

## FLOATING AGENCY AND FADED VALUE: WHY SHOULD BE ETHICAL?

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Do not be surprised at encountering another long queue in front of a *Reliance Jio*<sup>1</sup> outlet, nor be annoyed at a deadly Delhi<sup>2</sup> traffic jam and do not pass a comment that people have become too selfish, that they have abandoned ethics. No wonder, an elderly doctor couple were murdered cold blood without the notice in a crowded nine storied flat in the pos area of Bhubaneswar<sup>3</sup> or a three year old innocent girl is harassed at a renowned English medium school in Bangaluru,<sup>4</sup> equally unnoticed and unalarmed. In a country where elections are accused of being won on the basis of freebies like television sets or laptops, where the book “The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari” is being named as the best seller spare the *Gītā* or its magnificent philosophical heritage, where the age old notion of *moksa* has become a commodity earned through unchecked drugs effect and sexual activity in the name of modernised spiritual order at a high-tech ashram, a country where the magnanimous yogic system has turned into merely a cardiac exercise to make you a model like outfit, these unusual and unethical behaviour are obvious and spontaneous expressions. So natural is the question “why the hell be ethical?” in the age of self interest when the recent election in the most affluent and effective democracy in the world backed the idea “America First.”<sup>5</sup>

A preliminary clarification about the nature of the question “why be ethical?” is needed. For example Peter Singer in his much talked about essay “Why should I act morally?”<sup>6</sup> states that this question is a metaethical question seeking a justification about our ethical behaviour whether it is ethically laudable or condemnable. Many people hold that this question is as improper to ask as a question like why should I act

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<sup>1</sup> Reliance is an Indian private enterprise doing business in many areas. Recently it lunches free mobile data pack which created lots of enthusiasm among Indian costumers.

<sup>2</sup> Delhi is the capital city of India and suffers from bad traffic jam due to non-adherence to traffic rules.

<sup>3</sup> Bhubaneswar is the capital city of the state of Odisha, India, where an elderly couple were killed cold blood in a crowded apartment.

<sup>4</sup> Bangaluru is a popular city in India where this heinous crime happened in a reputed school.

<sup>5</sup> The slogan was the tagline for the American Presidential election.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p- 6.

rationally? For, asking this question already presupposes the efficacy of rationality. After all seeking an answer whatsoever it may be is a presupposition of rationality in operation. Similarly asking the question ‘why should I act morally?’, one already presupposes the efficacy of ethicality. However, the type of question asked here is not a metaethical question, a question about ethics but a question in ethics i. e., acting ethically means acting in a certain way- morally good way. This is a question about the choice between two types of actions and inviting a normative justification behind such a choice. More candidly, this is a question to shun actions motivated by self-interest and appreciate action directed towards others, moulded by altruistic reason. So here being ethical means being motivated or guided by altruistic reasons and unethical otherwise. More candidly, if someone acts on purely self interest we would term him acting unethically. Similarly, if one acts out of altruistic reasons we would term him as ethical. The depth of the question lies in the fact that most of the people in present time act out of self interest and justify this stance as ethical and do not see sufficient reason to act altruistically. This work is a sincere attempt to delineate adequate reasons for acting altruistically.

Last three or four decades is the age of systematic wealth accumulation, the age of Ivan Boesky, corporate raiders like Carl Icahn, T. Boone Pickens, or Henry Kravis, developers such as Donald Trump, the junk bond financier Michael Milken or Wall Street chiefs like Salomon Brothers’ John Gutfreund. This is also age of Malavyas when greed and self-interested development have been lauded never before. Eighties in the America was known as the decade of greed when Boesky himself delivered a commencement address at the school of business administration at the University of California, Berkeley, in which he told his audience: greed is alright ... greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.<sup>7</sup> Today in India major junk of people train their off springs this attitude of self-service and universal and eternal greed in the name of self-existence and development. No wonder, the popular cinemas translate the attitude by defining life as a race and morning walk will not work.

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Slater, *The Titans of Takeover*, p. 132; Adam Smith, *The Roaring '80s*, Penguin Books, New York, 1988, p. 209.

