On the Ethical Life

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Edited by

Raymond Aaron Younis

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I dedicate this book to three teachers: to my (departed) mother, Nouhad, whose effortless and abiding lessons in love, devotion and selfless commitment, I am only just beginning to appreciate; to my father, Elias, whose quiet strength and integrity are examples to me still; and to my partner, Sharon Dean, who assisted me tirelessly at the conference in 2007, and whose maturity, beauty and insight inspire me constantly.

Their love and wisdom have brought me many profound and enduring insights into the nature, function and importance of the ethical life.

And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power...
Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:
would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.
—Rilke, "Archaic Torso of Apollo"

***

To be happy is necessarily the wish of every finite rational being, and this, therefore, is inevitably a determining principle of its faculty of desire. For we are not in possession originally of satisfaction with our whole existence- a bliss which would imply a consciousness of our own independent self-sufficiency…. For it is every man's own special feeling of pleasure and pain that decides in what he is to place his happiness, and even in the same subject this will vary with the difference of his wants according as this feeling changes, and thus a law which is subjectively necessary (as a law of nature) is objectively a very contingent practical principle, which can and must be very different in different subjects and therefore can never furnish a law; since, in the desire for happiness it is not the form (of conformity to law) that is decisive, but simply the matter, namely, whether I am to expect pleasure in following the law, and how much.
—Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*

By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it: if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions, as well as of those of other men. There have been, at the same time, not many perhaps, even of the most intelligent, who have been disposed to embrace it purely and without reserve. There are even few who have not taken some occasion or other to quarrel with it, either on account of their not understanding always how to apply it, or on account of some prejudice or other which they were afraid to examine into, or could not bear to part with. For such is the stuff that man is made of: in principle and in practice, in a right track and in a wrong one, the rarest of all human qualities is consistency.
—Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

One mark of living well is to live so that you can accept death and feel satisfied with what you have done with your life. Henry's life [Henry Spira] has lacked many of the things that most of us take for granted as essential to a good life…. He had no children. His father and one of his sisters committed suicide, and his mother was mentally ill for much of her life. His relationship with Rene, the sole surviving member of his immediate family, was not close…. Yet he was able to contemplate his own imminent death with no major regrets about the way he had lived. What made up for the absence of so much that, for most people, are the essentials of a good life?
—Singer, “A Meaningful Life”, *Ethics in Action*

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE ETHICAL LIFE

RAYMOND AARON YOUNIS

The philosophical question of the ethical life is as important if not more important than ever, given the phenomenon of global warming and some of its predicted impacts on habitats, species and biological systems, and given other major problems that confront us today. According to one report, UNICEF estimates that 25,000 children pass away every day on average because of poverty: they "die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world" (Shah, 2009). UNICEF estimates that 500,000 women die in childbirth or pregnancy annually, and for every one of those women who die, up to 20 women suffer from injuries or disease. Robert Neild (2002) has pointed out that a number of policies adopted by wealthy countries induce corruption and even violence in relation to the Third World. There are many other examples: the devaluing of human and non-human life that we see, for example, in relation to war and the killing of civilians but also in relation to some processes of meat and food production, a "global financial crisis" precipitated, it would seem, by complacency, greed, excess and the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth and capital, and more generally, the work of relieving pain and suffering, and so on. These kinds of problems do raise the question of what we ought to do in quite urgent and compelling ways. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and Peter Singer in our own time, have recognized the importance of the question of the ethical life, and emphasized it in their own work. In this respect, their work is relevant, thought-provoking and timely.

Kant, for example, in *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* understood the question in relation to the will, duty and happiness. The question of the ethical life is a question of the connection between character, volition, reason, the "good will", and worthiness in relation to happiness, which is understood in terms of "general well-being and contentment with one's condition":

> Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgment and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous, if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good. It is the same with *gifts of fortune*. Power, riches, honour, even health, and the general well-being and contentment with one's condition which is called *happiness*, inspire pride, and often presumption, if there is not a good will to correct the influence of these on the mind, and with this also rectify the whole principle of acting and adapt it to its end… (Kant, 1952, p. 256)

The question of the ethical life in this context then, is a question of adapting the will -which shapes or constitutes one's character, in some sense - to virtue or the "good", itself understood in terms of principles of action which emphasize the primary importance of duty. "Duty" was defined by Kant as "the necessity of acting from respect for the law" (1952, p.259). So, in order to understand the question of the "ethical life" in a Kantian sense, one needs to understand a conception of the law (in moral terms), a rational being's understanding of the law, and the ways in which this conception influences one's will and directs it so to speak, towards actions that reflect a love of, or reverence for, duty. "Moral interest" or significance then, if one accepts Kant's analysis, consists "in respect for the law" and in this sense, the question of the ethical life is fundamentally a question of the ways in which our actions express or instantiate a reverence or a respect for the "law", manifest for example, in the commands or imperatives that reason "issues… unyieldingly" (p. 261).

