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... INTRODUCTION ...

WE ALL MAKE ETHICAL CHOICES, often without being conscious of doing so. Too often we assume that ethics is about obeying the rules that begin with “You must not. . . .” If that were all there is to living ethically, then as long as we were not violating one of those rules, whatever we were doing would be ethical. That view of ethics, however, is incomplete. It fails to consider the good we can do to others less fortunate than ourselves, not only in our own community, but anywhere within the reach of our help. We ought also to extend our concern to future generations, and beyond our own species to nonhuman animals.

Another important ethical responsibility applies to citizens of democratic society: to be an educated citizen and a participant in the decisions our society makes. Many of these decisions involve ethical choices. In public discussions of these ethical issues, people with training in ethics, or moral philosophy, can play a valuable role. Today that is not an especially controversial claim, but when I was a student, philosophers themselves proclaimed that it was a mistake to think that they have any special expertise that would qualify them to address substantive ethical issues. The accepted understanding of the discipline, at least in the English-speaking world, was that philosophy is concerned with the analysis of words and concepts, and so is neutral on substantive ethical questions.

Fortunately for me—because I doubt that I would have continued in philosophy if that view had prevailed—pressure from the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s transformed the way moral philosophy is practiced and taught. In the era of the Vietnam War and struggles against racism, sexism, and environmental degradation, students demanded that university courses should be relevant to the important issues of the day. Philosophers responded to that demand by returning to their discipline's origins. They recalled the example of Socrates questioning his fellow Athenians about the nature of justice, and what it takes to live justly, and summoned up the courage to ask similar questions of their students, their fellow philosophers, and the wider public.

My first book, written against the background of ongoing resistance to racism, sexism, and the war in Vietnam, asks when civil disobedience is justified in a democracy.¹ Since then, I've very largely sought to address issues that matter to people outside departments of philosophy. There is a view in some philosophical circles that anything that can be understood by people who have not studied philosophy is not profound enough to be worth saying. To the contrary, I suspect that whatever cannot be said clearly is probably not being thought clearly either.

If many academics think that writing a book aimed at the general public is beneath them, then writing an opinion piece for a newspaper is sinking lower still. In the pages that follow you will find a selection of my shorter writings. Newspaper columns are often ephemeral, but the ones I have selected here discuss enduring issues, or address problems that, regrettably, are still with us. The pressure of not

¹*Democracy and Disobedience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

exceeding 1,000 words forces one to write in a style that is not only clear but also concise. Granted, in such essays it is impossible to present one's research in a manner that can be assessed by other scholars, and inevitably some of the nuances and qualifications that could be explored in a longer essay have to be omitted. It's nice when your colleagues in philosophy departments appreciate what you are doing, but I also judge the success of my work by the impact my books, articles, and talks have on the much broader audience of people who are interested in thinking about how to live ethically. Articles in peer-reviewed journals are, according to one study, read in full by an average of just ten people.² An opinion piece for a major newspaper or a syndicated column may be read by tens of thousands or even millions, and as a result, some of them may change their minds on an important issue, or even change the way they live. I know that happens, because people have told me that my writing has changed what they donate to charity, or led them to stop eating animal products or, in at least one case, to donate a kidney to a stranger.

The essays in the opening section will shed some light on my approach to ethics, but it may be useful to say a little more here. Moral judgments are not purely subjective; in that, they are different from judgments of taste. If they were merely subjective, we would not think it was worth arguing about ethical issues, any more than we think that it is worth arguing about which ice cream flavor to choose. We recognize that tastes differ, and there is no "right" amount of garlic to put in a salad dressing; but we do think it is worth

² Asit Biswas and Julian Kirchherr, "Prof, No One Is Reading You," *Straits Times*, April 11, 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/prof-no-one-is-reading-you>.

arguing about the legalization of voluntary euthanasia, or whether it is wrong to eat meat.

Nor is ethics just a matter of expressing our intuitive responses of repugnance or approval, even if these intuitions are widely shared. We may have innate “yuck” reactions that helped our ancestors to survive, at a time when they were social mammals but not yet human and not capable of abstract reasoning. Those reactions will not always be a reliable guide to right and wrong in the much larger and more complex global community in which we live today. For that, we need to use our ability to reason.

There was a time when I thought this kind of reasoning could only be unraveling the implications of a more basic ethical stance that is, ultimately, subjective. I no longer think this. There are, as Derek Parfit has argued in his major work *On What Matters* (which I describe in the pages below in an essay entitled “Does Anything Matter?”) objective ethical truths that we can discover through careful reasoning and reflection.³ But for those who reject the idea of objective ethical truths, the essays that follow can be read as attempts to work out the implications of accepting the ethical commitment espoused by many philosophers in different terms, but perhaps best put by the great nineteenth-century utilitarian philosopher Henry Sidgwick:

... the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other; unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing

³Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For my own developing views on this issue see Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), and Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

that more good is likely to be realised in the one case than in the other.⁴

Sidgwick was a utilitarian, and so am I. Once we start to question our evolved and culturally transmitted intuitive responses to moral issues, utilitarianism is, I believe, the most defensible ethical view, as I have argued at much greater length in *The Point of View of the Universe*, written jointly with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek.⁵ Nevertheless, in the essays that follow, I do not presuppose utilitarianism. That is because on many of the issues I discuss, my conclusions follow from many non-utilitarian positions as well as from utilitarianism. Given the practical importance of these issues, as a good utilitarian I ought to aim to write for the broadest possible audience, and not merely for a narrow band of committed utilitarians.

Some of the following essays address topics for which I am well known: the ethics of our relations with animals, questions of life and death, and the obligations of the affluent to those in extreme poverty. Others explore topics on which my views are likely to be less familiar: the ethics of selling kidneys, or of growing genetically modified crops, the moral status of conscious robots, and whether incest between adult siblings is wrong. Happiness, and how to promote it, plays a key role in my ethical view, so that is the topic of one group of articles. Among the more personal essays is the book's closing reflection on surfing, which has added to my own happiness.

Readers who know my work on some topics may be surprised by my views on other topics. I try to keep an open

⁴Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edition (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 382.

⁵See fn3.

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mind, to be responsive to the evidence, and not simply to follow a predictable political line. And if you are not already persuaded that philosophers do have something to contribute to issues of broad general interest, I hope that this volume will convince you of that.