) identifies the 'moral community' as comprising those persons whose criticisms may not be easily discounted when considering or embarking on a certain course of action. She maintains that in the course of carrying out most ordinary actions (e.g., wearing this coat instead of that one), criticisms made by others may be discounted without too much difficulty. Some actions, however, are seen as problematic, both by oneself and, importantly, by others whose opinion counts, and criticisms pertaining to these actions may not be easily refuted by alternative modes of reasoning. Such criticisms stick and compromise the self in some larger way or in relation to a particular project. Of course, different moral communities concern themselves with varying numbers and types of action. As Emma Tarlo (1996) shows (and contrary to Greenspan's example), decisions about what to wear can become controversial in both ethical and moral terms. With regard to my own ethnography, I want to emphasize that the moral community may have few or no means of preventing certain actions seen as problematic—in this case, asking for money instead of working for or borrowing it and working off the debt, or giving and taking at the same time. However, criticisms may be voiced directly to the person or may circulate more generally. The notion of the moral community allows us to ask ethnographically what kind of actions become susceptible to criticism, when and why, and how people justify their undertaking of them. Equally, it allows us to explore situations in which people agree or come to agree that a particular course of action was the right one or the only one, and why.

The methodology that provides the ethnographic data in this article is unusual and requires explication. I draw exclusively on conversations my interlocutors have had with me about the choices and behavior of others they know or have heard about in situations of charitable/alms giving or receipt. That is to say, neither I nor most of the people who feature in this article have participated in the particular situations being discussed. These discussions, then, are speculative, evaluative, didactic, and pragmatic, as will be seen. I dwell on these conversations because I am interested in the ways in which ethical activity is kindled through discursive interaction (see also Lempert 2013: 371). Further, I am interested in the ways in which such ethical interactions draw into the here and now ideas, stories, and examples from other times and places and can, in turn, be drawn into other ethical conversations, sometimes generating or sedimenting generally accepted codes of conduct. In this, I follow Keane (2014: 5), who suggests that we can fruitfully focus on "the affordances of interaction and the objectifications they can induce as critical components of ethical life."

Lambek (2010) identifies two elements present in common usages of the term 'ethics': first, the definition and application of criteria for the evaluation of good and bad or right and wrong; second, the valence put on certain actions as good or bad. Lambek outlines his argument as follows: "Ethnographers

commonly find that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good" (ibid.: 1). Ethics here is evaluative, and such evaluations are ongoing—informing and shaping social life. People often make ethical evaluations moored to public criteria of validity (Faubion 2001) of their own and others' intentions and actions and the consequences thereof. These evaluations point to generally circulating ideas about—and criteria pertaining to—the ethical or the good. They allow us to empirically discern what matters to certain groups of people, as well as to particular individuals, and to see how certain actions are held up to scrutiny. But where is ethics located?

Lambek and others (e.g., Das 2012) point to the pervasiveness of the ethical, by which they mean that it is not removed from, but an integral dimension of, everyday life. What is at stake here is a distinction between an understanding of ethics as a conscious project of self-cultivation, a sustained answer to the question 'how should one live' (Laidlaw 2002) with a reasonably clear sense of 'the good' (however conceptualized), on the one hand, and a more contingent and patched-together sense of the ethical that emerges from the ongoing flux of life, on the other.[1] As Lempert (2013: 371–372) points out, the latter approach is a corrective to the privileging of overt rational reflection and choice and institutionalized discourses, inviting closer attention to interactions. But, he adds, this does not mean that ethics is simply present. Things have to be *made* ethical (ibid.). It is this insight that I will follow in this article—things are made ethical in interaction, in the context of both everyday life and sustained ethical projects. This effort takes work and is purposeful. Equally, ethical talk may serve another purpose altogether—a way of testing boundaries and exploring options. People work out in conversation what they might be able to do or get away with doing. By paying attention to the ways in which people talk about things that they find knotty or worthy of comment, we can unpack those aspects of living, including interactions with others, and subject them to more than a fleeting scrutiny.

This approach does not ignore extraordinary circumstances, nor does it assume that people either do things without thinking about them or think about everything that they do. Rather, it focuses on interactions where ethical issues come to the fore as people reflect on actions in the past or the future and the ways in which they comply with or go against what they understand to be right or good. But how do people understand these things?

Zigon (2009: 80–81) identifies three interrelated spheres of morality: the institutional sphere, public or widely shared morality, and morality as embodied disposition, that is, one's already cultivated everyday way of being in the world. These interrelated spheres of morality, Zigon writes, furnish people with the guidelines and disposition to act correctly without the need for reflection in most cases. Thus, by and large, people lead comfortably moral lives. However, there can come points of rupture when one feels unmoored and needs to re-evaluate the world and one's place in it. This he calls the 'ethical moment'. The ethical moment, for Zigon, "is a moment of conscious reflection and dialogue

with one's own moral dispositions, as well as with the other two moralities …
a moment of freedom, creativity, and emergence" (ibid.: 83).

