

Commentary on ‘Coping with global change: The need for new values’

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The following text was presented to the 1995 conference of the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children, and is reprinted here unrevised. Unfortunately the challenges of coping with global change that it discusses have still not been addressed. Some of the facts have changed—for example, China’s per capita greenhouse gas emissions have risen significantly, although they are still far below those of the United States and most other industrialized countries. But the planet is warming faster than scientists predicted twenty years ago, and little has been done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, so the problem of climate change is even more urgent than it seemed to be when the text was first presented. Therefore my arguments about the changes we need to make to the way we live are still relevant, and it is for that reason that I have accepted the editors’ invitation to reprint the article.

Original paper

Coping with global change: The need for new values

Keynote Address: Seventh International Conference on Philosophy for Children

(NB: Parts of this address are drawn from Peter Singer’s book, *How are we to live?* Melbourne, Text Publishing, 1993).

Introduction

Philosophy is often thought of as a body of knowledge; but this idea makes little sense, because for virtually every significant statement that one philosopher makes, it is possible to find another who will disagree with it. It is better to consider philosophy as a method of enquiring into very fundamental questions that do not yield to the methods of science. In the Western tradition, since the time of Socrates, this method can be characterised by a form of relentless questioning, in which the answer to one question only leads to a further question, and so on, and on and on. Readers of Plato will know what I mean. And so will parents of small children. That is why philosophy for children is one of those ideas that, once mentioned, are so blindingly obvious that you say: ‘*Of course!*’ Let us try to use the natural curiosity children have about why things are as they are, and why we do what we do, in order to lead them into a method of enquiry that can help them throughout life, no matter what issues they may eventually come to think about.

My theme—the way in which global change challenges us to devise new values—reflects the urgency of the need for us to reflect on the fundamental issues of how we are to live. By that I mean: what are our ultimate values? What do we take as our goals in life? The problem is that if we *don't* start reflecting seriously on these issues, we are likely to be led by the forces of the free market into a direction that will be individually unsatisfying, and collectively self-defeating. While we, the adults, need to change our practices now, it is the quality and perhaps even survival of the world our children will inherit that depends on the adoption of the new values I shall be urging. So this is a theme that is geared towards children, and the values they must learn from us and develop further.

The kind of question that I want to ask was nicely put in Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street*. *Wall Street* starred Michael Douglas as a convincingly unpleasant Gordon Gekko, a financial wheeler-dealer and corporate raider. Bud Fox, the ambitious young stockbroker played by Charlie Sheen, is for a time taken in by the prospect of making it big, but when Gekko attempts his usual takeover and asset-stripping procedure on the airline for which Fox's father works as a mechanic, an angry Fox asks:

Tell me, Gordon, when does it all end, huh? How many yachts can you water-ski behind? How much is enough?

'How much is enough?' is a question that we need to ask more, and we need to discuss with children whose goals are in the process of being formed. It may not sound like an ethical question. It is not a sensitive ethical issue, like abortion or euthanasia. It does not connect with common ethical concerns, like dishonesty. It is not about sexual propriety—or at least, not obviously so. Despite these appearances, however, it is a question that leads us deeply into ethics. That is because we cannot say how much is enough until we know: 'enough for what?' And this is a value question. I want to explore that question today, in the context of global change.

Since the collapse of communist societies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, we have been living in a world that has only one dominant social model for developed societies. The hope of resolving the conflict between individual self-interest and the good of all by building an alternative to the free market economy based on collective ownership of the means of production and distribution is now a self-confessed failure. Only a brave few cling to the socialist ideal, rejecting the distortion Lenin and Stalin wrought, and claiming that it has never had a proper trial. It seems that the individualist view of self-interest is the only one we have.

So strongly does the liberal democratic free enterprise model impose itself on our vision of the possibilities that Francis Fukuyama, a former deputy director of policy planning at the US State Department, has been given a respectful, and from some quarters even enthusiastic, hearing for a bold, surprisingly well-defended, but in the end scarcely plausible idea. Fukuyama has revived Hegel's conception of history as a process with a direction and an End. History has an End, according to Hegel and his twentieth century disciple, not so much in the sense of coming to a full stop, but rather in the sense of a

final goal or destination. In *The end of history and the last man*, Fukuyama argues that this end is, precisely, the universal acceptance of the liberal, democratic, free enterprise form of society (Fukuyama 1992). Yet just when this model has taken so strong a hold on the minds of those who consider themselves politically realistic, we are gradually becoming aware that we are nearing the end of an epoch. Like Daniel Bell, who predicted 'The End of Ideology' shortly before the rise of the New Left and the resurgence of radical ideologies in the sixties (Bell 1988). Fukuyama may have predicted the permanence of the liberal free enterprise system just when it is about to prove itself unable to cope with its gravest crisis.