Mill understood the question of the ethical life very differently. He emphasized the importance of happiness but he did not conceive of it in terms of a reverence for duty. Certainly, he linked it to well-being and contentment as Kant had done, but Mill ascribed quite different sources and foundations to such things. So, for example, when he argued that the pursuit of an ethical life is also a pursuit of a happy, or happier, life, and when he linked happiness to pleasure and pain, in the body as well as the mind, he was providing an explicit alternative to the Kantian view:

> This remarkable man [Kant] whose system of thought will long remain one of the landmarks in the history of philosophical speculation, does… lay down a universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation; it is this:- "So act, that the rule on which thou actest would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings." But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he

> fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct. All he shows is that the **consequences** of their universal adoption would be such as no one would choose to incur… (Mill, 1947, p.4)

The dispute between Mill and Kant is outside the scope of the present chapter, though not outside the scope of the volume as we shall see, but what is striking here is the very different understanding of the question of the ethical life. Mill clearly believed that the question does not necessarily or logically entail an appeal to a universal first principle, such as a Kantian categorical imperative. The reasons why Mill believed this are clear: if one argues that there is one fundamental principle or law that underpins all morality, one ought to show that it is self-evident (not to say sufficient); if there is more than one fundamental principle or law that underpins all morality, there "should be a determinate order of precedence among them… and the rule for deciding between the various principles when they conflict, ought to be self-evident" (p. 3). These points are well-made, though the debate between neo-Kantians and utilitarians continues as a number of papers in this volume make clear.

It is well known that the question of the ethical life, as Mill understood it, is especially meaningful in relation to a principle that Mill had found in Bentham's work, namely, "the greatest happiness principle" (p.3). But Mill added: "Nor is there any school of thought which refuses to admit that the influence of actions on happiness is a most material and even predominant consideration in many of the details of morals, however unwilling to acknowledge it as the fundamental principle of morality, and the source of moral obligation" (p. 3). It is an interesting distinction that once again distances Mill's analysis from Kant's; it is as if the question of the ethical life and the question of happiness are deeply inter-related, though not necessarily (or desirably) in ways that require a fundamental principle and a single source of moral obligation or duty. In this sense, there is a kind of counter-reductive emphasis in Mill's approach.

It is not so well known that his understanding of the question of the ethical life is also revealed, memorably and implicitly, in his tribute to Bentham:

> By thus carrying the war of criticism and refutation, the conflict with falsehood and absurdity, into the field of practical evils, Bentham, even if he had done nothing else, would have earned an important place in the history of intellect. He carried on the warfare without intermission. To this, not only many of his most piquant chapters, but some of the most finished of his entire works, are entirely devoted: the 'Defence of Usury'. the 'Book of Fallacies'; and the onslaught upon Blackstone, published

> anonymously under the title of 'A Fragment on Government', which, though a first production, and of a writer afterwards so much ridiculed for his style, excited the highest admiration no less for its composition than for its thoughts, and was attributed by turns to Lord Mansfield, to Lord Camden, and (by Dr. Johnson) to Dunning, one of the greatest masters of style among the lawyers of his day. These writings are altogether original; though of the negative school, they resemble nothing previously produced by negative philosophers; and would have sufficed to create for Bentham, among the subversive thinkers of modern Europe, a place peculiarly his own. But it is not these writings that constitute the real distinction between him and them. There was a deeper difference. It was that they were purely negative thinkers, he was positive: they only assailed error, he made it a point of conscience not to do so until he thought he could plant instead the corresponding truth. Their character was exclusively analytic, his was synthetic. They took for their starting-point the received opinion on any subject, dug round it with their logical implements, pronounced its foundations defective, and condemned it: he began de novo, laid his own foundations deeply and firmly, built up his own structure, and bade mankind compare the two; it was when he had solved the problem himself, or thought he had done so, that he declared all other solutions to be erroneous. Hence, what they produced will not last; it must perish, much of it has already perished, with the errors which it exploded: what he did has its own value, by which it must outlast all errors to which it is opposed. Though we may reject, as we often must, his practical conclusions, yet his premises, the collections of facts and observations from which his conclusions were drawn, remain for ever, a part of the materials of philosophy. (Mill, 1838)

The question of the ethical life is also a question of carrying on a kind of war, but it is a civilized one for it is a war of argument and debate, against manifest falsehoods and absurdities, and against "practical evils" (understood, presumably, by Mill in terms of things like the oppression of minorities – for example, in *Representative Government*, Mill asks, memorably, is "it necessary that the minority should not even be heard? Nothing but habit and old association can reconcile any reasonable being to the needless injustice. In a really equal democracy, every or any section would be represented… proportionately", p. 257).

It is warfare "without intermission" and also involves the identification of fallacies, a battle against corruption that is driven in part by conscience; it does not settle for negative thinking. That is to say, errors are assailed, but some "truth", generally synthetic in Bentham's case, is subsequently "planted". Premises, and the collection of facts and observations from which these premises are drawn, are emphasized, and praised, by Mill. In this context the *philosophical* question of the ethical life is also,

inescapably, a question of rational argument, and a question in which premises drawn from facts and observations – for example, the facts that are revealed to us, if any, by modern biology in relation to non-human animals and their capacity to feel pain or to think and learn, or the observations that we may make about the proliferation of wealth in developed countries and the misery that abject poverty creates in other parts of the world, or about the impact of rising temperatures on ecosystems and weather patterns - are given a prominent place.