While I find Zigon's discussion of the three interrelated spheres of morality
useful, I do not see the ethical moment as constituting a radical break. Nor do
I understand the three spheres of morality as being able to seamlessly furnish
people with ways to live morally; indeed, the institutional sphere may comprise
religious and legal institutions that profess conflicting moral values. Instead,
I follow Laidlaw's (2002) distinction between morality, which he understands
as pertaining to law-like rules and obligations, and ethics, which is a way of
answering the question of how one should live. Morality and ethics, as Laidlaw
shows, inform each other in various ways in different places and times and
for different persons. The ethical moment, for me, is when people explicitly
address the question of how to live, keeping in mind their own inclinations
as well as social rules and their various obligations and duties to others. For
Zigon (2009), the ethical moment is transformative—it is a response to some
kind of crisis. I would argue rather that the ethical moment is a pause—it may
precipitate a change in behavior, direction, or goals. Equally, following such a
pause, people might decide to carry on doing something that they and others
of their moral community feel is not quite right or good.

Attention to the ethical moment and to ethical talk has the advantage of
being able to bring within the anthropology of ethics diverse projects ranging
from sustained and systematic attempts at self-cultivation to attempts to be
'as good as possible' or 'good enough' under given circumstances. As Tocheva
(2011) suggests, the self does not have to be the sole center of ethics. Rather
than necessarily being committed to projects of self-perfection, people try to
act with a concern for their self-realization as righteous persons, often in rela-
tion to other persons. This, as she shows, is no easy task. Tocheva works with
Russian Orthodox priests and analyzes how they worry about giving charity to
people in need. What is it best to give—money, food, work? Where does one's
duty lie? What should or will people do with what is given? Giving can cre-
ate relationships—but what kinds of relationships are these, and should such
relationships be generated and nurtured? What further claims does each party
have on the other? Should they have any such claims at all? (ibid.). Indeed,
it is no surprise that both giving and taking, especially of alms and charitable
donations, have generated key conversations in the anthropology of ethics. I,
too, am concerned here with non-reciprocal giving and taking—and in the case
of the latter, also with 'asking'—among Tamil Hindu and Muslim householders
in rural South India.

The Unreciprocated Gift in Hinduism and Islam

By and large, the Indianist literature on unreciprocated gifts in the religious or
ritual context has focused on the Hindu case of *dana*.[2] *Dana* is a Sanskrit word
that can be glossed as 'gift', but it has cadences that render it unsuitable for reci-
procity. Key among these is the idea that, along with *dana*, the giver also passes

on his/her sins or inauspiciousness to the recipient. Taking a return gift means that the sins are not passed on, but are returned to the giver. Hence, *dana* has to be unreciprocated. There is a rich scholarship on *dana* and the poison in the gift (see, e.g., Parry 1986; Raheja 1989). *Dana*, however, is only one kind of unreciprocated gift in the Hindu context. There are other Hindu/Indic terms for gifts, including *sangita*, which is a small gift that is said to make up for a possible deficiency in the central gift; *dakshina*, a form of gift that is given to a teacher or priest over and above any payment made; and *bhik* or *bhiksha*, translated as alms (Copeman 2011: 1052). Accepting these gifts does not carry the same dangers as accepting *dana*. Further, *dana* has many valences; indeed, it is being mobilized in India now for new contexts such as blood donation, where the notion of sins being passed on with the gift are underplayed or ignored (ibid.) Here, *dana* is subsumed into larger ideas about gifting and philanthropy and is subject to discussions about the need (not worth) of recipients, as much as the needs and orientations of the givers (see also Agarwal 2010).

In the Muslim context, z*akat*, or the giving of alms in order to aid the needy or less fortunate, is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. *Zakat* is calculated as a proportion of the giver's wealth.[3] Muslims may also give *sadaqah*, or additional voluntary donations, as and when they see fit.[4] However, as Benthall (1999) points out, sometimes *zakat* and *sadaqah* seem to blend into one another. The importance of *zakat* to donors is explained thus by Benthall (ibid.: 29):

> *Zakat* derives from the verb *zaka* which means to purify (also with the connotation of growth or increase). The meaning is usually taken to be that, by giving up a portion of one's wealth, one purifies that portion which remains, and also oneself—through a restraint on one's selfishness, greed and imperviousness to others' sufferings. The recipient, likewise, is purified from jealousy and hatred of the well off. Thus the action of giving alms has this moral function as well as fulfilling needs … There is wide agreement about the general principles of zakat. It is a kind of 'financial worship', and without its observance, the efficacy of prayer is negated. It is closely associated with prayer in many verses of the Quran.

In Islam, while charitable giving to strangers is important, there are influential strands of thought which suggest that giving to known people is better: "[I]f you give a gift to one of your relatives, that may be better than giving charity, because it is more befitting to uphold the ties of kinship. The same may apply if you give a gift to a friend of yours, because that will strengthen the bonds of love between you."[5] Giving to someone who one knows will make good use of the gift is considered equally important.

In Hindu thought, as Heim (2004) shows, a distinction is made between gifts of esteem and gifts of altruism wherein the latter kind of gifting is considered more meritorious than the former. This plays into discussions about the worthiness of a recipient. In both Hindu and Muslim cases, it is important to note that such gifts do not have to reciprocated by the recipient, or at least not in any directly equivalent form. A return may take any form—merit, blessings, prayers. We might thus ask, for whose benefit is the gift given? As Chris Gregory and James Laidlaw have pointed out, dissenting perceptions—what

Gregory terms 'asymmetrical recognition'—of the gifting transaction both exist and are productively ambiguous (see Copeman 2011: 1055–1056), making the giving and taking of gifts anthropologically interesting in numerous ways.

