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***Corresponding author:** Hasan El-Shamy, Professor Emeritus, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA, Email: elshamy@iu.edu; elshamy@indiana.edu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1510-9805>

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Review Article

Behavioral Potential and Memory for Verbal Folklore a Component of Folkloric Behavior

Hasan El-Shamy*

Professor Emeritus, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

Abstract

Psychological theories are of critical importance for understanding traditions, especially folk oral traditions, and narration. Since the mid-1950s until 2001 the situation concerning learning theories has *not* (my *Ital.*) changed in any significant manner as stated by Purdy, Jesse E. [(et al.)], *Learning and Memory* (second ed. Wadsworth: 2001). Regarding long-term memory, it is summarized that required for the continuity of Märchen, it is stated: "In contrast to short-memory, long-term memory is thought of as a system or set of systems that stores memories with retention intervals up to entire lifetime of 70 or 80 years. ...". (p. 5, cf. p. 116).

Nowadays, the Märchen seems to have vanished from active tale-telling (at least in countries where their narratives generated Märchen theory). Stith Thompson, who established the Motif-Index a folklore department the home of the Motif-Index of Folk-Literature is virtually never used. Consequently, this paper concludes with the following verified findings::

Reward and expectancy of reward play a decisive role in acquiring new responses and modes of behavior. They strengthen responses, helping to crystallize them into habits. At the same time, punishment, and the drive to avoid punishment are responsible for the inability to learn and acquire new, punished responses and for the inhibition, (as stated by Berlo, David K. *The Process of Communication*, (New York, 1961, pp. 98-99). Meanwhile, suppression and repression of habitual, punished responses are influenced by reward, while punishment determine an individual's 'behavior potential' at a certain time and under given circumstances. (Rotter, J.B. *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology*, (New York, 1954).

In the discussion that follows we will be concerned mainly with the learning of folkloric responses and the acquiring of folkloric behavior on an individual basis; as well as consider folklore learning on a communal basis, as it occurs in cohesive societies /(communities).

With the spread of the concept of quantifying folklore, the basic process of learning "Folklore", especially the verbal, remains unaccounted for. See:

https://whitewolf.fandom.com/wiki/Sterling_Institute_for_Folklore_Quantification

the response changed; at present "The true life of the Märchen fulfills itself ... in children's room," thus, "The work of the folklorist, which seeks to observe the life of the Märchen among adults is, mostly, research in relics [2]." Similarly, every other folklore genre is accepted and practiced or discredited and abandoned according to the same "whole" or "reference scale mechanism [3]."

The Details

Changes in cultural value systems have altered the role of Märchen in society. Max Lüthi sums up the situation: "Formerly, when there was no radio and only a few books were available, stories were narrated in the evening circles [1]." When the situation changed (different cues were included),

Effect

The concepts of *reward* and *punishment* are important in the development and strengthening of habitual folkloric practices. The individual does not respond unless he expects his responses to reward directly, through obtaining a desirable object (satisfier), or indirectly, through avoiding undesirable influences (annoyers). Reward not only influences the formation and strength of habits, but also the speed of their formation and their durability against the forces of time and social interaction.

The expectancy of reward is a vital factor in stimulating individuals and groups to act or react overtly, and to perceive and interpret stimuli, i.e., to act covertly. If the individual does not expect reward, he may refuse to select, perceive, and interpret a stimulus, for things that do not mean anything to him fail to attract his attention and have virtually no motivational impact.

Reward

A major concern of philosophical and psychological investigation has been the principle that pleasure and pain, being the consequences of human acts, are cardinal factors in determining the continuity or discontinuity of behavior. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) postulated that we do that which gives us pleasure and avoid that which produces pain. This idea developed into the theory of psychological hedonism:

"... the theory that man's actions are determined primarily by the seeking of pleasant, and the avoidance of unpleasant feelings [4]."

