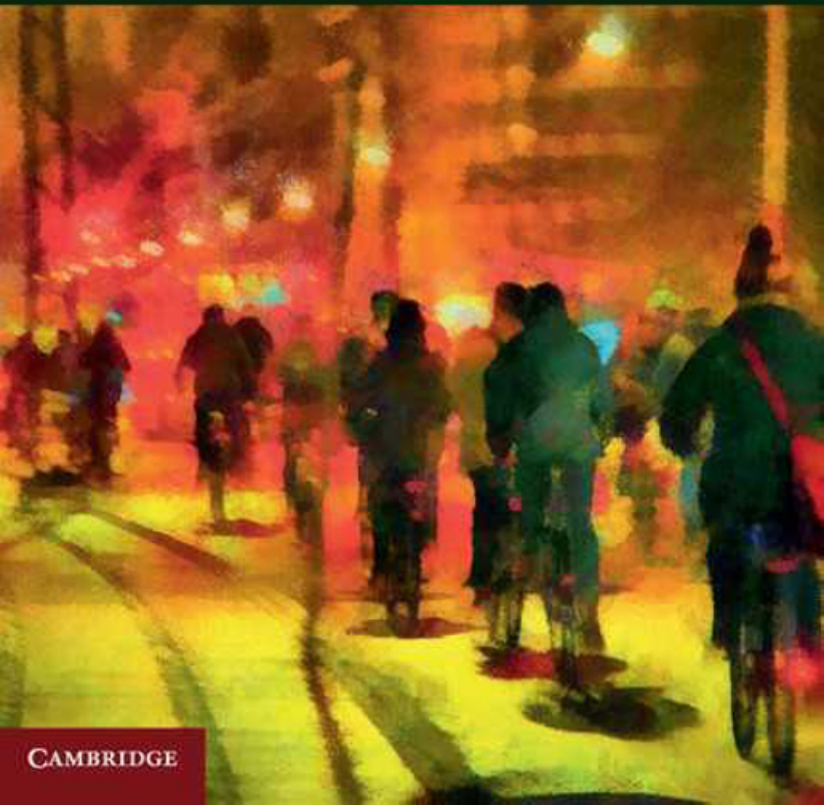


EDITED BY JOHN PERRY

God, the Good, and Utilitarianism

Perspectives on Peter Singer



CAMBRIDGE

GOD, THE GOOD, AND UTILITARIANISM

Is ethics about happiness? Aristotle thought so and for centuries Christians agreed, until utilitarianism raised worries about where this would lead. In this volume, Peter Singer, leading utilitarian philosopher and controversial defender of infanticide and euthanasia, addresses this question in conversation with Christian ethicists and secular utilitarians. Their engagement reveals surprising points of agreement and difference on questions of moral theory, the history of ethics, and current issues such as climate change, abortion, poverty and animal rights. The volume explores the advantages and pitfalls of basing morality on happiness; if ethics is teleological, is its proper aim the subjective satisfaction of preferences? Or is human flourishing found in objective goods: friendship, intellectual curiosity, meaningful labour? This volume provides a timely review of how utilitarians and Christians conceive of the good, and will be of great interest to those studying religious ethics, philosophy of religion, and applied ethics.

JOHN PERRY is Lecturer in Theological Ethics at the University of St Andrews, and formerly McDonald Fellow for Christian Ethics & Public Life at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Pretenses of Loyalty* (2011).

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It is a special object of the present work to avoid all hasty and premature reconciliations, and to exhibit fairly the divergence of the different methods without extenuation or exaggeration.

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*

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The conference from which this book emerged was held in May 2011 at Christ Church, University of Oxford. It was made possible by a grant from the British Academy and the ongoing support of the McDonald Agape Foundation.

Many people made the conference possible in ways other than financial. The idea of bringing Peter Singer's moral philosophy into conversation with Christian moral theology came originally from my long-time friend, Charles Camosy. Virginia Dunn was the administrative coordinator for the entire event; without her efficiency and organization, the conference would have lacked speakers, attendees, lunch, and wine. Nigel Biggar, who directs the McDonald Centre, provided wise guidance throughout.

The book is dedicated to all my friends, colleagues, and students in Oxford, with thanks for five unforgettable years.