For both Hindus and Muslims, then, giving is generally a good, even mandatory thing. However, there is some leeway about when to give and to whom and why. Further, a distinction is often made between asking for charity/ alms and being given them. One may present oneself in ways that encourage culturally sanctioned modes of giving, without necessarily asking. The modes of self-presentation and subsequent action are also subject to evaluation, however speculative.

It is important to note that the giver is not bound to give to any one who comes seeking alms or charity, in either the Hindu case (e.g., Burghart 1983: 639) or the Muslim. In each instance, the giver makes a decision whether or not to give based on the stated or unstated claims of the man (or woman) at his door, taking into account the time of day, month, or year—for example, charitable giving is more meritorious for Muslims during Ramadan than at other times. Equally, the giver is not obliged to give all that is being asked for.[6] From the giver's perspective, the seeker of alms or charity represents an opportunity to be a good person according to religious and moral tenets (Bornstein 2012).[7] The worth of the recipient is important, but the giver only has partial knowledge of this and, indeed, might prefer limited knowledge. Often it is enough that the supplicant looks and acts the part, absolving the giver of any detailed investigation into his/her real needs, worth, or project.

As we have seen, both Islam and Hinduism have strongly developed normative theories about the giving of charitable gifts and alms. As far as the donor is concerned, giving is generally perceived as good, leading to merit or rewards. But some kinds of giving are deemed better than others, for instance, face-to-face giving, or giving at certain times, or giving to certain kinds of persons, based on esteem, need, categorization of recipients according to elaborated classifications, prior relations, or combinations of all these factors. There are generally accepted dispositions and appropriate modes of giving, which people strive to follow. There is also a difference between giving when asked and giving from a sense of the worth of the recipient, even when both kinds of giving are seen as religious duties. James Staples (2003: 302) writes that while both Hindus and Muslims may regard begging as a practice that allows them to engage in meritorious forms of religious donation or alms giving, "there are those who now distinguish between pious alms giving (in the form of gifts to monk-ascetics, for example) and giving money to beggars."

Asking for Help: The Problem of Non-reciprocity

Between 1997 and 2003, each year during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan about 10 to 20 Muslim men from a small town that I will call Paiyur in the state of Tamil Nadu traveled to Singapore or Malaysia. They had often borrowed money in order to pay almost a year's income to agents who charged

a commission to obtain tourist visas and flight tickets for them. The main purpose of these short visits abroad (locally called *dasagam* trips) was to seek charitable donations of money from diasporic Tamil Muslims based on shared religion, shared language, and the kind of relationship specified within Islam between the rich and the poor.

Tamil-speaking Muslims, originally from India, form a significant proportion of Singapore's and Malaysia's Muslim populations (Sandhu 1969; Shankar 2001; Tschacher 2006). Settlement patterns of different Tamil Muslim groups in these countries vary, but, according to Tschacher (2006: 37), during the colonial period "the weavers of Tinnevelly District [wherein Paiyur is located] usually migrated as families and settled down permanently in their new homes. This made their communities more stable in the long run, and … may have served to strengthen a Tamil identity." Most still speak Tamil as their first language. Contact between diasporic Tamil Muslims and their counterparts in India has been fairly constant in the twentieth century (Shankar 2001). Due to state policies in Singapore that preclude Qur'anic instruction in Tamil, Muslim mosques (where the main language is Tamil and of which there are a number) have relied on India for supplying religious teachers and imams (Tschacher 2006: 176–178). Visits from religious leaders (*shaikh*) and other such specialists from India to both countries also appear to be common.

As to why the men of Paiyur go so far away to seek charitable help, their own answer is the favorable exchange rate.[8] A small amount in Singaporean or Malaysian currency translates to fairly large sums in Indian currency,[9] and it is generally seen as a worthwhile risk to borrow money for air tickets and visas. This is particularly the case in the holy month of Ramadan. Benthall (1999: 29) explains that during Ramadan Muslims "are called on to be more than usually generous. Alms given during Ramadan are said to be seventy times more meritorious than at other times of the year." Tschacher (2006: 219) writes that in Singapore, where there is no statutory levying of *zakat*, most of his respondents "preferred to choose the recipients of *zakāt* on their own."

The men from Paiyur find Tamil Muslims who live in the cities they are visiting by going to Tamil mosques or associations, by asking around in Tamil areas and knocking on doors of houses or businesses, or by taking lists of names and addresses from their travel agents. They then, I am told, ask for money in the name of Islamic charity to fulfill obligations that are recognized as important by themselves and by those whom they approach. The most important of these (and the one that help is requested for) is the duty to get a daughter married. This is an expensive business: a dowry has to be paid to the bridegroom's family,[10] new clothes have to be bought, and the daughter must be supplied with jewelry. In addition, relatives, other Muslims in the town, associates, and well-wishers must all be invited to the wedding feast.[11] Weddings can throw households into indebtedness that can last years and even result in the loss of houses, which are put up as collateral for the debts taken from money-lenders who charge high rates of interest. It is noteworthy that help is mainly sought for a practice seen as non-Islamic but nevertheless unavoidable, that is, the giving of dowry. Considered to be a result of Hindu influences on Tamil Muslims, dowries

are common in Paiyur. Sums demanded and paid can run up to £1,000. This is well over many households' annual income in this group whose access to secure income is limited and indebtedness is an ever-present threat. Notwithstanding this, no one feels able to fail to discharge the obligation to marry off his/her daughter or perform other life-cycle ceremonies, despite the financial burden these might impose. Indeed, their performance is considered freeing. People who have married off a daughter often say, "Now I can rest, having finished my duty [*kadamai*]." In order to get to this stage, households do various things. People borrow money and step up their household-based income-generating activities, mainly weaving, and get their older children involved. Some men try to secure short-term manual labor in the Middle East or make a *dasagam* trip.