John Dewey, whose system of philosophy dwelt on education and learning, clarified psychological hedonism in his writings on "self-interest." He, perhaps more accurately, describes man's behavior as being primarily "in his own self-interest." Dewey concluded: "All members of the empirical school emphasized ... [self-interest as] the sole motive of mankind [5];" man only does things which he thinks are in his own interest and naturally avoids doing things he believes to be harmful. He evaluates his milieu according to 'what's in it for me.'

The first scholar to systematically test the effect of reward and punishment on behavior was Edward L. Thorndike (1874-1949), whose "Law of Effect" was one of three principal and five subordinate laws which constituted his psychological theory of learning. Thorndike's primary law in his theory of "reinforcement" is the law of effect. It stated that "the stamping in of stimulus-response connections depended not simply on the fact that the stimulus and response occurred together [Guthrie's basic principle of learning] but on the effect that followed the response [6]." Later, P.T. Young, in accord with "a good many psychologists," was to define reinforcement as "... a kind of strengthening of associative bonds that is revealed by an increased probability that a given stimulus situation will elicit a specific response [7]."

Through experiments with animals and humans, Thorndike concluded that the stimulus-response connection could be

reinforced if a stimulus was followed first by a response and then by a satisfier; but if the stimulus is followed by a response and then by an *annoyer*, the stimulus-response connection would be weakened, according to the law of effect. Thorndike defined a 'satisfier' as a state an animal seeks to maintain, and an 'annoyer' as one it seeks to avoid.

By a satisfying state of affairs is meant one which the animal does nothing to avoid, often doing things which maintain or renew it. By an annoying state of affairs is meant one which the animal does nothing to preserve, often doing things which put an end to it [8].

According to the "Law of Effect," the relationship between a certain motivation and a folkloric response (a response represents the value attached to a genre, such as the pronouncements that *Märchen* are "women's stuff," "songs are to be sung only to an appreciative, friendly audience," or "dancing is shameful") depends upon the type of reaction the operant receives when he expresses the genre. If a person employs a proverb to rationalize certain odd conduct and the proverb's validity is accepted by the group, the individual's association of rationalization with proverbs would be strengthened (or learned). If, however, the proverb is unacceptable to the group, the individual's association of rationalization with proverbs will be weakened. In the first instance, where the connection was strengthened by the reward, the response will be *more* apt to be repeated under similar circumstances, while in the second instance, where the connection was weakened by punishment, the response will be *less* apt to be repeated. According to this learning principle, folklore genres either prosper or perish.

Thorndike's law of effect [9] has undergone many re-phrasings, reflecting various views as to *how* the stimulus-response relationship is strengthened by reward or weakened by punishment; but the essential premise, that reward strengthens while punishment weakens connections between a stimulus and its response, has remained unchanged [10].

Punishment

Thorndike introduced the law of effect in 1913 and restated it in 1931. Initially he described "reward" as a factor which "stamps in" and "punishment" as a factor which "stamps out" a stimulus-response connection. Over the years, however, he reversed his stance on how punishment affects the learning process. He concluded that Reward strengthens a response substantially. However, punishment weakens it very little or not at all [11]. He finally concluded that reward has a *direct* strengthening effect on a connection whereas punishment operates *indirectly*, weakening a connection only if it leads the individual to change his behavior until a new response is learned to replace the old, punished one [12].

Turning from Thorndike's position, the question remains: *what is the real effect of punishment on learning, and where does the principle of punishment stand today?* These questions are of tremendous importance, for punishment is the major operating factor controlling change and stability in folklore material.

Punishment more effective than Thorndike Believed

In his *Theories of Learning*, Hilgard appraised Thorndike's conclusions under the title "*Punishment More Effective Than Thorndike Believed*." For Hilgard, Thorndike erred in calculating certain factors in his experiment, and he notes that "In several experiments, Thorndike made a faulty assumption about the baseline of chance expectation [13]." Had Thorndike's calculations been accurate, he would not have reversed his original stand concerning the direct effect of punishment on the learning. In other words, the influence of punishment on the learning process supported rather than discredited its effectiveness as a factor in punishment.