Introduction

John Perry

If you have only ever heard one criticism of utilitarianism, it is likely the charge that utilitarianism permits what is morally abhorrent: torturing an innocent person to entertain a large crowd, for example. With such possibilities in mind, some philosophers dismiss all consequentialist theories of ethics as unworthy of consideration and on their way to extinction.¹ Others, often utilitarians themselves, suggest that this willingness to do the abhorrent should redound to the theory's credit: utilitarians are simply those brave enough to bite the bullet and follow their principles, wherever they lead. Put simply, we often assume that the issue with utilitarianism is that it overrides common moral rules or intuitions.

This book concerns a quite different facet of utilitarianism: its understanding of *the good*. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in basing ethics on what is good – on what leads to happiness and well-being, rather than on duty, rules, or rights. The causes for this are various. One cause is that, among religious ethicists, there has been a return to virtue, occasioned by a growing discontent with those modern moral theories based on abstract rules or procedural fairness. Many of these have been surprised to discover (though it should have been no surprise) that their innovation is hardly innovative at all. The centrality of human good and well-being was taken for granted in Aristotle's eudaimonism, Aquinas's natural law, and even Protestant views grounding ethics in the commands of a benevolent God. This was the default position. Another cause of this shift is prominent among those commonly thought to be the theological ethicists' enemies: philosophers and scientists who hope that the good will provide an objective, even a biological or neuropsychological, grounding for ethics by which to sidestep the pitfalls of pluralism. Regardless of the cause,

¹ Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33:124 (January 1958): 1–19 (17); J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 150.

greater attention to the good in ethics is a welcome development, but it also raises the stakes for how we conceive the good. It is this facet of utilitarianism that this volume explores, rather than now-wearying debates about whether it would justify the Romans feeding prisoners to the lions or public hangings of the innocent (those remain important questions, of course, especially for those about to be eaten).

A related facet of utilitarianism examined in these essays is its relation to theological ethics. This is often overlooked, perhaps for the simple reason that the answer seems so obvious. What has Bentham to do with Jerusalem? The religious traditions that have most influenced the West all place significant importance on moral rules. Within such a perspective, utilitarianism might seem to be a non-starter, and hardly even worth considering. That is too quick a dismissal, for several reasons. A focus on the good – as opposed to duty, rights, or rule-following – has a significant Christian heritage, both in patristic and medieval sources, and in twentieth-century efforts such as proportionalism and situationalism.

Not only does the history of Christian ethics have within it hints of consequentialism, the converse is also true, for utilitarianism itself was originally a Christian endeavour and its earliest defences were works of moral theology. William Paley's highly theological *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* remained standard fare on university reading lists for many years, while Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published the same decade, was virtually unknown. In less than a century, however, theological utilitarianism had been entirely eclipsed. John Stuart Mill, who took his cue from Bentham rather than Paley, offered a version of the theory associated with deep scepticism towards religion, and whose practical conclusions were regarded as anti-Christian. This transition alone deserves further study if we hope to understand the history of ethics in modernity.

Studying these two facets – utilitarianism's focus on the good and its relation to theological ethics – would still be too broad and so this volume approaches the topic by focusing specifically on the work of Peter Singer. Singer is an apt choice not only because he is the world's best-known utilitarian, but because his work touches on our two facets in important ways. First, religion, especially Christianity, plays a prominent role in Singer's work because he presents his own ethical theory as a self-conscious rejection of those elements of Christianity that he sees as morally problematic, such as the place it assigns animals in the natural world and its regard for the sanctity of life. It is therefore worth exploring whether his critique of Christianity is sound, and whether he deserves the often-hostile

condemnation of Christians. Second, Singer has recently suggested that he is in the process of rethinking the concept of the good in his own theory, and thus it is a timely occasion to study it more fully. Singer's rethinking has been prompted by Derek Parfit's *On What Matters* and by Henry Sidgwick, who is prominent in Parfit's book, and whom Singer regards as the greatest utilitarian. In brief, Singer is now increasingly open to the possibility that ethics may have an objective basis; it may be irrational, and ultimately bad, for me to prefer certain things. What difference this change-of-mind might make remains to be seen. A minimal change might mean Singer merely shifts the foundation of his utilitarianism from preferences to pleasure. Yet it could foreshadow a more fundamental change, considering a broader range of goods as morally important.