The Tamil Muslims of Paiyur on *dasagam* trips place themselves within two of the eight permitted categories in Islam of people who should be helped—as poor and needy and as suffering from debt incurred or about to be incurred due to the fulfillment of an obligation. Further, drawing on generally accepted ideas in Paiyur that there are no poor people in Singapore, one man who has been on *dasagam* trips told me that his presence and request gave people who do not see poverty on their doorstep a chance to perform face-to-face charity. That is to say, both parties benefit. He was being unusually playful, however. In fact, most of the men from Paiyur who go on these trips fear refusal and consequent humiliation. They avoid speaking about successful trips as well. Even after years of my knowing him and being very close to his family, one man referred positively only once to one of his *dasagam* trips. Pulling out a newspaper cutting from a file in which he kept important and treasured pieces of paper, he said, "Look, this newspaper has an article about me. I led the prayer in the Tamil mosque in Malaysia one time I was there." I asked him what else he had done, but he replied very quickly: "It is not nice to ask. We go because we have no other way. It is a matter of shame [*avamanam*]" (Venkatesan 2009: 73).

Partly in order to alleviate this sense of humiliation and partly to be more successful in their venture, when they go on *dasagam* trips, the Tamil Muslims of Paiyur emphasize their status as ritual specialists, a common identification for men of this Labbai sub-group. They dress, as one man put it, in the "devout Muslim uniform" of white shirt, white sarong, white cap, and white shoulder cloth. They offer to say blessings (*dua*) and perform other ritual services for those from whom they seek help. Notwithstanding this, people who make *dasagam* trips are criticized by some Muslims in Paiyur who neither make nor condone these trips. Local criticisms, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (see Venkatesan 2009), turn on two crucial and interrelated points. The first is based on the high value placed on work in Islam and the condemnation of begging, as reflected in the oft-mentioned saying of the Prophet: "Verily, it is better for any of you to take your rope and bring a bundle of wood upon your back and sell it, in which case God guards your honor, than to beg of people, whether they give or not; if they do not give, your reputation suffers, and you return disappointed; and if they give, it is worse than that; for it lays you under obligation."[12]

The second criticism focuses on the lack of an enduring relationship between giver and recipient. Like most Tamils, the people with whom I work recount in

detail how they are connected to, dependent on, and, in turn, obliged to others: the more diverse and long-standing the networks and connections, the better. People often talk about those willing to help them in times of need because of a prior and ongoing relationship. Accounts of *dasagam* trips are not amenable to the kind of self-narration that both Hindu and Muslim Tamils employ to show their location in the social world. Despite the broad definition of charity in Islam, which includes praying for others, the charity-seeker's connection with donors is perceived by others, and to some extent by himself, as instrumental and cynical. This is what makes these *dasagam* trips difficult to talk about for the men who undertake them and worthy of being condemned by those who do not. Indeed, the majority of men in Paiyur do not go on these trips.

Doing the right thing or going about something in the right way is not automatic, even in a close-knit population like that of Paiyur, where by and large people adhere to similar norms. Although people do not refuse to give their child in marriage into a household where someone has made a *dasagam* trip, nor do they avoid interacting with those who have gone on such a trip, the lack of social sanctions should not blind us to the fact that *dasagam* trips are ethically problematic, both to those who make them and to others in the group.

I want to dwell on three points about the condemnation of *dasagam* trips in the context of ethical talk. First, making such a trip is consistently looked on as a matter of choice by those who do not make them, even though the men who undertake such trips and members of their households emphasize their lack of choice. This emphasis clearly seeks to deflect criticism from the moral community. If one has no other way in which to act (especially to fulfill a key obligation), how can one be criticized for acting in that way? The fact that this mode of justification is not accepted by others (because they have the same responsibilities but have managed to find other ways to cope) points to a crucial aspect of ethical evaluations—the attribution of volition, and therefore of freedom, either to act as one ought or to act in other, less ethical ways. The harshest criticism is reserved for those who keep making such trips, especially when their need is not visible to others.

My second point is that, paradoxically, people also use talk as a way of exploring whether or not they themselves would undertake a *dasagam* trip, should it become necessary or expedient. The tenor of such conversations is, unsurprisingly, different from condemnatory discussions. People talk about their own financial problems, upcoming obligations, and the iniquities of moneylenders. They also frame *dasagam* trips as risky ventures that can gain high returns, with the ability to successfully pull off such a trip becoming an indication of worth. One woman, referring to the first female from Paiyur who had just gone on a *dasagam* trip, said: "We'll see. If she is successful, maybe I will go too." Talk here serves several purposes, among them, to explore possibilities and to normalize and work out how to turn an ethically problematic action into an acceptable one.