Singer has been especially attuned to these kinds of developments. He supports the utilitarian understanding of the question and develops it along similar lines. He objects to the Kantian theory very much along utilitarian lines, especially Kant's insistence on persons who find pleasure in spreading happiness independently of their self-interest:

> Here is a doctrine that might wring a grimace of recognition from an early Christian saint mortifying his flesh in the desert. In one sense Kant's view is diametrically opposed to the idea… that morality is a game for suckers; and yet the two views have in common the assumption that to act morally we must deny our own best interests for the sake of our moral duty. The difference is that those who think morality is a game for suckers see this assumption as a reason for holding morality in contempt, whereas for Kant, it merely shows how pure and rare true moral worth is. Kant's position offers a bleak prospect of the human condition. We grasp the moral law because as reasoning beings, we are inevitably aware of it and in awe of it, but we find it fundamentally hostile to our nature as physical, desiring beings. We may yearn to bring about harmony between the moral law and our desires, but we can never succeed. (1993, p.183)

Singer is surely correct in raising the question concerning the assumption – for that is what it seems to be - that links pure or "true" moral action to the denial (or if not "denial", perhaps to a relegation) of our best interests. But is Singer correct in his view of Kantian ethics? Does it offer, necessarily, a "bleak prospect of the human condition", especially when taken as a whole, or when recent re-interpretations of Kantian ethics are taken into account? Is the "moral law" as Kant understood it in fact "fundamentally hostile" to our "nature" in some respects? Is that yearning to bring about harmony between the "moral law and our desires" an impossible one? These are important questions and should not be ignored or overlooked. A number of contributors to this volume take a view of Kant that is quite different to Singer's view. The debate between them was one of the highlights of the conference from which this volume is drawn; it is notable indeed that Singer's work raises not just profound issues about

the question and nature of the ethical life, but also signals a revitalization of the debate between utilitarians and neo-Kantian thinkers.

Singer crucially applies the question of the ethical life to human relationships, for example, and notes that "we face ethical choices constantly" in this context: there are "opportunities to use people and discard them, or to remain loyal to them… we often know what the right thing to do is, but are uncertain about what to do" (2000, p.244). In this sense, the question of the ethical life has an interpersonal dimension: it is a question of our relationship with others around us. But Singer also captures the personal dimension that one finds for example in the Socratic tradition with its emphasis on self-understanding:

> There are, no doubt, some people who go through life without considering the ethics of what they are doing. Some of these people are just indifferent to others; some are downright vicious. Yet genuine indifference to ethics of any sort is rare… We should each ask ourselves: what place does ethics have in my daily life? In thinking about this question, ask yourself: what do I think of as a good life, in the fullest sense of that term? This is an ultimate question. To ask it is to ask: what kind of a life do I truly admire, and what kind of life do I hope to be able to look back on, when I am older and reflect on how I have lived? Will it be enough to say: "it was fun"? Will I even be able to say truthfully that it *was* fun? Whatever your position or status, you can ask what – within the limits of what is possible for you – you want to achieve with your life. (2000, p.245)

Singer's understanding then combines a sense of the personal and a sense of the interpersonal dimensions of the question. It is important to note too that one's sense of the "place" that ethics has in one's daily life, is not necessarily the same thing as what one thinks of as a good life. There is a question here of the relevance and importance of ethics in our daily lives, and another question of the shape, so to speak, of one's life as a whole. One might say that there is an existential dimension to the question, that is, in relation to our concrete, lived experience and awareness from *day to day*, and there is an ontological dimension to the question, that is the sort of life we might imagine or conceive of as *a whole*. These questions should not be conflated (and there is no suggestion here that Singer has conflated them).

Moreover, a life that one might admire – for example, the life of a philosopher like Socrates – also highlights another aspect of the question. The question of the ethical life is also a question of appropriate examples that one can or might follow; of role models or mentors or paradigms. So, when one says that one admires the life of Socrates in an ethical sense, rather than an aesthetic one, one might mean, for example, that one

believes that Socrates lived the sort of life that one ought to imitate in some respects or it might mean that some or many of the moral values that Socrates embodied ought to be upheld.

The question of "fun" is an important and timely one, as Singer realizes, and it does deserve more attention in relation to the question of the ethical life. It is not unheard of for many young university students to say in ethics classes that the most important thing in "life" is to "have fun"; or that their plans in the foreseeable future are to have "fun". This kind of thing is understandable of course. But there is some vagueness in the claims. What constitutes "fun" - sexual indulgence and/or consuming copious quantities of alcohol and/or other drugs? Is "fun" a question of "having a good time"? These kinds of definitions can be very problematic: for example, it is conceivable that one might live a life that could truthfully be described as a "fun" life, but it would not necessarily follow from this that that life could truthfully be described also as an *ethical life* - perhaps the "fun" was motivated by selfish or egotistical or predatory behavior; or perhaps the "fun" was gained at the expense of another's dignity or self-respect; or perhaps that life could also be truthfully described as excessive, indulgent, dissolute or decadent. If this argument is sound, it would follow that the appeal to "fun" is not in itself going to provide a compelling answer to the question of the ethical life; one could say in this respect that it is not so much the experiential constituents of such lives that provide the answer but the ethical frame, so to speak, in the context of which those constituents unfold, multiply and are understood.