The research of W.K. Estes [14], and R.L. Solomon and L.C. Wynne [15] clarified the role of punishment as a "stamping out" force, noting that it only exerts this pressure when the punishment is strong enough to actually "stamp out." In other words, the characteristic effects of punishment are absent if the punishment is so mild that it constitutes no more than lack of reward. At the same time, ample evidence appeared to prove that punishment suppresses the punished response and leads to its disappearance. Experiments conducted by James A. Dinsmoor [16] and W.K. Estes [17] have shown that severe forms of punishment can indeed promptly suppress the punished response, the results of such suppression being unmistakable. The law of effect as it is accepted today remains close to Thorndike's original formulation [18].

McGeoch and irion define «effect» as follows

Effect means, throughout, what happens following the act in question, usually what happens within a few seconds after it ... I, ... acts are fixated and eliminated as function of their effect ... II: Acts followed by a state of affairs which the individual does not avoid, and which he often tries to preserve or attain, are selected and fixate, while acts followed by states of affair which the individual avoids or attempts to change are eliminated [19].

In terms of folkloric behavior, the principle of effect could be regarded as the actual factor that "stamps in" or "stamps out" the "connection" between a folklore genre and the function it performs in a community. If a person makes a folkloric response to a given motivation, using a folklore item for a definite purpose (*Märchen* to entertain, a proverb to rationalize, a legend to explain, a joke to elicit laughter, an amulet to cure, etc.), he will learn to make the same response (genre or folk item) under similar conditions, if his first and succeeding attempts prove rewarding.

On the other hand, if the first and succeeding attempts are punishing the person will *not* make the same response to similar motivations in the future. Instead, he will seek new responses in hopes of producing a rewarding "state of affairs" instead of the annoying "state of affairs" produced by his old responses.

These studies and their results are relevant to learning on an individual basis: now let us consider the nature of the learning of folklore in a communal or social context.

The concept of effect in anthropology and folklore scholarship

Anthropologists have recognized the importance of reward for the continuity of culture in general, and specific cultural traits in particular. Kroeber and Wissler (quoted by Miller and Dollard) applied the principle of reward to issues of cultural borrowing and cultural invention (innovation). In 1923, long before anthropology was influenced by any major learning theories, Wissler argued that if a borrowed or invented cultural trait provided reward, (such as the reward obtained by using iron instead of bronze) it would be adopted and put to use [20].

Similarly, Kroeber stated that cultural traits die out "... from inanition, from sterility of social soil, through supplanting by more vigorous descendants [21]," which prove more rewarding. This specification is made in statement II. McGeoch and Irion." In: *The Psychology of Human Learning* (see p. 40).

During the early and middle forties, under the influence of Hull's learning theory (Thorndike, 1913, p. 8), these implicit references to the positive effect of "reward" on the space-time continuity of a cultural item grew in importance until it became an accepted facet of culture basic to a great many anthropological definitions. Murdock's definition of culture includes the principle of reward as one of its basic seven components; for Murdock "*Culture is gratifying*: culture always and necessarily, satisfies basic biological needs and secondary needs derived therefrom [22]." Similarly, Kluckhohn states that "In every culture ... success, or reward, is essential to all learning. If a response is not rewarded, it will not be learned. Thus, all responses which become habitual are 'good' from the organism's point of view; they necessarily provide some sort of satisfaction [23]." This basic Hullian concept, i.e., satisfaction of biological primary drives, and derived, secondary (cultural and social) drives, became the foundation for Malinowski's functionalist approach (see *ante*, page 36) whereby "function" signifies satisfaction of a need and reward for response.

Drives are not merely "primary,"/biological ones; social and cultural drives/ (secondary drives) exist in their own right and can equal "biological needs" in drive-force. In folklore scholarship, the term "function" imparts the same meaning it has in anthropology: Bascom's "Four Functions of Folklore," is basically the application of functionalism (drive-response-reward) to folklore. Thus, function-oriented studies, such as the Herskovits' *Dahomean Narrative*, Messenger's "The Role of Proverbs in a Nigerian Judicial System," and William A. Lessa's "Divining from Knots in the Carolinas [24]," attempt to establish the drives eliciting folklore genres as responses and the rewarding role of these genres *per se*, whether these drives are purely organic and psychological or social and cultural.