This leads me to my third and final point. One way to make a *dasagam* trip acceptable, it appears, is to become more than just a supplicant by having something (usually in the ritual sphere) to offer to people whom one approaches. There is one man in Paiyur who regularly goes to Malaysia, but

who is not criticized for this in Paiyur. This is because he is known to have established long-standing relations with his benefactors, who value his ritual expertise and his ability to tell fortunes. Indeed, so esteemed is he that an elderly Malaysian couple who were too infirm to make the Hajj pilgrimage sent him and his wife in their stead. Unlike the majority of charity-seekers, he is perceived as having created lasting attachments, not simply connections limited by time and purpose.

Giving and Not Taking: The Problem of Reciprocity

In the above discussion, the recipient asks for help in his attempt to fulfill his duties as a householder and, unlike more approved Tamil modes of seeking help from people with whom he has enduring relations, does so from strangers in ways that are seen as humiliating and cynically instrumental. Establishing and nurturing appropriate and long-lasting relations with others is important to Tamil householders and spoken of approvingly. This situation is profoundly different from the salvation-oriented logic of Hindu renouncers who consciously strive to remain detached and avoid creating enduring attachments in order to free their souls.

In Brahmanical Hindu thought, the soul (*aatma*) is conceptualized as pure consciousness that is fettered by the body and bound to the world of people, things, relations, and causes and effects. At some point, a person might take up the sustained project of freeing the soul from its fetters and from the cycle of birth and rebirth, which are a consequence of karma, or the effects of one's actions. Renunciation is one such sustained project.[13] The renouncer enacts his own social death, thereby removing himself from social ties and obligations.[14] He then becomes "to himself his own end … except that he is cut off from the social life proper" (Dumont [1966] 1999: 185). The role of renouncer is recognized by the wider society and, by and large, is supported by it. The renouncer is not required to earn his living and is given food and other basic needs without any expectation of reciprocity.[15] This leaves him free to concentrate on his spiritual quest by mastering his desires, performing austerities, and focusing on god. The renouncer may also guide and teach disciples (lay and other renouncers) who gather around him (Narayan 1992). Burghart (1983: 640) writes: "Any householder who provides for another's food and clothing is superior to that other person, for that other person is seen to depend upon the householder. In giving alms, however, it is the recipient, not the donor, who is superior because the recipient uses his gift for a sacred purpose." There are also resonances here of the difference between gifts of altruism and gifts of esteem. Renouncers receive gifts of esteem because their projects are seen to be ethical and worthy.

Because my interest in this article concerns the ways in which householders conceptualize and enact their interactions with and obligations to others and try to do so ethically—that is, with attention to the question of how ought one to live, especially with regard to giving and taking—I will focus here on discussions with my informants about renouncers and the giving and taking of alms. In particular, I will elaborate on one conversation I had with two informants

(both Brahmin temple priests) about an ethnographic discussion recounted by Prasad (2007). Before I turn to this, it is important to note that taking the path of a renouncer (*sanyasa marga*) is widely understood to be a choice. That is, one *decides* to renounce the social world and all that it entails in order to pursue the goal of freeing the soul. Such a course is not lightly undertaken, involving as it does adherence to strict codes of conduct, nor is it seen as an unmitigatedly good thing. As I have considered elsewhere (Venkatesan 2014a), abandoning one's obligations to parents, children, and others in order to become a renouncer is seen as problematic partly because leaving one's duties unfulfilled might entail rebirth to enable their fulfillment in another life. Further, it can be seen as selfish, and, as DeNapoli (2009) points out, some renouncers (especially women) are at pains to emphasize that there was no choice involved in taking this path—it was their destiny. Renouncers, like others, are evaluated according to ethical criteria, particularly with regard to their adherence to the *sanyasa dharma*, or the moral code of renouncers. Equally, people strive to observe generally accepted rules in their interactions with renouncers, even as they discuss the reasons for particular normative modes of interaction, exceptions, and so forth. In doing so, they think about their own and others' actions as a means to teach, explore, and reflect.

I now turn to a reminiscence narrated to anthropologist Leela Prasad during fieldwork in 1995 in the South Indian pilgrimage and monastery town of Shringeri. Ramachandra Bhattru (RB) was Prasad's landlord in Shringeri when she was conducting fieldwork. Prasad (2007) describes him as helpful and interested in her project on oral narrative and moral being. On one occasion, RB and Prasad were talking about encounters with renouncers when he recalled an incident from his childhood that took place in the 1960s. Prasad quotes the conversation in full (ibid.: 198–200). I paraphrase it below.

When RB was a boy, on days when renouncers came to the house seeking alms, his parents would lock him and the other children up in a room. Curious and keen to see what was being kept from him, RB once managed to slip away. He watched his parents give an alms-seeking renouncer water to wash his hands and serve him a meal. RB decided that he had to show himself so his parents would know what he had seen. He went up to the renouncer, who had not yet begun eating, and prostrated himself before him. Thrilled with himself, he rose only to find his father's "head bursting with rage." The renouncer said to his father, "The boy has acted innocently. Don't punish him. I must now leave." The renouncer left without eating. RB was beaten by his father and not given any food for the whole day. Finally, he asked his father what he had done wrong and was told: "A *yati* (renouncer) was so unjustly denied food today, because you fell at his feet, at the feet of a sanyasi in a grihasta's (householder's) home today, you denied him his food for the day… If you prostrate before a sanyasi to whom you have offered alms, he will probably not tell you this, but he will throw away that offering and forego food for the day" (Prasad 2007: 200).