Singer appeals to the case of Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*, and his analysis sheds further light on the question:

> According to Plato, Glaucon begins by retelling the story of a shepherd who served the reigning king if Lydia. The shepherd was out with his flock one day when there was a storm and a chasm opened up in the ground. He went down into the chasm and there found a golden ring, which he put on is finger. A few days later, when sitting with some other shepherds, he happened to fiddle with the ring, and to his amazement discovered that when he turned the ring a certain way, he became invisible to his companions. Once he had made this discovery, he arranged to be one of the messengers sent by the shepherds to the king to report on the state of the flocks. Arriving at the palace, he promptly used the ring to seduce the queen, plotted with her against the king, killed him, and so obtained the crown (2000, p.245).

Singer adds that the implication is that the possession of such a ring would seem to justify abandoning "all ethical standards" (p.245). Glaucon's challenge to Socrates then reveals another important aspect of the question

of the ethical life, namely, that a "wise" person who finds the ring would, "unlike the shepherd, continue to do what is right" (p.246). Although Singer does not elaborate at this point (on the question of "what is right") he nevertheless offers a useful modern answer to the challenge posed by the ring of Gyges: most people he argues, "live and die unreflectively, without ever having asked themselves what their goals are, and why they are doing what they do… Until you have put to yourselves the questions that Socrates faced, however, you have not *chosen* how you live" (p.247).

Singer goes on to voice some of the doubts that remain about ethics today. For example, "the assertion that life is meaningless no longer comes from existentialist philosophers who treat it as a shocking discovery; it comes from bored adolescents for whom it is a truism (p.248). This too is an important point that should not be overlooked. It too highlights the importance in turn of asking the question of the ethical life, again, today. Singer notes that the "pursuit of self-interest, as standardly conceived,.. a life without any meaning beyond our own pleasure or individual satisfaction" is "often a self-defeating enterprise" due, for example, to the "paradox of hedonism", familiar to the ancient Greek philosophers, according "to which the more explicitly we pursue our desire for pleasure, the more elusive we will find its satisfaction" (p.248).

The question of the relation between a life that is lived in the belief that it is essentially or fundamentally meaningless, and therefore perhaps needs to be "filled" so to speak, with fleeting pleasures or "fun" times, on the one hand, and the ethical life, on the other hand, is a significant one: if a life is believed to be meaningless, and if satisfaction or pleasure are pursued in the light of personal ambition and inclinations, and with an implicit understanding that freedom, pleasure, fulfillment, happiness and some kind of authenticity are to be sought in mass consumption, one cannot but wonder what the effect will be in ethical terms, if such an approach is universalized, in the context of interpersonal relations, communities, the environment, the distribution of resources and sustainability, among other things.

In *How are we to Live?*, Singer notes poignantly and memorably, that though we do not face the kinds of risks today that were faced by men such as Oscar Schindler and Wallenberg, or by Singer's own grandparents, there is nonetheless, "no shortage of opportunities for ethical commitment to worthwhile causes" (1993, p.254). This kind of understanding, and interpretation, of the question of the ethical life is arguably Singer's most lucid and enduring contribution not only to ethical debate today but also to contemporary applications of the sorts of utilitarian theories developed by Bentham and Mill. He writes (characteristically, one might add, for this is

the sort of note - practical, lucid, existentially engaged, timely and thought-provoking - that is often found in his writings on the ethical life):

> My involvement in the animal liberation movement has brought me into contact with thousands of people who have made a fundamental decision on ethical grounds: they have changed their diet, given up meat, or, in some cases, abstained from *all* animal production. This is a decision that affects your life every day (1993, p.255).

He notes that there is plenty of "significant evidence" that ethical argument "can change people's lives"; that a "moral revolution" (1993, p.256) can come about in people's lives as a result of reflection on the question of the ethical life, and as a result of understanding, of informed choices, and of decisive action. In this sense, there is almost a neo-existentialist dimension to Singer's ethics – that is, there is a strong connection between individual freedom, shared knowledge or understanding (for example, in relation to other animals), choices and active decision-making, and a kind of authenticity rooted in principles of consideration of the interests of other species, if any, and an ecologically rather than a narrowly humanist informed perspective on nature – that manifests a commitment to the transformative capability of personal utilitarian ethical frameworks. Implicitly of course there is the view too that the question of the ethical life can be a compelling and transforming one, when answered in the sorts of ways that Mill, Bentham and Singer affirm, variously.

Singer's insistence on the importance of "taking the view of the universe" has generated some debate but it is defensible on at least one interpretation. He states:

> from "the point of view of the universe" my perspective is no more privileged than theirs [that is, family and friends, for example]. Thus my ability to reason shows me the possibility of detaching myself from my own perspective and shows me what the universe might look like if I had no personal perspective… (2000, p.267)

What Singer seems to be saying, in the main, is that from a non-human perspective - and *conceivably* - a personal, human perspective would not (necessarily?) be privileged, in the sense perhaps in which a human being privileges things such as the interests of the self or its desires or orientations; or in other words, from a non-human perspective, one could imagine a world in which personal, human inclinations, desires, obligations, actions and orientations are not at the centre of the natural order. The latter point made by Singer ("if I had no personal perspective…") sounds like it owes a debt to Zen Buddhism but that does not necessarily make it

obscure, incomprehensible or incoherent! Reason allows us to construct pictures of other worlds in which human beings and their perspectives are not privileged; there can be little reasonable about this. Indeed one only has to picture the kind of world that evolution in one sense, suggests to some biologists, to see the point: a world in which all species are part, but none is at the apex or the centre, of the whole.