This type of reward is intrinsic, deriving from the function of the folkloric item; the operant's response constitutes his own reward (drive - folkloric response - reward). A second type of drive-reward/punishment relationship is found in folkloric response as a function of *other* cues and *not* as a function of the folkloric response *itself*. This type of reward/punishment has been sporadically cited by folklorists from their field experiences.

Folklorists consider social reward a major factor in motivating narrators, singers, minstrels, dancers, etc., to perform their art before an audience. In reference to raconteurs, Thompson stated “The man who excels is rewarded with the esteem of his fellows and with much coveted prestige [25].” Berze Nagy, quoted by Dégh, thus described the storyteller:

He is always the center of the society, enjoys the privileges of a veritable chieftain, be it in the house or around the fire in the stable. He has the right to drink first from the flask, and is offered the best sort of tobacco. If the storyteller happens to be a woman she is in command of the members of the house even if she is not in her own home: this is her privilege [26].

It is mainly this type of social reward that motivates performers; while it is psychological satisfaction (wish-fulfillment), social satisfaction (entertainment), or cultural satisfaction (performing religious or mythical rites), that motivates an audience to reward the performer for his response.

Effect and social learning

Rewards and punishments are *not* merely aftereffects of behavior, experienced after making a certain response stamping in, or stamping out the rewarded or punished response. They are also, in their social and cultural context, vital factors motivating a person to act. Expectation of reward is a major drive which impels individuals to some acts, while expectation of punishment impels them to others. Non-biological, social or acquired rewards are enormously important in social life. “Relief from anxiety ... Receiving money, social approval, and higher status ...” are examples of acquired rewards which motivate individuals and groups [27].

Rotter’s «Behavior Potential»

Reinforcement is a basic motivational element in Rotter’s theory for predicting responses [28]. In his study of responses for application in clinical psychology, Rotter introduced a formula for behavior potential (B.P.). According to his theory, the potentiality of certain behavior is elicited through expectancy of reinforcement (E), and the value of the reinforcer (R.V.) for the individual. That is, the probability of certain behavior to occur is determined by two variables: the expectancy that the behavior in question will be reinforced (rewarded), and the value of the reinforcement (reward) to the subject (his basic formula is $B.P. = f(E.R.V.)$). For example, a person will not tell a tale unless he *expects* to be rewarded and unless the reward, which is determined by social and cultural values, is important to him. If a person has a choice between two anticipated rewards for two separate responses (such as listening to a tale and watching television) or can choose between being rewarded by an important member of the community or an unimportant one, he will choose the more advantageous reward. In their *Social Learning and Personality Development*, Albert Bandura and Richard H. Walters concluded that the presentation of positive reinforcers (rewards) [is] a means of producing socially approved patterns of behavior,” while punishment is used for “the suppression or *inhibition* of responses” [29] that are socially or otherwise undesirable.

Berlo’s «Fraction of Decision»

An occupational hazard for folklorists in the field is the problem of drawing informants into conversation. Whether as informants, or as operants, behaving naturally in their social and cultural milieu, people make conscious and unconscious decisions for every response they make. *What makes a person decide to tell tales, sing songs, or perform a ritual dance?* In other words: *What changes the individual’s behavior potential for folkloric responses?*

As noted earlier, drive impels the organism to behave and cues elicit his response and guide his behavior. Reward of the response strengthens the S-R relation, which is the essence of learning; without reward people fail to learn, and their unrewarded responses will disappear. Berlo’s “Fraction of Decision” theory employs a formula for this process in which reward plays the decisive role in determining the responses an organism makes. Following the suggestions of Fred Cottrell in *Energy and Society* [30], Berlo proposed that “... people and societies differ in the amount of energy available to them; therefore, they differ in the amount of learning or change in behavior that they can tolerate. In any given situation, however, behavior change is determined by reward expected vs. energy required [31].” Berlo applied the principle of “energy and society” to a communication equation developed by Wilbur Schramm to determine the “Fraction of Selection,” [32] which led to the more general equation of “Fraction of Decision [32].”