Prasad's analysis, which follows RB's own retrospective understanding of the incident, centers around conduct that is deemed appropriate to renouncer-householder interactions. Central to these interactions is the giving and the

receiving of *bhiksha* (food alms given to the renouncer). As Prasad (2007: 201) puts it: "The awkwardness of Ramachandra Bhattru's prostration ... comes not from the act itself, but from the timing of the act: when blessings are sought of the [renouncer] when he is himself seeking bhiksha—that is, in fact, an *impersonal* seeking of food—he is forced to enter into a worldly transaction (food in exchange for blessing) that demands reciprocal transaction. The food then becomes unfit for consumption, tainted by a certain worldly quality, precisely the characteristic that a renouncer has vowed to eschew."

In August 2009, sitting in the veranda of their house in southern Tamil Nadu, as we were talking about a previous visit of a famous renouncer to the region, I recounted this ethnographic vignette to two Brahmin Hindu temple priests with whom I work: a father and his son. It is striking that both understood the problem in the same way as RB, his father, and Prasad had done, notwithstanding the amount of time that had elapsed. The younger priest agreed that the renouncer could not eat once he had given his blessing. He went on to talk about how renouncers have to be completely out of the give-and-take cycle and reciprocity. According to him, renouncers must not even enter temples wherein immanent gods are worshipped because only people concerned with *pratiphalan* (reward, requital, or return), worldly concerns, and ideas of gain and loss (*labham*, *nashtam*) enter temples. The renouncer is beyond these. His only concern is the transcendent god and the liberation of his soul. The son concluded: "There are only two things for him: *gnanam* [spiritual knowledge] and *vairagyam* [detachment]. Only those two."

While he did not refute the views of his son, Dhandapani, the elder priest, went further in his analysis of the incident in two important ways. The first turns around somewhat the categorization of the renouncer's actions and the child's unknowingness. The second recasts the role of the renouncer. I reproduce relevant parts of our conversation translated from Tamil below:

> Dhandapani (D): You know you said that when the child asked [for the blessing], he left without eating. That is because his purpose was fulfilled (*niraivu aayiduthu*). The satisfaction of eating came from giving the child the blessing. He was done.
>
> Soumhya (S). What do you mean by done?
>
> D. His purpose was fulfilled. What he came thinking he was to do, was done. Iswaran [god] can come in any form. Here he came in the form of a child with a desire. [The renouncer] gave the child what it desired and was satisfied, as if he had eaten. If he had eaten, the *paavam* [sin] would have attached to the child and also the *saabam* [lit., curse; here, the consequence of a bad action] to him. That is why ... he left right away.
>
> S. [The renouncer] says to the parents, do not scold the child. He has acted unknowingly.
>
> D. Aah. No, the child did not really act unknowingly. God acted through it. What the *sanyasi* knew was, "What I came thinking I should do here is accomplished. Now I have no more work here."

S. What I thought was if he had eaten after giving the *asirvadam* [blessing], then it would be as though he had eaten [taken] in return for giving.

D. In our thinking, that might work. But not for him really. *They come in order to give*. [My emphasis]. So having given, he feels fulfilled. Then why linger?

There are three noteworthy things about Dhandapani's understanding of this story. First, the renouncer's satisfaction comes from giving, not from satisfying any bodily need. By acting correctly, he becomes replete, even if remaining hungry. Taking the food would have had bad consequences for himself, the child, and its family. Second, the child unknowingly acts as an agent for god: the renouncer is not meant to eat in this house at this time.[16] His blessing has to take another form. Third, the renouncer comes to a particular house for food alms in order to confer a blessing. By taking the offering of food from the family, even without saying anything to that effect, the renouncer was actually giving rather than taking. Once he had blessed the child, he had given his blessing for the household. Thus, he left without eating. In this reading, the renouncer is completely free of need; even his eating offered food is a gift or a blessing. He is cast as a giver rather than a recipient.

Within both priests' interpretations, what is clear is that the renouncer avoids any whiff of give *and* take—the connecting word 'and' being crucial here. He may take (also conceptualized as giving in the older priest's reading) or give, but must not combine the two at any one time or place. Equally, he must not give too much, and he must not linger. He has nothing to do in this house once he has given his blessing; anything more would compromise his detachment. The renouncer's quest to liberate his soul means that he is severely constrained in his interactions with the very people who support his quest and, in some senses, make it possible. He has to consciously and constantly work at cultivating an engaged detachment to the extent that he must master, and forego if necessary, his bodily needs (hunger, in this case) if he is not to be compromised in the spiritual sphere. Others who interact with the renouncer are also constrained. The impulse to hospitality, the desire to provide delicacies—all this has to be set aside so that the moral project can be viable for both parties. In that sense, those who interact with renouncers also have to actively cultivate an ethic of engaged detachment. The renouncer who does not follow the rules is seen as having been false to the *sanyasa dharma*. Had the renouncer stayed and eaten, it is likely that RB's parents would have been critical of him internally, if not openly.

Here we see again that ethics is concerned with doing the right thing. We also see that ethical behavior is taught, reflected upon, and internalized, although there might be different reasons advanced for why a particular action is correct at a particular time. There is also a strong focus on volition—one can act in other ways but chooses not to. The boy is beaten because he *chose* to do something that his parents sought to prevent. Zigon (2009) characterizes morality as embodied and habitual, but, as the child RB learned, it is not always transposable across every situation. Doing the right thing in one setting, that is, prostrating oneself before a respected elder, is not necessarily

the appropriate action in another, for example, when the elder is a renouncer about to eat a food offering. This causes a pause, an opportunity for reflection, not simply for the child who is transformed as a result, but also for others who hear about the incident (as was the case for my Brahmin priest informants). In this case, the ethical moment reinforces the workings of Zigon's interrelated spheres of morality. However, even the child RB's action can be understood in a different way—as a representative of god at that particular moment. Recast according to Dhandapani's interpretation, the boy had no choice, and no blame could attach to him.