I would like to offer a counterweight to Fukuyama's vision of 'the End of History.' It is summed up in the title of a book by Bill McKibben: our era is witness to, not the end of History, but rather *The end of nature*. As a writer who lives in the Adirondack Mountains of New York state, McKibben is sharply aware of the fact that for the first time in the history of our species, there is no longer a natural world, unaffected by human beings (McKibben 1989). Not in the Adirondacks, nor in the rainforests of the Amazon, nor on the Antarctic ice-cap, can one get away from the effects of human civilization. We have depleted the ozone layer that shields our planet from solar radiation. We have added to the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Thus the growth of plants, the chemical composition of the rain, and the very forces that form the clouds, are in part our doing. Until now we have used the oceans and the atmosphere as a vast sink for our wastes.

The liberal democratic free enterprise society that Fukuyama proposes as the ultimate outcome of all history is built on the idea that we can keep doing this forever. The body of responsible scientific opinion is telling us that we are passengers on a runaway train that is heading rapidly towards an abyss. We *cannot* continue with business as usual. We shall either change voluntarily, or the climate of our planet will change, and take entire nations with it. Nor are the changes we need to make minor ones. They involve the basic values and ethical outlook that underlie the free enterprise societies of the late twentieth century.

Perhaps the liberal democratic free enterprise society will survive this challenge, and adapt to cope with it; but if it does, it will be a significantly different form of liberal democratic free enterprise society, and the people living in it will need to have very different values and ways of living. So the pressure to re-examine the ethical basis of our lives is upon us in a way that it has never been before.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Adam Smith?

If any single man pointed the direction in which the free enterprise economy should march, that man was Adam Smith, and the pointer was his extraordinarily influential work, *The wealth of nations*, published in 1776. Smith argued that in a market economy, we can each become wealthy only by being more efficient than our competitors at satisfying the wants of our customers or clients—a thought epitomised in his famous

sentence. 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher that we expect our dinner but from his regard to his own self-interest.' To serve our own interests, we will strive to produce our goods more cheaply than others, or to produce better goods at the same price. If we succeed, the market will reward us with wealth; if we fail, the market will put us out of business. Thus, wrote Smith, the desires of countless individuals for their private interests are drawn together, as if by a hidden hand, to work for the public interest. The collective outcome of the individual desire for wealth is a prosperous nation, which benefits not only the wealthy, but also 'the very meanest person in a civilised country.' On this last point, Smith waxed lyrical:

the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages. (Smith, in Campbell & Skinner 1976, p. 24)

This became a standard justification for the inequality that results from the pursuit of wealth under a free enterprise system. Even the poorest, we are told, have no grounds for complaint, because they are better off than a King in Africa¹.

Some twenty years before Smith published *The wealth of nations*, Smith wrote a critique of a recent work that was then causing something of a sensation among intellectuals on the Continent: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on inequality*. Rousseau's essay, which compared modern civilization unfavourably with the life of the 'noble savage', was an attack on everything that Smith was later to champion. In Rousseau's vision of the natural state of human beings, the earth was left to 'its natural fertility' and was covered with 'immense forests whose trees were never mutilated by the axe.' These conditions provided 'on every side both sustenance and shelter for every species of animal.' As for the noble savage himself:

I see him satisfying his hunger at the first oak, and slaking his thirst at the first brook; finding his bed at the foot of the tree which afforded him a repast; and with that, all his wants supplied. (Rousseau 1958, p. 163)

For taking us out of this idyllic state, Rousseau blamed the institution of private property, which allowed us to accumulate more than we needed, and so made us compare what we had with what others had, and desire to surpass them in wealth. This multiplication of our wants he saw as the source not only of inequality, but also of hatred, civil strife, slavery, crime, war, deceit, and all the other evils of modern life.