According to Berlo’s “Fraction of Decision” principle and Rotter’s “Behavior potential” theory, “We decide to perform those behaviors which we expect will be ‘worth the effort,’” that is when the behavior potential is major. Meanwhile, “We decide not to perform behaviors when we believe they are ‘not worth the effort [31],’” that is, when the behavior potential is minor. Thus, whenever the individual considers the expected reward to be greater than (>) the expected energy required (behavior potential is major), he will make that response, and whenever the individual considers the expected reward to be lesser than (<) the “expected energy required” he will *not* make that response (behavior potential is minor). The equation for Berlo’s principle is:

$$\text{Fraction of Decision} = \frac{\text{Expected Reward}}{\text{Expected Energy Required}} \quad [33]$$

By “expected energy required” for a response, Berlo means a group of relevant cues requiring the expending of energy in an activity, such as walking, talking, and working, or in an emotion, such as embarrassment, degradation, or frustration. As Berlo points out:

Although precise values are difficult to assign, the conceptual implication remains valuable. The greater the reward an individual perceives in making a response, the more energy he will expend (if he has it available) to make the response. As perceived reward decreases, required energy must also decrease if the response is to be made [34].

The Role of Reward in Folkloric Behavior: (Equations/Quantifying)

Overt folkloric behavior (narrating, singing, performing or making folk artifacts) and covert folkloric behavior (believing in ghosts and saints) are both determined by the individual's decision to expend the effort necessary to secure the rewards implied by surrounding cues. Archer Taylor, for example, in his introduction to *The Proverb*, declined to define the complex genre of his study and justified his omission by stating that the effort required would not produce a satisfactory, worthwhile result:

The definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone [35].

Attempting to define the proverb "is too difficult": the energy to be spent on the attempt is greater than (>) the anticipated reward. Taylor's rationale, in terms of the "Fraction of Decision" principle, could be represented by a formula:

$$\text{Fraction of Decision} = \frac{\text{Expected reward (achieving a proper definition)}}{\text{Expected energy required}}$$

Since expected reward is < [lesser than] expected energy required: Fraction of Decision is negative / Behavior potential is minor.

This principle is applicable to operants in a society as well as to informants in their dealings with field collectors:

I. Operants

1. Von Sydow regarded reward as central to all aspects of the process of folklore continuity:

An active teller of tales will become a passive bearer of folktale tradition when nobody cares to listen to him any longer and this may happen for various reasons. In religious revolutions a great variety of tradition will always become obsolete because they do not conform to the new form of religion, which will often take up a hostile attitude to them and force their bearers to inactivity. A similar change may occur in the case of political or social revolutions [36].

In other words, even an active narrator, (whose expected reward is always greater than the energy required to perform) can be forced to abandon his practice of tale-telling through lack of reward (a process of extinction), or through punishment (a process of inhibition, suppression, or repression), although the amount of energy required for his performance remains the same. The equation for Von Sydow's argument is:

A. In the case of active teller:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{social attention}}{\text{time, effort, possible embarrassment}} \end{aligned}$$

Expected reward > energy = positive response/Behavior potential is major.

B. In the case of neutralized teller (active teller becoming a passive bearer):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{time, effort, and drawing attention of audience}} \end{aligned}$$

When the expected reward is less than the required effort, the result is behavioral inhibition.

2. Another example is given by Eberhard in his study of the minstrels of Southeastern Turkey

A. In the case of an active performer, Eberhard reported:

... traditional minstrels sing upon invitation at weddings or other ceremonial affairs or drop into coffee shops and simply start to sing, receiving whatever money the public cares to contribute [37].

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{monetary reward and possible social reward}}{\text{energy, time and possible embarrassment}} \end{aligned}$$

Monetary reward and possible social reward > energy required = positive response/Behavior potential is major. The result is a positive response: singing for the expected reward.

