

The Drowning Child

To challenge my students to think about the ethics of what we owe to people in need, I ask them to imagine that their route to the university takes them past a shallow pond. One morning, I say to them, you notice a child has fallen in and appears to be drowning. To wade in and pull the child out would be easy but it will mean that you get your clothes wet and muddy, and by the time you go home and change you will have missed your first class.

I then ask the students: do you have any obligation to rescue the child? Unanimously, the students say they do. The importance of saving a child so far outweighs the cost of getting one's clothes muddy and missing a class, that they refuse to consider it any kind of excuse for not saving the child. Does it make a difference, I ask, that there are other people walking past the pond who would equally be able to rescue the child but are not doing so? No, the students reply, the fact that others are not doing what they ought to do is no reason why I should not do what I ought to do.

Once we are all clear about our obligations to rescue the drowning child in front of us, I ask: would it make any difference if the child were far away, in another country perhaps, but similarly in danger of death, and equally within your means to save, at no great cost – and absolutely no danger – to yourself? Virtually all agree that distance and nationality make no moral difference to the situation. I then point out that we are all in that situation of the person passing the shallow pond: we can all save lives of people, both children and adults, who would otherwise die, and we can do so at a very small cost to us: the cost of a new CD, a shirt or a night out at a restaurant or concert, can mean the difference between life and death to more than one person somewhere in the world – and overseas aid agencies like Oxfam overcome the problem of acting at a distance.

At this point the students raise various practical difficulties. Can we be sure that our donation will really get to the people who need it? Doesn't most aid get swallowed up in administrative costs, or waste, or downright corruption? Isn't the real problem the growing world population, and is there any point in saving lives until the problem has been solved? These questions can all be answered: but I also point out that even if a substantial proportion of our donations were wasted, the cost to us of making the donation is so small, compared to the benefits that it provides when it, or some of it, does get through to those who need our help, that we would still be saving lives at a small cost to ourselves – even if aid organizations were much less efficient than they actually are. [...]

We live in a time when many people experience their lives as empty and lacking in fulfilment. The decline of religion and the collapse of communism have left but the ideology of the free market whose only message is: consume, and work hard so you can earn money to consume more. Yet even those who do reasonably well in this race for material goods do not find that they are satisfied with their way of life. We now have good scientific evidence for what philosophers have said throughout the ages: once we have enough to satisfy our

basic needs, gaining more wealth does not bring us more happiness. [...]

We must free ourselves from this absurd conception of success. Not only does it fail to bring happiness even to those who do extraordinarily well in the competitive struggle; it also sets a social standard that is a recipe for global injustice and environmental disaster. We cannot continue to see our goal as acquiring more and more wealth, or as consuming more and more goodies, and leaving behind us an even larger heap of waste.

We tend to see ethics as opposed to self-interest; we assume that those who make fortunes from insider trading are successfully following self-interest – as long as they don't get caught – and ignoring ethics. We think that it is in our interest to take a more senior better-paid position with another company, even though it means that we are helping to manufacture or promote a product that does no good at all, or is environmentally damaging. On the other hand, those who pass up opportunities to rise in their career because of ethical 'scruples' about the nature of the work, or who give away their wealth to good causes, are thought to be sacrificing their own interest in order to obey the dictates of ethics.

Many will say that it is naive to believe that people could shift from a life based on consumption, or on getting on top of the corporate ladder, to one that is more ethical in its fundamental direction. But such a shift would answer a palpable need. Today 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. Perhaps it is the central place of self-interest, and the way in which we conceive of our own interest, that is to blame here. The pursuit of self-interest, as standardly conceived, is a life without any meaning beyond our own pleasure or individual satisfaction. Such a life is often a self-defeating enterprise. The ancients knew of the 'paradox of hedonism', according to which the more explicitly we pursue our desire for pleasure, the more elusive we will find its satisfaction. There is no reason to believe that human nature has changed so dramatically as to render the ancient wisdom inapplicable.

Here ethics offer a solution. An ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, larger, goals, thereby giving meaning to our lives. The view that there is harmony between ethics and enlightened self-interest is an ancient one, now often scorned. Cynicism is more fashionable than idealism. But such hopes are not groundless, and there are substantial elements of truth in the ancient view that an ethically reflective life is also a good life for the person leading it. Never has it been so urgent that the reasons for accepting this view should be widely understood. [...]

from Peter Singer The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle
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