Adam Smith, however, took a very different view of the desire to accumulate

¹ For Locke it was a king in America, not Africa: 'And a king of a larger and fruitful territory there feeds lodges, and is clad worse than a day labourer in England'. *Second treatise on civil government*, ch. V, para. 41; see also Bernard Mandeville, *The fable of the bees*, pt. i.181: 'If we trace the most flourishing Nations in their Origin, we shall find that in the remote Beginnings of every Society, the richest and most considerable Men among them were a great while destitute of a great many Comforts of Life that are now enjoy'd by the meanest and most humble Wretches.' I owe this reference to RH Campbell and AS Skinner's edn of *Wealth of Nations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, 24n.

possessions. Both in his critique of Rousseau and in a larger work, the *Theory of the moral sentiments*, that he was then delivering as lectures at the University of Glasgow, he defended the multiplication of wants and the desire to accumulate possessions. It was, he thought, our desire to accumulate more and more that led our ancestors to develop the arts and sciences in ways which:

have entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence ... The rich ... are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.

A modern reader cannot help being struck by the difference in the attitudes of Rousseau and Smith to the forests and nature generally. Since the world has followed Smith, rather than Rousseau, the state of our forests is not surprising. But now it is time to stop and ask: why are we still following Smith rather than Rousseau? It is significant that Smith did not defend the desire to accumulate possessions on the grounds that accumulation is the way to happiness. On the contrary, this belief was, he thought, a 'deception'. Regarding the grander houses and possessions for which we strive, Smith says:

If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light.

Instead, when we think about 'the pleasures of wealth and greatness', they strike us 'as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow up it.' Now comes the punch-line of all this: though we are deceived when we imagine that wealth will bring us real satisfaction, the deception is a fortunate one, because 'it is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind' (Smith 1976, IV i.10).² Thus the father of modern economics and the greatest original advocate of the free enterprise society did not believe that it would bring us any real satisfaction!

It is true that all this economic development conformed to the Biblical notion that it is good for our species to 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish-the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.' (Genesis I 24-28). Today, however, the desirability of any further 'multiplication of the species' is highly dubious, and there are few who would advocate turning more forests into 'agreeable plains.' We need to

² I owe these references to Michael Ignatieff (1984) *The needs of strangers*, London, Chatto and Windus, 108ff.

challenge the view of nature that lies behind Adam Smith's economics.

Living on our inheritance

As a generation, we have inherited the accumulated resources of our planet: fertile soils, forests, oil, coal and minerals like iron and bauxite; and an atmosphere and oceans capable of absorbing the wastes we put into them. We began the twentieth century with a relatively clean and stable natural global environment. On this basis, we have built a huge global economy that produces, for the upper and middleclass citizens of developed nations, an unprecedented standard of luxury, supplemented by an extraordinary range of gadgets. The global economy now produces as much in 17 days as the economy of our grandparents, around the turn of the century, produced in a year (Postel & Flavin 1991, p. 186). We assume that this expansion can go on without limit, but the economy we have built depends on using up our inheritance. Since the middle of the century the world has doubled its per capita use of energy, steel, copper and wood. Consumption of meat has doubled in the same period and car ownership has quadrupled. And these are items that were already being used in large quantities in 1950; the increase for relatively new materials, like plastic and aluminium, is higher still. Since 1940, Americans alone have used up as large a share of the earth's mineral resources as did everyone before them put together (Durning 1991, pp. 154, 157). We are eating up capital, rather than living on what we produce. From the food we produce to the exhaust we emit from our cars, the pattern is the same. We take what we want from the earth, and leave behind toxic chemical dumps, polluted streams, oil slicks on the oceans, and nuclear wastes that will be deadly for tens of thousands of years. The economy is a sub-system of the biosphere, and it is rapidly running up against the limits of the larger system.

How an overflowing sink makes Adam Smith obsolete

Our present economy is simply not sustainable. That is true even if we focus only on the developed countries. But we cannot limit our focus in this way. Jeremy Leggatt, science director of Greenpeace in Britain, has warned that China's plans to increase its coal burning six-fold in the next 40 years could mean that China is emitting three times as much of the world's greenhouse gases as the United States does today. Such grim warnings have led to various international conferences that try to get nations to agree first not to increase greenhouse gas emissions, and then to wind them back to the levels of previous years, for example, 1990 levels. But there is a fundamental ethical flaw in this way of dealing with the problem. The average American is responsible for the burning of between 4 and 5 tonnes of carbon per year; the average Indian and Chinese contribute roughly one tenth of this amount. How can the citizens of rich nations tell China to stop, when even if China's ambitious plans succeed, each Chinese citizen would still be adding less carbon dioxide to the atmosphere than the citizens of most rich countries do today?