The essays originated at an academic conference at the University of Oxford in 2011. Held under the auspices of the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics & Public Life, and funded by the British Academy, it was entitled *Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer*. With this name in mind, some attendees hoped the goal was to present a harmony of the two perspectives, showing that utilitarianism and Christianity were entirely compatible on practical matters. Others expected the opposite, and hoped to see a full-scale Christian critique of Singer and all that he stands for. Both groups were predictably disappointed. The real goal was more modest: to bring onto the academic stage a debate that might otherwise be confined to talk radio, cable news, Twitter, and the rest of the culture-wars media machine. Singer is a prominent voice and his arguments deserve to be read with generosity and respect; indeed, doing so is a virtue and duty required of scholars.

This may sound trivial but, in organizing the conference, we found that it was anything but. From two different quarters, there were vigorous, even hostile, critiques of the *very idea* of this conference. Certain Christian ethicists argued that the event would simply give legitimacy to the views of a marginal, extremist fringe (i.e. utilitarians) and that, in the end, the Christians would come out of the exchange on the losing end because we couldn't count on our interlocutors to debate in good faith. There were two reasons that led us to reject this argument. First, like it or not, utilitarianism is not a fringe view, but is influential in the academy and, increasingly, in popular culture and government. Second, behind this critique lies a mistaken assumption about the nature and purpose of scholarly conferences. A conference is not the sort of thing one can 'win'. A quite different objection to the very idea of the conference was that Singer's views are anti-feminist and so to invite him to speak in an 'exchange' with Christian ethicists would

be no exchange at all; it would simply be one batch of misogynists preaching to a misogynist choir. The flaws with this objection should be obvious. It is based on the mistaken beliefs that there are no Christian feminists and that Singer is anti-feminist.² I mention this background because it shows that the charitable, yet candid, exchange of views displayed in the following essays was not easily achieved.

The first of the essays sets the stage for the others by asking, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?' That question could be asking two different things, and so the essay provides two answers. One answer is historical. From what genealogy did utilitarianism emerge? That is, who were the first utilitarians and in what socio-political context did they develop their ideas? The other answer is conceptual. By what process of reasoning would someone become a utilitarian?

The essay shows that, historically, utilitarianism first emerged from Christian theologians who were themselves responding to perceived challenges to natural law. Key aspects of their work were then challenged by Bentham and Mill, leading to forms of utilitarianism that are more recognizable today. This contrasts with the 'Standard Story' told both by utilitarianism's champions (it is the one, true rational ethics that throws off the monkish superstition of all past theories) and by utilitarianism's critics (it is a rejection of ethics and an aberration, soon to die out).

Where does utilitarianism come from *conceptually*? How does one come to embrace it? The essay recounts Singer's answer to this question, showing that his view is characterized by three features, each of which we have reason to doubt. First, Singer's utilitarianism is committed to a particular vision of rationality as the only possible mode by which ethics can proceed: the deductive certainty of mathematics or geometry. Second, classical utilitarians are interested in only one way of evaluating the good: that is, by rendering all expressions of moral goodness commensurable and measurable on a single scale. Third, they are surprisingly averse to considerations of human nature. Bentham and Sidgwick shaped modern utilitarianism so that it displays these three features, but they need not have. There were other possible avenues they might have followed, connecting both Christian moral sense theory and Hume's ethics to today. The essay explores some of these alternatives, especially by comparing Jonathan Haidt's Humean utilitarianism to Singer's work.

² See Peter Singer, 'An Intellectual Autobiography', in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffrey Schaler (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2009), 1–74 (40, 49).

The [second chapter](#) is Singer's, and it well displays our twin themes of God and the Good. In it, he presents a brief religious autobiography, explaining how he came to his current views on God and religion. In brief, he became sceptical of Christianity at an early age because of certain puzzling stories that he read in the Bible, and because of the hypocrisy of certain Christians that he met. Later, he was troubled by how he saw the social conservatism of some Australian churches as harmful to others on topics like obscenity legislation and abortion.