Conclusion

Conversations with each other or with the anthropologist wherein people discuss their own and others' actions and intentions offer an opportunity to reflect, explore, and evaluate various options and to arrive at fragile agreements about what is the good thing to do and why. People with whom I worked always did a certain amount of sitting around and talking while working or when the work was done. The interactions that inform this article came about in diverse ways.

Discussions of *dasagam* trips had the flavor of gossip. People, particularly weavers, talked about the actions of others that they did not approve of, even as they contemplated their own uncertain finances and possible debt. Most of the time, this would be in the context of weaving as a livelihood, as it is not a very valued one in Paiyur, with associations of weakness and lack of initiative (see Venkatesan 2010). In a sense, then, these discussions had the very pragmatic function of establishing the speaker as a person who, despite appearances, was in fact strong and had self-respect. Where the conversations were more exploratory, the emphasis was often on the ability to take risks successfully, as well as the grinding effects of long-term debt and the potential loss of a house to a moneylender. As I said earlier, those who made *dasagam* trips rarely spoke about them (unless to recount an instance that showed they were valued in the places they visited). This silence itself speaks volumes about the problematic nature of these trips, without any suggestion that those who go on them will stop doing so.

My discussion with the two priests about the child and the renouncer is somewhat different. It came up in the context of the kinds of behavior incumbent on renouncers from which there should be no deviation. This is in contrast to householders who, while recognizing rules for conduct, have some leeway in interpreting and acting on them, even as they justify their own particular actions. For instance, the younger priest, although unmarried, performs the public worship in the temple in clear contravention of the rules that require temple priests to be married (see Fuller 1984). His justification for doing so is his father's frail health and the need for temple worship to be performed no matter the circumstances. In our conversation, what became clear was that while the renouncer had only one way to act (not to eat on that occasion), the child's father had at least three options: to accept the renouncer's injunction

that the child was unknowing; to deem the child's actions as coming from god; or to punish the child as a way to teach it. He chose the last, and this had an enduring effect on Ramachandra Bhattru's understanding of the right way to behave—so much so that he jokingly told Prasad (2007: 202) that he, too, now locks up his son when renouncers come.

Notwithstanding the invoked presence of the ascetic renouncer, this article has focused on ethical issues raised by householders in situations of giving and taking about what they or others should do, should not do, and, more problematically, can do in order to accomplish what absolutely needs to be done. Where options are limited, as in the case of the poor men of Paiyur who seek alms to organize their daughters' marriages, the choice (at least as they describe it) is not between doing as one likes and doing as one ought; it is between doing what one needs to do in order to do what one ought as the parent of a girl. To them, this is a matter of morality, of law-like obligations. In other words, they say that they have no choice. Their detractors, on the other hand, argue that they choose to ask for money rather than working for it or going into debt.

The question of choice, then, appears as an important determinant in both evaluations and justifications. I suggest that this points to questions of freedom. How free is someone to do what is generally accepted as the right thing? In the absence of resources, how pertinent is it to discuss freedom from constraint, especially when people are bound by the claims of others? And what implications do the above have on people's decisions and abilities to lead what might be described as good lives, by their own criteria and those of people who matter to them? Liberal philosophers such as T. H. Green and Isaiah Berlin have made distinctions between different kinds of freedom. Green, for instance, distinguishes between juristic freedom, or the "power to act according to preference," and true freedom, which is "found in the pursuit of self-perfection, in the pursuit of something the individual believes to be truly good and that will bring permanent satisfaction" (cited in Dimova-Cookson 2003: 513). In Berlin's discussion, negative and positive freedoms are similar yet differ in important ways to Green's understanding of freedom. This is because of the ways in which Berlin problematizes 'positive freedom' or 'freedom to' in relation to 'freedom from' or 'negative freedom'. According to Berlin (1969: 130), the negative sense of freedom may be conceptualized as "What am I free to do or be?" and the positive as "Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or to do?" My contention is that ethnography reveals that one cannot make separations between what people feel they ought to do and what they feel they can do, even where desires are clearly known or knowable. For those enmeshed in social relations, 'ought', 'can', and 'want' inform each other in multifarious ways. Indeed, there can be more than one way of conceptualizing each unless one is, like the renouncer, committed to a lifelong and clearly laid out ethical project in terms reminiscent of Green's understanding of true freedom. From the householder father's perspective, there were, as has been noted, three ways to deal with his son—all of them correct, according to different perspectives.

Giving and taking, as key aspects of sociality, allow us to approach the questions of claims that people can or should make upon one another. I have

argued that notwithstanding giving being deemed a good thing in both Hindu-ism and Islam (albeit with injunctions about how, why, and when to give), tak-ing poses a problem for recipients who cannot or must not directly reciprocate that which is given. This paradoxical situation brings taking in particular, but also the motivations and modes of giving, into the purview of both ethics and morality. If we regard ethics as being concerned with action and morality as being concerned with rules, the paradox is intensified because while the rules may be more or less clear, action is driven by a host of considerations, not least of which is the desire to be and do good in ways that may not fully conform to the rules or to do something that is not considered good in order to fulfill an obligation. The question then becomes one of responsibility and account-ability. Whom should one take into account—the stranger donor/recipient, oneself, those to whom one has clearly defined duties, one's moral community, or all of the above?