No wonder that third world economists are starting to see Western concern about the environmental effects of third world economic development as a new form of colonialism. Anil Agarwal of the Centre for Science and the Environment in New Delhi has put the case forcefully:

India and China today account for more than one-third of the world's population. The question to be asked is whether we are consuming one-third of the world's resources or contributing one-third of the muck and dirt in the atmosphere and the oceans. If not, then surely these nations should be lauded for keeping the world in balance because of their parsimonious consumption despite the Western rape and pillage of the world's resources.

Agarwal suggests that we see our planet's facility for dealing with waste as a very large, but finite, global sink. The use of this sink should be shared out equally between the people of the world. Every individual on the planet might be regarded as having an entitlement to dump, say, half a ton of carbon down the sink. On that basis, Americans are now using more than six times their fair share, while most Indians and Chinese are using less than their entitlement. The greediest five countries, seen from this perspective, are the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the bloc that made up the former Soviet Union.³

Adam Smith argued that the rich did not deprive the poor of their share of the world's wealth. In another part of the passage cited earlier in this chapter, he wrote:

The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. (Smith 1976, IV i.10)

Smith then refers, as in the section of the passage quoted earlier, to the 'invisible hand' which brings about a distribution of the necessaries of life that is 'nearly the same' as it would have been if the world had been divided up equally among all its inhabitants. Whether this was true even in Smith's day is very doubtful; but if we move to the present time, and consider 'the rich' to include all the developed nations, then in the light of the facts to which Agarwal refers it is quite obvious that Smith is wrong. Smith never dreamt that the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb pollutants might be a finite resource. So while he knew that the rich could be selfish and rapacious, he did not imagine that they could take ten times their share of the global atmospheric sink. Far from dividing with the poor the produce of all their improvements, the rich effectively deprive the poor of the opportunity to develop along the lines that the rich themselves have taken; for if the poor were to behave as the rich do, the global sink would overflow,

³ Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, *Global warming in an unequal world: A case of environmental colonialism*, Centre for Science and the Environment, New Delhi, 1991; quoted from Fred Pearce (1992) Ecology and the new colonialism. *New Scientist*, 1 Feb 1992, pp. 55-56.

bringing catastrophe on us all.

An opportunity for change

It is time to return to the question: 'how much is enough?' I haven't yet given the answer that Gordon Gekko gives to Bud Fox's question, how much is enough? Here it is:

It's not a question of enough, pal. It's a zero-sum game. Somebody wins, somebody loses.

The result of this competitive attitude to life is a striving that can never be satisfied. Consider the real-life case of Ivan Boesky, the multi-millionaire arbitrageur to whom the figure of Gordon Gekko bears more than a passing resemblance. Why did Boesky get involved in insider trading when he already had more money than he could ever spend? In 1992, six years after Boesky pleaded guilty to insider trading, his estranged wife Seema broke her silence and spoke about Ivan Boesky's motives in an interview with Barbara Walters for the American ABC network's *20/20* program. Walters asked whether Ivan Boesky was a man who craved luxury. Seema Boesky thought not, pointing out that he worked around the clock, seven days a week, and never took a day off to enjoy his money. She then recalled that when, in 1982, *Forbes Magazine* first listed Boesky among the wealthiest people in the US, he was upset. She assumed he disliked the publicity, and made some remark to that effect. Boesky replied:

That's not what's upsetting me. We're no one. We're nowhere. We're at the bottom of the list and I promise you I won't shame you like that again ever. We will not remain at the bottom of that list.⁴

We must free ourselves from this absurd conception of success. Not only does it fail to bring happiness even to those who, like Ivan Boesky, 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 ever large heap of waste.

The problem is that the dominant conception of the good life today depends on constantly rising levels of consumption. When the celebrated Harvard economist JK Galbraith published *The affluent society* in 1958, no-one disputed the accuracy of its title as a description of the United States, nor did they disagree with the picture presented in the book of a land that America had reached heights of affluence undreamt of by earlier generations. Yet Paul Wachtel pointed out in *The poverty of affluence* that America has since become, in terms of material considerably *more* affluent than it had been twenty-five years earlier. Wachtel reports that by the early eighties, Americans owned five times as many air conditioners per head, four times as many clothes dryers and seven times as many dishwashers. One can add to Wachtel's figures: in 1960, only 1

⁴ ABC News *20/20* Transcript #1221, May 15, 1992, p. 5.