Also, it is not unreasonable to think that reason, allied to things like empathy, concern, understanding and imagination, allows us to take a perspective that is not our own. Of course, it is debatable whether or not we can *know just what it is like* to be a suffering pig, for it would seem that even a pig may not *know what it is like to be a suffering pig*, but this kind of objection misses the point somewhat. Singer is talking about the importance of taking a perspective that is not our own in order to allow for some understanding of, and insight into, the importance of the existence of species other than our own; of the possibility of detaching ourselves from our own, often self-centered, it must be said, interests in order to recognize other creatures whose existence is important and which may have "interests". Such a transformation is not only conceivable; it may reap significant benefits for other animals that may otherwise perish, or be pushed to the brink.

Singer continues:

> The perspective on ourselves that we get when we take the point of view of the universe yields as much objectivity as we need if we are to find a cause that is worthwhile in a way that is independent of our own desires. The most obvious such cause is the reduction of pain and suffering, wherever it is to be found. This may not be the only rationally grounded value, but it is the most immediate, pressing, and universally agreed upon one. We know from our experience that when pain and suffering are acute, all other values recede into the background. If we take the point of view of the universe, we can recognize the urgency of doing something about the pain and suffering of others, before we even consider promoting (for their own sake rather than as a means to reducing pain and suffering) other possible values like beauty, knowledge, autonomy, or happiness (pp.269-270).

So, "taking the point of the universe", it seems, is less about the attainment of a kind of pure objectivity; less about taking the point of view of non-human animals, or the point of view of something that is not like us; and more about taking a view that promotes an ethic in which the needless pain and suffering of species other than our own is decreased. "Taking the point of the universe" in this sense, raises our consciousness of the capacity for pain in nature - a capacity which some may forget applies to other species as well - and therefore may prompt us to take action more

quickly or more decisively, instead of focusing our energies in the short term, primarily, for example, on aesthetic, epistemological, or metaphysical or speculative questions.

If we do take this kind of point of view, another problem may also be overcome:

> the possibility of taking the point of view of the universe overcomes the problem of finding meaning in our lives, despite the ephemeral nature of human existence when measured against all the eons of eternity. Suppose that we become involved in a project to help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food. The project is an outstanding success.... Now someone might say: "What good have you done? In a thousand years these people will all be dead, and their children and grandchildren as well, and nothing that you have done will make any difference." That may be true, or it might be false. The changes we make today could snowball and, over a long period of time, lead to much more far-reaching changes. Or they could come to nothing. We simply cannot tell.
>
> We should not, however, think of our efforts as wasted unless they endure forever, or even for a very long time. We can make the world a better place by causing there to be less pointless suffering in one particular place, at one particular time, than there would otherwise have been. As long as we do not thereby increase suffering at some other place or time, or cause any other comparable loss of value, we will have had a positive effect on the universe. (p.270)

The question of meaning, understood metaphysically, is often considered in relation to the self and its concerns, aspirations, relationships, actions, projections and so on. Singer is surely correct in arguing that the work of decreasing pain and suffering, particularly *gratuitous* pain and suffering, can give one a sense of satisfaction or happiness, even of fulfillment, even if one's achievement is *not* an eternal one. This kind of argument is defensible. If we measured the true value of our acts and their consequences in terms of their *eternal or enduring significance only*, it would become difficult if not impossible for any of us – that is, unless we can see the future and without end *clearly* - to claim that the things that we have done have *true value*, precisely because the ability to see or grasp eternal or enduring things clearly (or at all) seems to be a very rare one indeed! To reinforce Singer's point concerning the value that attaches to, or the meaningfulness of, decreasing pain and suffering in the world, one need only think of recent attempts by compassionate, and empathetic, human beings, to save beached whales or otherwise traumatized non-human animals, and the esteem in which these kinds of efforts are held in many communities.

It is significant too that Singer stresses *not increasing* pain and suffering, and also *decreasing* pain and suffering; two significant tasks, not one, that form parts of the ethical life, conceived along broadly utilitarian lines. It also needs to be said that if one attempts to "help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food" and the attempt is "an outstanding success", it is difficult to see how one could coherently argue that *nothing that has been done as part of the project will make any difference.* Of course, much depends here on how one understands "making a difference"; it is a little ambiguous. So long as we understand "making a difference" in terms of *positive or beneficial change,* the attempt mentioned above can reasonably be said to be "successful" if it brings about such effects – it may even be "outstandingly successful". If it is successful, then it would follow that some "difference" has been made. It is hard to see how the charge - *nothing that you have done will make any difference* - can be true, particularly since it assumes two things: first, that the person making the charge implicitly seems to be claiming some privileged insight into the (distant) future; second, this person seems to assume that the difference that has been made *only* applies to the people in that community. In other words, there is a kind of speciesism at work here, or at least, a very human-centered view of difference and value, that is presupposed rather than demonstrated. It is at least conceivable that after the people of that community have gone, something may remain, for example in structural terms, or in relation to other species, that may "make a difference" and may even be, conceivably, of enduring value.