Singer then offers a more substantive engagement with Christian ethics on four issues: the treatment of animals, taking life, duties to the poor, and moral theory. He sees both the Greek philosophical tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures as anthropocentric, and thus ultimately immoral in their lack of regard for non-human animals. Though he recognizes that there are biblical passages that seem to give high regard to animals and Christians who put this into practice (movements such as Christian vegetarianism, for example), these are minority voices and largely ineffectual. The 'dominion' over nature granted to humans by Genesis still carries the day in how the West regards animals. On this issue Eastern religions such as Buddhism are better in theory, he says, though societies influenced by Buddhism are rarely better in practice.

On the taking of life, Singer's critique is more robust. The core tenet of Christian ethics on this issue (and the root of the problem, as far as he's concerned) is 'the doctrine of the sanctity of life', which he defines as the double claim that it is always wrong to intentionally kill the innocent and that there is an absolute right to life for all members of the human species. Singer's response to this is well known: simply being *Homo sapiens* doesn't merit certain sorts of treatment, any more than being white or black skinned should merit certain sorts of treatment. Rather, what should matter are features such as being sentient or being rational. Unlike skin colour these are morally relevant because they influence how we experience pleasure, pain, happiness, preferences, and so on. Singer follows this with a sharp critique of the Catholic distinction between ordinary and extraordinary forms of medical treatment, and the principle of double effect. He concludes by noting one, perhaps surprising, point on which he agrees with a 'traditional' Christian view: that human life begins at conception. This does not lead him to oppose abortion, however, for he regards murder as killing persons rather than killing humans.

When Singer turns to obligations to the poor, he notes that his utilitarianism and Christianity are in harmony. Both consider it a moral duty to

give to those in need, even at significant personal sacrifice. Unlike the treatment of animals, where Singer can find affinity with only a minority strand within Christianity, generosity to the poor is at the core of Christian teaching, running throughout the Bible and subsequent millennia. He closes the section by asking Christians to follow this teaching more consistently.

Finally, Singer briefly considers a series of questions in the realm of utilitarian moral theory. Through most of his career, he has been a preference utilitarian, meaning that his particular brand of utilitarianism is grounded on what maximizes preferences, rather than, for example, on pleasure or happiness. On this view, moral judgements are not 'reasonable' in the usual sense of the word, but may be statements that reflect our desires (as in Hume) or universalizable imperatives (as in R.M. Hare). But now, persuaded partly by Parfit's *On What Matters*, Singer reports that he is sympathetic to Sidgwick's non-naturalist objectivism. Preference utilitarians can remain agnostic on whether anyone's preferences are morally good or bad. If you prefer to eat dirt, while I prefer rice, who is to say which is better? What matters is that our preferences are satisfied without thwarting others. But a Sidgwickian objectivist cannot maintain this agnosticism. On this view, at least as Singer appropriates it, some preferences are simply irrational. He concludes by offering a hypothetical defence that might allow him to remain a preference utilitarian despite what Sidgwick and Parfit say, while acknowledging that he has not yet decided. He closes with the tantalizing speculation that there may yet be 'some other form of consequentialism that has more than one intrinsic value'.

Before I summarize the remainder of the essays that comprise this volume, it is worth noting that Singer's chapter displays one feature that we intentionally encouraged at the conference, and which is discernible throughout the subsequent chapters. The questions we are asking about utilitarianism – about its understanding of the good and its relation to religious ethics – can be addressed from three perspectives: moral theory, history, and practical ethics. Or to put it another way, moral theory cannot stand on its own; it is both inherently practical discipline and unavoidably historically situated. To use language more familiar to Christian theology, ethics is *pastoral* and *traditional*. Utilitarianism, whether in its pre-Victorian Christian origins or the secular utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, has always had a practical bent. Throughout Singer's career, real-life concerns such as cruelty to animals and famine have motivated his writing, and the causes that he personally supports. In an online interview, the economist Tyler Cowen even suggested to Singer, half-teasingly, that Singer's practical

ethics makes him pastoral in a more literal sense, a sort of rabbi: a 'Jewish moralist' providing a mishnah for the secular Talmud that is utilitarianism.³

What has been less common to the utilitarian tradition is its self-understanding *as a tradition*. It is a movement that is situated within a particular historical context, one that is extended over generations and achieves its coherence partly by reference to influential texts and decisive verdicts on practical questions. Some schools of thought quite obviously fit this description, such as rabbinic Judaism, Aristotelianism, and Catholicism. Utilitarianism belongs on that list too, but has often eschewed that image, not recognizing that it too has 'authoritative' figures like Mill and Sidgwick or that it emerged as it did because it first faced a particular set of problems: in Bentham and Mill's case, the problems addressed by the great Victorian reform movements.