While life is a race, obviously Arjuna<sup>8</sup> cannot but see only the eyes of the fish deliberately ignoring the serene and sagacious splendour of the tree. No wonder, this eternal race has produced a peculiar folk who longed to earn money, lots of it and made a culture of unending earning and extravagant spending. What was happening was, as Michael Lewis put it in his popular *Liar's Poker*, 'a rare and amazing glitch in the fairly predictable history of getting and spending.' Smart bond traders like Lewis were earning a million dollars a year in salary and bonuses before they turned twenty five. Never before, Lewis could truthfully assert, have so many unskilled 25 year olds made so much in so little time as we did this decade in new York and London.'<sup>9</sup> It should not be understood that this is an act of envy by the oldies towards young people and their success. There is nothing wrong in making money. However, envisaging money-making as the only goal of life invites many problems. Sometimes, it triggers social violence, systematic corruption, social and economic exclusion and many a time the ruin of personal life.

#### **Faded Values: Mine to None**

Justification of this self-interested stance towards life took two philosophical foundations. A) A detached and disconnected self and agency endorsed by the age old individualistic philosophy. And B) The alternative to this stance seemed vague and vicious. To explain the second stance peter singer records:

The problem is that most people have only the vaguest idea of what it might be to lead an ethical life. They understand ethics as a system of rules forbidding us to do things. They do not grasp it as a basis for thinking about how we are to live. They live largely self-interested lives, not because they are born selfish, but because the alternatives seem awkward, embarrassing, or just plain pointless. They cannot see any way of making an impact on the world, and if they could, why should they bother? Short of undergoing a religious conversion, they see nothing to live for except the pursuit of their own material self-interest.<sup>10</sup>

Not only that the alternative sounds vague, it often invites bizarre results. People think that the immediate alternative to self interested stance to life is an absolute and

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<sup>8</sup> Arjuna is a character in the great epic the Mahabharata in India. It is noted that Arjuna, in order to marry Draupadi, the princess had to win an archery competition where he had to aim at the eyes of the small bird sitting on a tree.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Lewis, *Liar's Poker*, Penguin Books, New York, 1990, pp. 9, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Singer, *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest*, Random House, Australia, 1993, p-280.

universal view of the world which imposes abstract categories on human existence and sabotage our freedom. For them ethics has necessarily a religious favour and therefore people who do not subscribe to religious world view cannot see any meaning in life outside mere merry-making. Nor ethics coloured with political ideology is of much help. More candidly, the way socialism was turned into Leninism or Stalinism left many faces pale about the efficacy of political ideology. Furthermore, the collapse of communist societies in Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union has revealed the utopian nature of Marxist thought. Only a brave few cling to the socialist ideal, rejecting the distortion Lenin and Stalin brought and claiming that it has never had a proper trial. It seems to many that the individualist view of self-interest is the only one that is still viable. So obvious was the fading of ideology and assertion of self-interested view that, Daniel Bell predicted ‘the end of ideology’<sup>11</sup> In the sixties Francis Fukuyama, a former deputy director of policy planning at the US state department has argued – in the line of Hegel- in the “End of History and the Last Man” that this end is precisely the universal acceptance of the liberal democratic free enterprise form of society.<sup>12</sup> So people are justified pursuing self-interested goals because there is no absolute and universal value which can move them.

The redundancy of absolute or objective values took two roots. Firstly, no value seems more important than self preservation and therefore becomes a prey of power equation. Values are necessary to preserve or protect people from possible threats. What if there is no such possible self- thwarting? Values seem irrelevant, redundant. And secondly, values are understood from relativist and subjective point of view. The first root dates back to the Greek tradition which is recorded in one of the dialogues of Plato i.e., *Republic*.

According to Plato, Glaucon, a well-to-do young Athenian in order to challenge Socrates, begins by retelling the story of a shepherd who served the reigning king of Lydia. The shepherd was out with his flock one day when there was

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<sup>11</sup> See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 2nd edn, with a new Afterword, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988.

<sup>12</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1992.

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 his 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.

Glaucon takes this story to reaffirm a commonsense view of ethics that values are only for the poor and the weak. Anyone who has enough power to protect himself and affirm his superiority, anyone who had such a ring would abandon all ethical standards. For him there is no value than exercising power. Values are his wish, whims and he is quite rational to forsake values whatsoever. Plato in his dialogue records:

. . . no one, it is thought, would be of such adamant nature as to abide in justice and have the strength to abstain from theft, and to keep his hands from the goods of others, when it would be in his power to steal anything he wished from the very marketplace with impunity, to enter men's houses and have intercourse with whom he would, to kill or to set free whomsoever he pleased; in short, to walk among men as a god . . . if any man who possessed this power we have described should nevertheless refuse to do anything unjust or to rob his fellows, all who knew of his conduct would think him the most miserable and foolish of men, though they would praise him to each other's faces, their fear of suffering injustice extorting that deceit from them.<sup>13</sup>

Glaucon challenges Socrates to find any other reason other than this to act morally. What is the point to act right when there is no possibility of being caught or being accused of guilty? Glaucon asks Socrates to show a wise person who found the ring would, unlike the shepherd, continue to do what is right. People act right when they cannot do otherwise. There is nothing right or wrong, power makes it so. Socrates convinced Glaucon that doing right brings real happiness, whatever profit injustice may seem to bring. Socrates had to provide a long list of arguments to show the connections between being right and being happy. Modern readers will find it hard to get the connection. When power exhibits, values fade away.