B. In the case of a neutralized performer, Eberhard noted:

... the tradition is close to its end ... They [the Turks] will ... prefer to read the stories rather than listen to them, and will ask for more and different types of books, a demand the minstrels are certainly unable to fulfill. Even now a tendency to prefer crime stories and 'Westerns' is noticeable, and even in the hamlets the population is beginning to regard the narrations as 'old-fashioned' ... [38]

Thus, when a minstrel is called upon (stimulus) to perform, he will take all of these factors into consideration, and his decision will be influenced by the energy required to surmount the various obstacles and by the reward he expects to gain.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{little or no reward}}{\text{great energy requirements and possible embarrassment}} \end{aligned}$$

Expected reward < expected energy required = negative decision / behavior potential minor.

The same formula applies to the audience in deciding to attend the performance as to the minstrel in deciding to perform.

a. Positive decision, or listening to the minstrel:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{great reward (best available)}}{\text{time, less freedom of movement, payment}}\end{aligned}$$

Expected reward > energy required = positive decision/ Behavior Potential is major

b. Negative decision or choosing forms of entertainment other than the minstrel:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{small reward (not best)}}{\text{time, less freedom of movement, and payment}}\end{aligned}$$

Expected reward < expected energy required = negative decision/ Behavior potential minor.

Lord reports the following:

In market centers such as ... Novi Pazar and Bihac, market day ... is a good opportunity for the singer because, although his audience may not be stable, it does have money and is willing to reward him for his pains [39].

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Fraction of Decision} &= \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy required}} \\ &= \frac{\text{monetary payment}}{\text{energy, time, unstable audience, a mixed audience}}\end{aligned}$$

Monetary reward > expected energy required = positive decision / Behavior potential is major.

II. Informants

An informant being interviewed by a folklorist will consider the type of reward he is going to get out of narrating, describing, or singing. An informant shares folklore knowledge only when the expected reward is greater than (>) the expected energy required (behavior potential is major).

1. Some informants, like "Trefflé Largenesse [who] sat idly on a porch fronting the main street in town, bursting with *contes* and hungry for visitors;" [40] or the Irish country people who seemed "to realize instinctively that we [O'Sullivan and his colleagues] are doing something important for them [41]," are self-rewarding, deriving benefit through psychological gratification. The equation for these similar cases is:

$$\text{Fraction of Decision} = \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy}} = \frac{\text{psychological gratification}}{\text{time, effort required}}$$

Expected reward > required energy = positive / Behavior Potential decision is major.

2. Not all informants attain a sense of fulfillment through communicating their knowledge. Jan Vansina, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, and Ralph Piddington (see *ante*, page 40) find it necessary to add monetary payment to the expected reward in order to raise the behavior potential and to tip the balance to a positive decision. Expressed in an equation:

A. Fraction of Decision is negative; behavior potential is minor.

$$\text{Fraction of Decision} = \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy}} = \frac{\text{self-rewarding}}{\text{time, effort required}}$$

Expected reward < expected energy required = negative / Behavior Potential decision is minor.

B. Fraction of Decision is positive; behavior potential is major.

$$\text{Fraction of Decision} = \frac{\text{expected reward}}{\text{expected energy}} = \frac{\text{self-rewarding and monetary}}{\text{payment, time, effort required}}$$

Expected reward > expected energy required = positive decision / Behavior Potential is major.

Other folklorists find that they can influence the equation to their advantage by adding tobacco, liquor, etc. to the expected reward to increase "Behavior Potential." Whether the effect of such non-monetary payments is psychological or purely economic, the result is the same--major behavior potential and positive fraction of decision.

Berlo concluded his explication of the "Fraction of Decision" principle with a reassessment of the validity of the maxim "... that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive,'" stating, "... man does not behave on this principle unless he gets more from the giving than he does from receiving [42]." The maxim complies with the general rule of the effect of reward, the degree of giving being affected by the greatness of the reward to be gained. If, for example, the state of grace falls to individuals who have lived righteously, an individual's giving is not giving at all, but merely the discarding of minor rewards in expectation of the major reward--eternal joy in the afterlife. Thus, an individual's "giving" is actually an exchange of rewards, determined by the type of reward which he values most highly.

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