We can see why some utilitarians might want to deny the parallel between their theory and, say, Judaism or Aristotelianism, because denying it appears to afford a strategic advantage. It allows utilitarianism to represent itself as the basic or default 'moral point of view' from which all other points of view begin, committed as it is to nothing more than happiness and fairness. Other moral theories *add onto* this basic ground with various embellishments, such as virtue or God's command or categorical imperatives, but since these cannot garner universal assent, real ethics must be limited to what is morally basic. Unsurprisingly this basic ground turns out to be utilitarianism.

More plausible would be to see these various traditions as just that; none is more 'basic' than others. Each begins from somewhere: that God's law is revealed in Torah, or that eudaimonia is the well-functioning of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue, or that it is immoral to treat others only as means, or that each counts as one and none for more than one. Acknowledging these differences need not (as is sometimes supposed) lead to relativism. What follows, rather, is that a full understanding of an ethical tradition demands careful and sustained attention not only to its underlying theory, but to its full historical context, how it conceives itself as a conversation over time about how to live morally. To ask that utilitarianism self-consciously consider itself a tradition is not to stack the deck in favour of religious ethics, simply because tradition might be a word more commonly used in religious ethics than moral philosophy. In fact, part of what makes utilitarian ethics attractive is precisely how well it scores when viewed from such a perspective: Bentham stood for prison reform when being 'soft on crime' was unpopular; Mill advocated women's rights

³ A video of the interview is available at www.bloggingheads.tv/videos/2022.

when many thought it foolish; Singer was a friend to animals when this was seen as sentimentalism.

It is because of this that the following essays give attention not only to moral theory, but to the history from which those theories emerge and the practical conclusions to which they lead. Singer displays all of these in his chapter, as does the subsequent essay by Charles Camosy. Much of the impetus for the conference came from Camosy who, since then, has published a book on the topic.⁴ More so than with any of the other authors, Camosy is arguing for common ground between utilitarianism and Christian ethics, more specifically, between Singer's ethics and Roman Catholic moral theology. Camosy of course recognizes the sharp differences in practical conclusions – after all, Catholic teaching rejects even early abortion as akin to murder, while Singer thinks infanticide can be morally permissible – but he believes these differences are theoretically narrow. It is not always clear what he means by *narrow*, but he seems to have in mind that the two moral views can be stated in *commensurable language* and that the different conclusions hinge on only one or two presuppositions. That these conclusions diverge so widely makes them appear more opposed than they actually are. Though his claims sounds counter-intuitive, Camosy makes his case well, focusing on exactly the same issues Singer did in his chapter: duties to the poor, duties to animals, taking of life, and moral theory. As mentioned above, it is unclear (even to Singer himself) what difference a switch to an objectivist moral theory will make for his utilitarianism; Camosy is clearly among those who hope that it will make a great deal of difference. Other contributors are more sceptical of Christian-utilitarian common ground than Camosy.

The subsequent three essays focus in greater detail on particular questions of moral theory. The first of these is John Hare's 'Morality, happiness, and Peter Singer'. Though brief, it is perhaps the most analytically rigorous of the chapters. It explores the relation of morality to happiness, and morality to God, in a number of utilitarians. Hare's 'big picture' question concerns the connection between happiness and moral goodness. Do we have some kind of assurance that these will go together? If so, what is it? And if not, why be moral? Hare begins with his father, the philosopher R.M. Hare, who was Singer's doctoral supervisor and whose universal prescriptivism remains deeply influential on Singer (a debt Singer acknowledges in many places, including his contribution to this volume).