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<sup>13</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, Book II, 360, 2nd edn, trans. Desmond Lee, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1984.

The second root has a recent history. These are popularly known as ethical relativism and ethical subjectivism. Ethical relativism banks on the oft asserted idea that ethics is relative to the society one happens to live in and became quite popular in the nineteenth century. Peter Singer records this attitude by the following words, “the knowledge that there were places where sexual relations between unmarried people were regarded as perfectly wholesome brought the seeds of a revolution in sexual attitudes to the strict reign of Victorian prudery. It is not surprising that to some the new knowledge suggested, not merely that the moral code of nineteenth century Europe was not objectively valid, but that no moral judgement (is objectively valid- *my addition*) can do more than reflect the customs of the society in which it is made.”<sup>14</sup>

The other type of relativism is expressed in the form of ethical subjectivism. According to subjectivism, values are dependent on subjective taste or opinion. This form of subjectivism manifested in nineteenth century analytic philosophy. Ethical judgements are neither true nor false because they do not describe anything – neither objective moral facts nor one’s own subjective state of mind. This theory holds that ethical judgements merely exhibit emotional attitudes rather than describe them, and we disagree about ethics because we try, by expressing our own attitude, to bring our listeners to a similar attitude. Values do not refer to any objective reality or phenomena and depend on subjective attitude to certain happenings. This view, first developed by C. L. Stevenson, is known as emotivism.

What remains then is my attitude towards ethical talk. Values become my value. I create them by my liking or disliking. What else is more attractive than enjoying my life to its fullest who knows tomorrow I will die? This is a plausible view. Many people hold it. They live and die unreflectively, without ever having asked themselves what their goals are, and why they are doing what they do. Today, after two decades of the age of greed, this unreflective stance towards life has hunted us sharply. All those people once termed as heroes, much talked in the media started smelling the same redundancy in the self interested attitude towards life. Donald Trump confessed:

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p- 6.

It's a rare person who can achieve a major goal in life and not almost immediately start feeling sad, empty, and a little lost. If you look at the record - which in this case means newspapers, magazines, and TV news — you'll see that an awful lot of people who achieve success, from Elvis Presley to Ivan Boesky, lose their direction or their ethics.

Actually, I don't have to look at anyone else's life to know that's true. I'm as susceptible to that pitfall as anyone else . . .”

To reaffirm this change of attitude towards self-interested stance, Peter Singer records the view of Peter Lynch who realises the emptiness of the attitude towards life. During the eighties Peter Lynch worked fourteen-hour days and built the Fidelity Magellan mutual fund into a \$ 13 billion giant among funds. But at the age of forty-six, when most executives are still aiming higher, Lynch startled his colleagues by quitting. Why? Because he had asked himself: ‘What in the hell are we doing this for?’ And in answering that question, he was moved by the thought that ‘I don't know anyone who wished on his deathbed that he had spent more time at the office’.<sup>15</sup> People started realising that value made subjective is of no value and value nihilism is painful. If objective value is of no importance, what about subjective value either?

#### **Floating Agency: Look thyself**

The other justification of self interested view of the world is to view each individual of a unique existence independent of and disconnected from the community. The nuclei of this view is the belief of a self which is detached and different from the rest of the other but is associated with each other in the form of a society out of a contract or like. In 1887, Ferdinand Tonnies, a German sociologist published a work called *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, in which he distinguished between two conceptions of society. A *Gemeinschaft* - a term usually rendered in English as ‘community’- is a traditional group bound by a strong communal sense. It is an organic community, in the sense that the members identify with the larger whole, and can scarcely conceive of themselves as having a meaningful life apart from it. A *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand is an association of individuals. They see themselves as independent beings who could live easily enough outside the association. Society is therefore, regarded as a human creation, perhaps the result of some kind of social contract, and individuals may opt to join or leave as they see fit.