Further, even where there is a strong value placed on giving gifts without expecting anything in return, there is an equally strong sense of the dangers of accepting such gifts. They can be seen as compromising in a number of ways, diminishing people or corrupting them. It also makes a difference whether the gift is one of esteem or altruism, with the former generally recognized as being superior, in terms of both the recipient's own sense of self and the valuations of others who form part of his/her moral community. Thus, even where acceptable categories of recipients of charitable gifts and alms are clearly identified within a given religion, 'asking' and 'taking' are neverthe-less freighted with negative valuations. As we have seen, taking might then be reformulated as 'giving', or recipients of charity might strive to establish more symmetrical relationships wherein they move from being 'just takers' to being givers as well. What this shows is that instances of taking and even of giving gifts where there is no explicit or clear return generate both ethical talk and ethical moments that reveal how people conceptualize the right ways to engage with others.

I suggest that the ethnographic discussions above point to two ways of conceptualizing interactions with others. The first can be termed an 'ethics of attachment', which relies on enduring ties and expectations, reciprocity, care, and interpersonal knowledge. This is what householders look on as right and good in their relations with other householders. The second is an 'ethics of detachment' (Candea et al. 2015). Here, the attempt is to keep interactions at the level of connections that are time and purpose bound, based on structural roles rather than on personal relationships. This is the right kind of relationship with a renouncer. Problems arise when the attempt to make enduring relations is not possible, rendering potential attachments mere connections, which, moreover, are seen as instrumental and cynical, as in the case of the *dasagam* seekers and those from whom they seek help. Problems also arise when an ethics of detached engagement based on non-reciprocity, which should obtain with a renouncer, is replaced by an action that turns the interaction into one of reciprocity (food alms in return for a blessing). Because people have a sense of how they should engage with other kinds of persons, and because instances of

unreciprocated giving and taking and asking lay bare the social and structural logics underpinning them, such interactions open up a rich vein of ethical talk and ethical moments in which people reflect on what they or others can and should do in relation to other people.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. See the debates and discussion on 'the good' in Venkatesan (2015).
2. See Laidlaw (2000) on 'free gifts' in the Jain context.
3. The calculations to determine *zakat* are complex and take into account, among other factors, (1) a baseline income under which zakat is not payable, (2) the giver's own needs, and (3) the labor expended in making money or wealth.
4. See the entry on 'Ṣadaḳa' by T. H. Weir in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, First Edition (1913– 1936)*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma, T. W. Arnold, R. Basset, and R. Hartmann, http:// dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-871X_ei1_SIM_5027 (accessed 21 August 2016).
5. See the Islam Question and Answer website, http://islamqa.info/en/34614. This website also states: "The Prophet … said: 'Charity given to a poor person is charity, but charity given to a relative is two things: charity and upholding the ties of kinship.'" See https://islamqa.info/en/20278.
6. See Simpson (2008: 384) for an account of an interaction between a Muslim holy man and one of Simpson's informants, Rafiq, who is willing to give the holy man only a small sum of money and no more. When the holy man tries to prolong the discussion, Rafiq tells him in no uncertain terms to 'get lost'. This interaction also

points to the correct kind of relations that should obtain between different kinds of persons, albeit from Rafiq's perspective. See also Osella and Osella (2009).

7. Bornstein (2012: 24) argues in relation to Weber's typologies of social action that charitable and religious giving (*dan*) is difficult to categorize neatly in terms of Weber's four ideal types—instrumental-rational, affective, religious, and traditional— since "the same act may be constructed differently in varied domains of action."

8. People do not necessarily travel far away to ask for help. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella (2009) recount an incident from their fieldwork in Kerala where a wealthy Muslim entrepreneur was asked for financial help by two women to whom he gave some cash each. When one woman asked for more, he got annoyed: "'You had 500 rupees', he hisses to her. 'What else do you want?'" (ibid.: S206).

9. One Malaysian ringitt is 20 Indian rupees, and one Singaporean dollar is 50 Indian rupees.

10. Reformist Muslim movements are seeking to discourage people from demanding or taking dowries but with limited success in Paiyur.

11. The mosque in Paiyur has been encouraging people to curb wedding expenses. Again, this is to little effect.

12. See http://en.alukah.net/Shariah/0/3455/.

13. Renunciation is not the only path to freeing the soul (see Venkatesan 2014a).

14. The majority of renouncers are male, although there are also female renouncers (see DeNapoli 2009; Hausner 2007).

15. Laidlaw (2000) shows how Jain monks practice *gocari* (grazing) wherein they accept food from lay Jains but without any expressions of gratitude or appreciation. The food thus collected is brought back to the monastery and mixed with other received food offerings and redistributed. The idea is to completely deny any connection with individual donors, who do not even receive blessings from the monks for the offerings they have made.

16. The idea that the gods temporarily act through a child or an old man is common. I have heard about a very orthodox Brahmin woman who offers all food to the household gods first before anyone is allowed to eat. If a child asks for the food before the offering is made, however, she never refuses because the gods may be asking in the form of the child.

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