percent of American homes had colour television; by 1987, this had risen to 93%. Microwaves and video cassette recorders entered American homes in the '70s and '80s, and within a decade were to be found in nearly two-thirds of all homes (Durning 1991, p. 154). Despite this dramatic increase in material goods, people felt neither more affluent nor happier. The University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center has for many years been asking Americans how happy they are. The proportion describing themselves as 'very happy' has hovered around one-third since the 1950s (Durning 1991, p. 156)⁵. Why has it not risen with material levels of affluence? Essentially, because though the society was still becoming more affluent, the rate at which it was doing so had slowed:

In judging how well off we are economically ... we assimilate new input to our 'adaptation level.' For many Americans, having one or several color television sets, two or more cars, a home in which there are more rooms than people ... these and other features of their lives are experienced as the 'neutral point.' They do not excite us or arouse much feeling. Only a *departure* from that level is really noticed. Some pleasure may be afforded by our background level of material comfort, but unless we look elsewhere than the accumulation of goods for the main sources of pleasure and excitement in our lives, we are bound to be on a treadmill—one which, we are increasingly recognizing, can damage our health and shorten our lives. (Wachtel 1983, p. 11)

The message is that no amount of running on a treadmill can lead to personal fulfilment. Whether people compare themselves with their own wealth the year before, or with what their neighbours have, it is clear that for most people, most of the time, the pursuit of material affluence cannot bring happiness. That may be why the glaring disparities of wealth between Nigerians and West Germans, or between Filipinos and Japanese, do not give rise to any differences in how people from these nations rate their level of happiness. Michael Argyle, an Oxford psychologist and author of *The psychology of happiness* sums up the evidence by saying: 'there is very little difference in the levels of reported happiness found in rich and very poor countries.'⁶ Equally obviously, when growth runs into environmental constraints, this attitude is a recipe for disaster.

To say this is not to be anti-growth. There is potential for environmentally sustainable growth. Often ways of doing things that are environmentally friendly are also more labour-intensive than alternatives that consume more fossil fuels or cause more pollution. The Worldwatch Institute has estimated that generating 1000 gigawatt-hours of electricity per year requires 100 workers in a nuclear power plant, 116 in a coal-fired plant, 248 in a solar thermal plant, and 542 on a wind farm.⁷ Those figures partially

⁵ Durning is citing a personal communication from Michael Worley of the National Opinion Research Center, September 1990.

⁶ RA Easterlin (1974) Does economic growth improve the human lot: Some empirical evidence. In PA David & M Abramovitz (eds) *Nations and households in economic growth*, NY, Academic Press, p. 121.

⁷ Cited by Rosie Beaumont (February 1992) Jobs vs. the trees: Dispelling the myth. *Habitat Australia*, 20(1), p. 31.

explain, of course, why the nuclear and coal plants produce electricity that, in straight dollar terms, is cheaper than the more environmentally friendly alternatives; but the cost to our global ecosystem is not included in the dollar figures. The same is true of a comparison between an industry based on the use of a natural resource, such as a forest or a bauxite deposit, and one based on recycling paper or aluminium cans. The use of the natural resource may be cheaper, but it uses up an irreplaceable resource; recycling will be more labour intensive and therefore costlier, but it is sustainable.

To move towards a sustainable economy would cause unemployment in some industries, but on balance, it would create jobs, not reduce them. Nevertheless in strictly material terms, it has to be assumed that we would be worse off. Consuming irreplaceable resources is a quick and easy way of enriching ourselves; and we save ourselves a lot more trouble and expense by pouring our wastes down the global sink at a rate that, if continued by future generations, or matched by those in underdeveloped countries, will cause global catastrophe. If we cut back on these cheap ways of enriching ourselves, the economic loss must be felt somewhere. Products now made by consuming irreplaceable resources, or polluting the environment will become more expensive, and so we will be able to afford fewer of them. That may include cars, consumer goods, the use of energy for airconditioning, heating and transport, and even food, like feedlot beef and intensively farmed pork and poultry, produced by methods that are extravagant of energy, soil and water.

If we retain our narrow view of our own self-interest, particularly the conception that has been moulded by the development of consumerism since World War II, we will see the reduction in material affluence as nothing but a setback. Even if we recognize that it is inevitable, that the present economy cannot be sustained, we will consider it a regrettable necessity, desirable in the interests of the world as a whole, but bad in its impact on our own lives. On a broader view of self-interest, however, we ought to welcome the change, not just for the good of the global environment, but also for ourselves. For a start, although walking, riding bicycles and using public transport may use fewer resources than sitting in slow-moving traffic in one's own air-conditioned car, it is by no means obvious that the lower use of resources leads to less overall satisfaction for those who walk, cycle or take the train. This is just one way in which the size of a nation's Gross National Product is no guide to the level of welfare of the population. This is one reason why we need to change our conception of self-interest; but there is another, which goes deeper.