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<sup>15</sup> *Time*, April 8, 1991, p. 62.

Hence, the self that is otherwise independent, self-existent of the community, the question ‘without the bonds of custom and community, what reason does the individual have for acting ethically?’ seems plausible. The first and striking answer is provided by Thomas Hobbes in his work *Leviathan*. Reflecting the breakdown of traditional authority, Hobbes began from the assumption that all mankind has one basic desire: ‘a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death.’<sup>16</sup> For this reason, ‘in the natural condition of mankind all human beings would live in a state of war: where everyman is enemy to every man ... and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.’<sup>17</sup> To the question, ‘how can a society ever arise, or once it arises, survive from such uncompromisingly self directed beings, living in such as appalling situation?’, Hobbes’ answer is equally blunt as his view of human nature: society arises only by the application of superior force. Society exists because it is in the interests of us all to have peace, and peace can prevail only if we set up a sovereign with unlimited authority and sufficient power to punish those who breach the peace.

An estimate shows that perhaps 70 percent of the world’s population significantly in Asia, Africa the Middle East and Latin America live in societies in which loyalty to the family or tribe overrides personal goals.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, western society has been tending, at least since the protestant reformation, away from the community and towards a looser association of individuals. And surprisingly this life style is fast intruding to the other parts of the globe especially societies which are prospering rapidly like China and India.

Individualism per se as envisioned in the modern world was not conceived in a derogatory outlook. However, individualism today, mixed with consumerism and capitalism has become very one sided and therefore precarious. Tocqueville while admiring American individualism and its philosophy of self reliance and independence of its citizens, feared where this might lead: “each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, J. M. Dent, London, 1973, ch. 11, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13, pp. 64-5.

<sup>18</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 25, 1990, p. 41.



solitude of his own heart.”<sup>19</sup> In late twentieth century, individualism has been pushed to a new extreme. It is a society in which everyone does their own thing’ or ‘goes for it’ where ‘it’ means ‘whatever I want’. In many large American cities there simply is no community.

Robert Bellah, a Berkeley sociologist and principal author of *Habits of the Heart*, observes American society in the following words:

In early days the individualism in America was one that also honoured community values. Today, we have an ideology of individualism that simply encourages people to minimise personal advantage. This leads to a consumer politics in which ‘what’ in it for me? is all that matters, while considerations of the common good are increasingly irrelevant.”<sup>20</sup>

Unlike this consumerist self, the idea of a disconnected and disenchanted self is philosophically celebrated in existentialist writers especially that of Jean Paul Sartre, the French existentialist. Writings of German existentialist Frederick Nietzsche is also significant in fostering this idea. For Nietzsche, the modern man has murdered the idea of God and belief in him. Therefore, unlike Kierkegaard, he does not surrender unto the god but declare man as superman: courageous, brave, hard and healthy. Individuality was celebrated never before. Later on Sartre argues of human existence prior to the essence. Man is condemned to be free, Sartre argues, for he is thrown alone into this eternal solitude of absurd world. There is no value to follow, no standard to maintain, no goals to pursue. In this not ending nothingness, man has to create his own value, own ethics, construct his own essence.

### **Living ethically: living a meaning**

So painful is value-nihilism that life lost its meaning. A meaningless life is nothing, empty to that extent that soon we lose life itself. If there is no value in other than my life, there is no value in my life too. This is beautifully expressed in an ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus.

According to an ancient Greek myth, Sisyphus betrayed the secrets of the gods to mortal men. For this the gods condemned him to push a huge stone to the top of a hill; as he neared the peak the effort became too much for him, and the stone

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<sup>19</sup> *Democracy in America*, J. Mayer, ed., p. 508; quoted by Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, p. 16.

rolled all the way down to the bottom. Sisyphus then had to begin his task again . . . but the same thing would happen, and Sisyphus must labour with his stone for eternity. The myth of Sisyphus serves as a bleak metaphor for the meaninglessness of human existence. Each day we work to feed ourselves and our family, and as soon as the task is done, it must begin all over again. We reproduce, and our children must take over the same task. Nothing is ever achieved, and it will never end, until our species is extinct.