In all these ways, it is possible to speak meaningfully and engagingly of the "ethical life". The question of the ethical life encompasses many things, no doubt: a "good will", perhaps, freedom and choice, duty, utility, happiness and pleasure, decreasing pain and suffering, not increasing pain and suffering, an attempt to find meaning which is to say, to attribute some significance or value to a part or to the whole of one's life, trying to take a broader view and one that is not necessarily tied to human beings and their own (relatively) narrow concerns – by analogy perhaps – indifference, compassion and empathy, positive action, paradigms of ethical behavior, the sort of life that one would like to live or that one believes one ought to live, and so on. There are many dimensions to the question and to the discussion of the question and these dimensions. If one follows the debates between Kantians, utilitarians and others (all represented in this volume), and if one notes some of the consequences of not acting in beneficial ways to reduce, or not to increase, things such as poverty, disease, malnutrition,

environmental degradation and destruction, and so on, it seems reasonable to claim that the question of the ethical life is one of the most significant, and challenging, questions of our time.

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The following chapters draw on a number of papers from an international conference, "On the Ethical Life", held at the University of Sydney in 2007. Singer's keynote lecture was followed by papers which explored, critically, aspects of Singer's work, and more broadly, utilitarian responses to the question of the ethical life. A number of speakers provided neo-Kantian responses to the question. Others explored the relevance and importance of the question of the ethical life as well as salient themes and arguments in ethics today.

Singer focuses on six aspects of the question of the ethical life: universalizability and the basis of ethics; ethics and other animals; the sanctity of life and the "taking" of life; poverty and giving; method in ethics; and the place of reason in ethics. He outlines a number of objections to his arguments and proposes some counter-arguments. He also identifies some *aporiai,* or difficulties, that require further reflection and work. Two questions asked of Singer at the conference are preserved, with his answers.

Denise Russell is interested in the extent to which utilitarian theory, and Singer's own work in this respect, more particularly, can be applied to cetaceans and the sea. She examines some of the strengths and weaknesses of Singer's approach and asks: *is it possible to articulate a "sea-ethic" and what would it mean, then, to extend equal consideration to whales and dolphins?*

John Hadley and Siobhan O'Sullivan also draw on Singer's work to focus on "companion animals", "luxury goods" and the question of obligation in relation to giving. They note that Singer asks us to take into consideration the interests of other animals when acting in ways that impact on the wellbeing of such animals. They argue that Singer affirms even as he raises the moral status of animals and concludes that it is almost always unethical to consume non-human animals or exploit them in scientific experimentation. They argue that the most important modern utilitarian theories provide a framework that is useful for the promotion of interests other than our own, for example, those of other sentient animals. They add that recently, we have seen an increase in the trade in companion animal goods and services; that the trade in more luxurious goods is increasing greatly. They also note that New York Dog Lover Magazine,

for example, advertised a Swarovski crystal dog vest for almost $6000. Moreover, dog owners can spend a lot of money buying designer apparel for their animals; dogs can have a kidney transplant for around $10,000 with ongoing costs in the region of $150.00 and $2,000.00 per month, for such animals. They argue that although such practices may be seen to be consistent with the attribution of a higher moral standing for such animals, there are some aspects of Singer's ethics that would suggest that such behavior is not ethical, since he questions such behavior in light of the number of people living in poverty who might benefit from some of these funds. It seems then that that sort of spending on companion animals is highly unethical, not because the object is a nonhuman animal, but because the things that are bought are not essential to its needs – they could have been used to decrease the pain and suffering of another being.

Simon Clarke examines the "unjustified-suffering argument for vegetarianism". He argues that one argument against eating animals appeals to the unjustified suffering that is caused. He points out that while this argument has been put by a number of advocates, it requires more attention. He articulates it in a more convincing form, and rejects two major justifications for the consumption of animals and the causing of suffering. He compares other significant pro-vegetarian arguments, and looks at an objection to the argument that some animals would not exist if breeding them is not related to their being eaten.

Philip Quadrio also favors a Kantian view of the question. He explores the nature of Kantian ethics. He noted the ongoing tension between consequentialist and deontological theories. In the context of pedagogy, he argues that consequentialists often understand Kant as a sort of paradigmatic figure of deontological ethics. He agrees that there is some justification for this kind of view in relation to Kant's *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) but argues that in this text, Kant argued against a purely deontological theory of ethics. Quadrio argues that a fuller account of Kant's ethics, including earlier works such as *Lectures on Ethics* (1762-4), and later, "mature" works concerning ethics and political philosophy, such as *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), show that it is somewhat problematic to see Kant's ethics in "purely or primarily" deontological terms. So, Quadrio argues that there is a pedagogical issue here that needs to be resolved by ethicists today. He asks: if this view is correct, that is, that Kant's ethics should not be characterized as purely or primarily deontological, how should one characterize it? He offers an answer to this question concerning the very nature of Kantian ethics.

John Bacon takes a Kantian view of the question. He focuses on the feeling of "respect" in Kant's ethics. He argues that Kant excluded

"factually occurring emotions" from the foundation of his ethics; that Kant did not give the feeling of respect the importance that it might deserve. He goes on to argue that Kant knew of this problem and that he had tried to overcome it though not in ways which are convincing. So Bacon attempts to overcome the problem by drawing on Aristotle. Bacon sees this response as a fruitful one even if it does not bridge the gap between what common sense tells us about the importance of feelings and Kant's ethical theory. Bacon attempts a second step, this time borrowing from Allan Gibbard. Finally, Bacon proposes a revised form of the Categorical Imperative and hopes it works! Then, he maintains, it is "back to the drawing–board"! Since his paper followed Singer's keynote lecture at the conference, and generated some animated discussion, much of its content (and style) remains intact.