For centuries Western society has sought satisfaction from the holy grail of material abundance. The search has been exciting, and we have discovered many things that were well worth finding, but in so far as our goal was ever a sensible one, we reached it long ago. Unfortunately we have forgotten that there could be any other goals at all. What is there to live for, other than to be richer than others, and richer than we were before? Many who are outstandingly successful in terms of the materialistic conception of success find that the rewards for which they have worked so hard lose their appeal once they have been achieved. Adam Smith would not have been at all surprised. The

search for happiness through material wealth is based on a deception. Considered just from the standpoint of our own real interests the case for changing our conception of the good life is very strong. But as I have argued, this conception has to be changed for quite different reasons. It is constructed and became entrenched during a period when no-one thought of limits to material wealth or consumption. As the idea of unlimited growth has become untenable, so too has our conception of the good life. So what should our goals be? The pressing ecological necessity of changing our economy offers us the best opportunity for centuries to reflect on this question, and to find out how much really is enough.

The importance of a cause

How then do we find meaning in our lives? How do we choose goals? What should we take to be our ultimate values? In my book *How are we to live?*, I have suggested that we need to find a cause, or causes, that extend beyond the boundaries of our self. There are many such causes. Footballers are constantly reminded that the club is larger than the individual; so are employees of corporations, especially those that work for corporations that foster group loyalty with songs, slogans and social activities, in the Japanese manner. To support one's Mafia 'family' is to be part of a cause larger than the self. So is being a member of a religious cult, or of the Nazi Party. And so too is working against injustice and exploitation in one of its many specific forms. No doubt a commitment to each of these causes can be, for some people, a way of finding meaning and fulfilment.

So is it after all arbitrary, whether one chooses an ethical cause or some other cause? No; living an ethical life is certainly not the only way of making a commitment that can give substance and worth to your life; but for anyone choosing one kind of life rather than another, it is the commitment with the firmest foundation. The more we reflect on our commitment to a football club, a corporation or any sectional interest, the less point we are likely to see in it. In contrast, no amount of reflection will show a commitment to an ethical life to be trivial or pointless.

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 and 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 interests in order to obey the dictates of ethics.

This message is blasted at us from every side of popular culture. We see the same assumption of conflict between ethics and self-interest in the axioms of modern economics. The idea is propagated in popular presentations of sociobiology applied to

human nature. Best-selling books like Robert J Ringer's *Looking out for no. 1*, which was on the New York Times bestseller list for an entire year, tell millions of readers that to put the happiness of anyone else ahead of your own is 'to pervert the laws of Nature' (Ringer 1978, p. 22). Television, both in its programs and its commercials, conveys materialist images of success that lack ethical content.

The message is coming over strongly, but something is wrong. 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 this ancient wisdom inapplicable.

Here ethics returns to complete our picture. An ethical life is one in which we identify ourselves with other, and larger goals, thereby giving meaning to our lives. If we understand both ethics and self-interest properly, they may not be at odds after all. The view that there is a 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.

In a society in which the narrow pursuit of material self-interest is the norm, the shift to an ethical stance is more radical than many people realize. In comparison with the needs of people going short of food in Rwanda, the desire to sample the wines of Australia's best vineyards pales in to insignificance. The preservation of old-growth forests should override our desire to use disposable paper towels. An ethical approach to life does not forbid having fun or enjoying food and wine; but it changes our sense of priorities. The effort and expense put into fashion, the endless search for more and more refined gastronomic pleasures, the added expense that marks out the luxury car market—all these become disproportionate to people who can shift perspective long enough to take themselves, at least for a time, out of the spotlight. If a higher ethical consciousness spreads, it will fundamentally change the society in which we live.

Radical as this change is, a shift in our goals is absolutely necessary if we are to avoid both social and ecological disaster. My hope is that over the next decade, beginning with a few committed individuals there will emerge a critical mass of people with new priorities. If these people are seen to do well, in every sense of the term—if their altruism to each other brings reciprocal benefits, and if they manifest greater fulfilment in their lives—then the ethical attitude may gradually spread. I am no utopian, and I do not expect the ethical attitude ever to be adopted universally. There will always be a

niche for those who take advantage of others, and the fewer who occupy that niche, the more profitable it will become for those who remain in it. As an initial target, it will be enough if the idea of living an ethical life can be reinstated as a realistic and viable alternative to the present dominance of materialist self-interest.

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