Albert Camus, the French Existentialist wrote an essay on this myth that begins with a famous line: ‘there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.’<sup>21</sup> If life has nothing, if we are destined to do the same things for eternity, life become so boring that, it is not worth living. So the same nothingness, emptiness, absurdity hunts again and there is no rescue to it but committing suicide. Betty Friedan describes this emerging attitude to life in 1950s America in her famous book *The Feminist Mystique*. She interviewed many young, well- to- do American ladies and discovers a problem they were facing which did not have name. Friedan names it ‘the problem that has no name.’ Here is a 23-year-old mother:

I ask myself why I am so dissatisfied. I've got my health, fine children, a lovely new home, enough money . . . It's as if ever since you were a little girl, there's always been somebody or something that will take care of your life: your parents, or college, or falling in love, or having a child, or moving to a new house. Then you wake up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to.<sup>22</sup>

This lady searched for a meaning outside of her cosy cocoon. For complacency becomes unbearable, seems absurd, and turns into utter nothingness. This lady like many others can see this; they started searching for a meaning for life; started evaluating the worth of living. Many of them however, become upset, breathless, anguished and end up in deep depression or committing suicide. It happens- if we judge life not to be worth living – and act accordingly – we will not be in a position to ask any further philosophical question because we cannot be alive to ask such questions. But as Peter Singer adds to Camus question that it is not so much

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<sup>21</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1969, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1965, p. 19.

a matter of passively judging whether life is or is not worth living, but of consciously choosing a way of living that is worth living.

The first move towards this direction would be stepping out of your self-interested, self-motivated life. Come out of your closed windows, out of your antidepressants; a whole new world is waiting for you. You will not enter to abstract world of values; you will not be swayed away by conflicting political ideologies or will be sabotaged by communal heresies. You can add to the beautiful fabric of this world by your own choice and find meaning to your life thereby. Your act will add worth to the world as well as meaning to your life.

One way of doing this is to shape your goal by communal cord. Many people have done this in Japan, in South East countries and found meaning for life and made those countries better place to live. One reason for your outward movement is necessity. The world is facing so much pressing demands that it is utter necessity to work. The climate change and its impact on our overall prosperity is one of these pressing necessities. World poverty, health hazards etc. also demand our collective effort and therefore we must come out. By the way, in the process you also find a purpose to live. Marra James asserts:

I sometimes describe myself as a rubber ball. I've been pushed down sometimes to where I've almost been pressed flat, but I've always been able to bounce back . . . I feel very much a part of the whole - of history. I live in a spectrum that includes the whole world. I'm a part of all of it. For what I do impacts the whole.<sup>23</sup>

The list continues. The list will showcase the testimony that people having identified with a larger cause than their self have lived a purposeful life. This confirms the need for commitment to a cause larger than the self, if we are to find genuine self-esteem, and to be all we can be. No doubt we might face challenges, disturbing moments, and hard time to face the world. But, if we are committed to making a better world, these hard times would pale as Nietzsche states 'He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, AnnSwidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> V. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: an introduction to logotherapy*, trans. Use Lasch, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1964, pp. 103-4.

As said earlier you can contribute to very small things in the world according to your capability. Henry Spira replies about the reason behind his life time activism in the field of diverse causes: ‘where can I do the most to reduce the universe of pain and suffering?’ This is the simple motivation that pushed Spira worked for different causes throughout his life. For him there are so much pain and suffering in the world that reason for action. Carol Gilligan wrote in *In a Different Voice* these inspiring lines:

I have a very strong sense of being responsible to the world, that I can't just live for my enjoyment, but just the fact of being in the world gives me an obligation to do what I can to make the world a better place to live in, no matter how small a scale that may be on.<sup>25</sup>

What would you get out of it? Your life would not be same as usual. It may not mean that life will lose all fun, enjoying food and wine or having your favourite dress. But it will definitely change our priorities. After all, In comparison with the needs of people starving in Somalia, the desire to sample the wines of the leading French vineyards pales into insignificance. Judged against the sufferings of immobilized rabbits having shampoos dripped into their eyes, a better shampoo becomes an unworthy goal. The preservation of old-growth forests should override our desire to use disposable paper towels. There are so many issues in the world to be addressed now. There is no time to focus our thoughts on the possibility of a distant Utopian future. It is time to act now.

About the utility of this new approach to life Peter Singer provides a vivid possibility. ‘You will take up new causes, and find your goals shifting. If you get involved in your work, money and status will become less important. From your new perspective, the world will look different. One thing is certain: you will find plenty of worthwhile things to do. You will not be bored, or lack fulfilment in your life. Most important of all, you will know that you have not lived and died for nothing, because you will have become part of the great tradition of those who have responded to the amount of pain and suffering in the universe by trying to make the world a better place.’ What else can be a better reason for being ethical?

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<sup>25</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1982.