Raymond Aaron Younis returns to the question of the ethical life in "*Aporiai:* On Reconstruction, Ethics and the Ethical Life". He recalls Aristotle's warning in *Metaphysics* (Book 3, 995a27-b2)*:* "we must recount the things that must be puzzled over... For those who wish to get clear of perplexity it is advantageous to state the perplexities well; for the subsequent freedom from perplexity (euporia) implies the solution of the previous perplexities and it is not possible to lose a fetter one is not even aware of." Younis questions whether one can go forward in debates about the ethical life if a number of perplexities (*aporiai*) remain; whether we do not resemble people who are in fetters and who inquire openly without articulating a preliminary account of the obstacles that lie in the way of understanding, so to speak. He argues that the Aristotelian account of the *aporiai* not only in *Metaphysics* but also in *Nicomachean Ethics,* is pertinent in a discussion of the "ethical life" today; that Derrida's reading of these *aporiai,* though suggestive and original, is significantly flawed because of its inherent ambiguity and reductiveness; that a difficulty emerges in Singer's ethics (in which the distinction between the *elimination* of pain and suffering on the one hand, and the elimination of *pointless* pain and suffering on the other hand, though it is granted that both may be significant global goals, is blurred in ways that do not serve Singer's argument well). Younis concludes that the *reduction* (rather than the *elimination*) of *pointless* or *gratuitous* pain and suffering, as well as the advancement of the interests of human *and* non-human sentient beings, are defensible elements in what might justifiably be called an "ethical life" today; he also argues that such a life may in turn also offer one solution to the "problem of finding meaning" (Singer, *How are we to Live?,* p. 226) in our lives.

Anthony J. Langlois focuses on charity, justice and Singer's solution. He returns to the debate between Andrew Kuper and Singer in 2002. Kuper had argued that "the Singer Solution to World Poverty", though praiseworthy in terms of its sentiments, lacked an adequate theoretical base that would make it convincing in relation to key issues in debates about global poverty. Langlois looks at Kuper's argument and Singer's counterargument, and applies the debate to more recent writings by Singer (*One World: The Ethics of Globalisation*, 2004). According to Langlois, Singer builds upon the earlier "Singer Solution to World Poverty"; Langlois asks whether these developments address Kuper's argument, especially in terms of the question of the "locus of responsibility" in relation to action on global poverty. Langlois argues that Singer's emphasis on the capacity of the rich to intervene by giving a part of their excess earnings does have an advantage namely, saving lives now, but he questions if this kind of strategy can give us a foundation for an enduring global solution. He also argues that long terms solutions are needed so that Singer's own solution becomes part of a focus on justice understood globally; and so that Singer's solution is not seen just in terms of minor charitable aid for the poor and a "sop" for wealthy people's consciences.

Nina Brewer-Davis focuses on friends, families and moral theories. She argues that our relationships with friends and families with their associated obligations, are considerable ethical elements in our lives. She argues that they deserve more attention, rather than moral theories that stress impartial duties that apply equally to everyone. She points out that some theories deny the importance of friends and families, while other theories deal with such things awkwardly. She looks at how such "associative obligations" are taken up by four moral approaches: *agent-neutral skepticism, agent-relative skepticism, agent-neutral reductionism, and agent-relative reductionism.* She argues that each one of these is problematic and concludes that "associative obligations" need to be *agent-relative* and *non-reductive.* She then outlines another account that satisfies the criteria, namely, "shared history". That is, persons who are in relationships are psychologically connected in terms of such things as inter-relation and common values; in time, that is to say, their relationship affects their values, interests, and so on. Brewer-Davis argues that this kind of affect provides a foundation for a kind of *special concern,* which may provide a justification for obligations of an associative kind.

Joe Mintoff critically examines Singer's argument concerning the discovery of meaning through "doing good". According to Mintoff, Singer (in *How Are we to Live?)* argues that meaning can be found in human lives by working in favor of a "transcendent cause", and that living

"an ethical life" can have the strongest foundation in this context. Mintoff questions this kind of argument; he asks whether there are alternative ways of finding meaning in our lives. He concludes that the "life of cultured leisure does not suffer from the limitations of the ethical life. Most importantly, it is more like the intimate and delightful examination of some grand temple than the tedious labors of removing graffiti from one of its walls."

In the *Afterword,* Younis argues that recent attempts to assert the "end of ethics", in some sense, are unconvincing, because they are unclear, incoherent or reductionist; that the question of the relation between "ethics" and "ethical theory" is important in terms of the success of such attempts to assert "the end of ethics", but is not resolved in any clear or convincing way; that the question of the relation between ethics and rationality, highlighted in some of Singer's recent writings, deserves further analysis and reflection; and identifies further *aporiai* to be reflected upon and resolved. He concludes however that, notwithstanding such perplexities, the question of "the ethical life", and the pursuit of it, in the sense, for example, of *not increasing* gratuitous pain and suffering but also in the sense of *decreasing* such pain and suffering, remain urgent and challenging

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CHAPTER ONE

ON THE ETHICAL LIFE

PETER SINGER

1. The Basis of Ethics

What is it to live an ethical life? I shall start with where I come from philosophically, and then say something about some of the major issues that I think are important in terms of living an ethical life. After that I turn to the underlying ethical theory, in order to explain my stance on the extent to which there is a rational basis for living an ethical life.

Ethics is about making choices, about deciding what to do. But not just any decisions about what to do count as ethical. For a decision to be ethical, R M Hare argues, it has to be universalizable. This means that it has to be a decision you can prescribe irrespective of the position you might occupy in terms of the implications of that decision. Another way of putting this is that you have to be prepared to accept a decision, not from where you actually stand but as if you are in the position of the other person.

For a judgment to be universalizable, you have to be able to make it without using proper names or personal pronouns. That restriction doesn't quite do enough. It rules out some rather obvious principles like "It is acceptable to cheat on your taxes if you are Peter Singer but not if you are anyone else." No doubt, however, there are some minutely detailed descriptions of me that apply to nobody else. Could I therefore hold, in a universalizable manner, the principle that a person who is exactly like *this* (with the minutely detailed description filled in) can cheat on his taxes, but no one else can? The principle of universalizability does not rule this out in a formal way, but in practice it does so because of the requirement that we must accept our moral judgments in hypothetical as well as actual situations. I can imagine that the minutely detailed description does not apply to me, and does apply to someone else. Would I still accept the rule about who can cheat on their taxes? Presumably not.

When we consider ethical choices that affect many people, things get more complicated but the idea is still the same: you have to be prepared to put yourself in the position of *all* those who are affected by your actions and then consider whether that is a decision you would still be prepared to endorse if you had to live the lives of all those beings.

The core of universalizability is an ancient idea that can be traced back, in the Western tradition, at least to the Stoics, and can be found in other ethical traditions as well. Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative in terms of universal law can be understood as an imperfect formulation of universalizability. Henry Sidgwick, the great 19th century utilitarian, used the phrase "from the point of view of the universe" to indicate the perspective from which we give equal weight to everyone's interests. Bernard Williams pointed out that the universe doesn't have a point of view and I certainly agree with that, but I do not think it impugns the possibility of judging as if one were taking a universal perspective. The "veil of ignorance" that John Rawls talks about has a similar effect, as does the impartial or ideal observer that R.B. Brandt proposes. All of these proposed defining features of ethics force you to make decisions from a perspective that is not a self-interested one.

Does universalizability mean that to live ethically we are always required to be impartial, even towards our own children or friends or lovers? This is a well known objection to utilitarianism and other ethical theories that require impartiality. The claim is that such an ethical stance alienates us from the personal relationships that are most important to us. Universalizability, however, does not rule out such forms of partiality. Instead it demands that they be justified in impartial terms. Can there be an impartial justification of having close personal ties which of their very nature require you to show a degree of favoritism to those to whom you are close? I believe that we can give an affirmative answer to that question, precisely because these personal relationships play such a large part in whether our lives go well or badly.

If universalizability is the foundation of ethics, what role can be found for respect for rights, or other deontological notions? Such ethical principles need to be defended and justified. It can plausibly be argued that, considering the matter from the point of view of all affected, we would want to live in a society that respects some basic individual rights, and erects barriers against their violation in all but the most exceptional circumstances. That position can be defended in terms of enhancing a feeling of security or safety. It is, of course, a consequentialist justification of rights. Whether rights can be given any kind of intrinsic justification is questionable. We would need to ask which rights we have,

where they come from, and how we know we have them. Some would say that they are self evident, or that we can intuit them. But even among those who think that basic rights are self-evident, there is no agreement on what these rights are, and that surely throws into question the whole idea that they are self-evident.

What else, apart from universalizability, is required to make good ethical choices? The characteristics of reasoning in general are relevant here. When we think through our ethical positions, we should check if our views are consistent, coherent, and avoid arbitrariness or capriciousness in the distinctions that we draw. For example, where do we draw the boundary of our moral concern? Is this arbitrary, or based on something that provides an important distinction between those beings who fall inside, and those who fall outside, that moral boundary?

I turn now to three particular areas of ethics in which I have worked.

2. Ethics and Animals

The issue of how we should treat animals illustrates the application of the tools of ethical reasoning to which I have just referred. There is nothing inherent in the idea of universalizability that says that when we universalize our judgments - putting ourselves in the position of others – we should only put ourselves in the positions of other human beings. The only boundary to universalizing is the inevitable boundary of sentience or consciousness. We are asking "how would I like it if...?" and for that question to make sense, the being in whose place we are putting ourselves has to be a sentient being, that is one with feelings or consciousness. We can meaningfully ask how we would like being a pig confined for months in a stall too narrow to allow her to turn around, but we can't meaningfully ask how we would like it if we were a tree, and someone were to chop the tree down.

Unfortunately many philosophers have, in the past, assumed that ethics applies only to human beings, not only as moral agents – which is a defensible view, although of course not all human beings are moral agents – but also as moral patients, that is, as the subjects of moral concern. This assumption was so widespread that it was rarely defended – philosophers and others just did not see the need to defend it. Kant, for example, talks about respect for humanity as an end and never merely as a means but his justification for treating humanity as an end is in terms of their rational or autonomous nature. He never really addresses the question of whether those human beings who are not rational or autonomous beings – for example, infants or those with such severe intellectual disabilities that they