⁴ Charles C. Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

R.M. Hare recognized the difficulty these questions posed. Part of his response was made via the notion of an all-knowing archangel, someone who would know the preferences of all beings, know how to satisfy them, and be impartial between them. Insofar as we are like the archangel, we can be utilitarians. But of course we are not like the archangel and so the solution is not so simple. Even if God is a utilitarian (John Hare suggests that God is) this leaves unanswered the moral principle on which mere mortals act. One possibility is the sort of God one finds in Joseph Butler. Butler's God is essentially like an archangel that guides individuals to the cosmic good via their consciences. R.M. Hare was not fully satisfied with such an answer. According to John Hare, this left R.M. unable to defend his utilitarianism fully, for it only works for certain sorts of preferences. Other sorts of preferences depend upon an archangel's viewpoint, and on these R.M. doesn't have a complete answer. It is John Hare's view that this is precisely where Singer is now caught when he says that he doesn't know if he should remain a preference utilitarian. Singer is 'stuck' where R.M. once was. Hare then traces these questions about morality and happiness further back, through Sidgwick to Mill. Throughout all of the thinkers he considers, Hare notices three features: (1) the recognition that happiness and morality are separate, (2) an acknowledgement that in this world the two can come apart, and (3) some hope to keep the two together. He judges Singer's account of these to be, so far, unsatisfactory.

Lisa Sowle Cahill appreciates Singer's focus on practical or 'pastoral' ethics but wishes he would go further in this direction. She argues that many of the major disagreements in moral theory, especially among analytic philosophers, are actually only resolvable by reference to the communities from which they emerge. By drawing on his 'Intellectual Autobiography' and a largely unknown personal history of his family, *Pushing Time Away*, she shows that this is already implicit in his work. At every stage, Singer's theory has been led by personal activism, and communities of friends gathered around particular causes. This is a remarkable claim, for utilitarianism is commonly criticized from precisely the opposite direction: it is bare bureaucratic principalism, lacking any point of contact to the real world. But as Cahill shows, in Singer's case it was through communities of friends concerned with issues such as the suffering of animals that made possible his own theoretical work. This she connects to various Roman Catholic sources to show a similar perspective, though at points she criticizes these for being over-theoretical and ultimately unconvincing. Her goal is to show that quests for justice in *global* context, such as she and Singer support, depend more than ever on *situated* communities of

friends, on moral exemplars (more than abstract principles), and so on. To set this within the themes of the book as a whole, Cahill is arguing that our conception of the good cannot be abstract or procedural; it is, first of all, local. Though she supports this partly by reference to Singer, it also constitutes a challenge to forms of utilitarianism, such as R.M. Hare's, that place significant weight on the universalizability of moral norms.

Whereas the preceding essays bring the relation between religious ethics and utilitarianism to the fore, Brad Hooker's essay sits more comfortably within the realm of moral philosophy proper. He raises, but then sets aside, questions about the different possible ways utilitarianism can construe the good, be they hedonistic, perfectionist, eudaimonist, and so on. On his view, such distinctions are often practically irrelevant, since the same events will often maximize the good whichever conception of it one has in mind. Of much greater practical significance, says Hooker, is how that good is aimed at, either directly via acts or indirectly via act-guiding rules. Hooker argues for the latter, endorsing a form of rule-utilitarianism. He concludes by suggesting that both theists and atheists have reason to prefer rule- over act-utilitarianism, though their reasons for this preference will be different. One possible tension for utilitarianism of Singer's sort is that it is exceedingly demanding, and Hooker hints that part of the widespread appeal of Singer's work is that he fudges the choice between rule- and act-utilitarianism, switching to the latter whenever supererogatory acts (not accommodated by the usual rules) seem needed. He does not provide concrete examples of where Singer does this, but it would certainly explain some tensions raised by Camosy, where Singer appears to waffle on this distinction (e.g. does Singer maintain, as Camosy claims, that there is a rule against killing persons?).

The subsequent four essays each focus on a concrete moral issue and ask what different practical conclusions on that issue reveal about utilitarianism and the good. Nominally, Tim Mulgan focuses on the issue of climate change. In fact, he is using this issue to generate a thought experiment that reveals deeper problems with most forms of utilitarianism (though Mulgan is himself a utilitarian of a sort). The good that utilitarianism seeks to maximize (however construed) generates duties not only to others living now, but to distant future people whom we will never meet. But those people may be quite different than us in terms of their preferences and what makes them happy. So what sort of a world ought we to leave behind for them? The answer seems to require something significantly more objective than utilitarianism is usually willing to provide, and certainly more objective than Singer has provided so far. One possible response would be to

recognize certain goods as valuable even apart from anyone's wanting them. Another would be a modified naturalism; we would ask what is good for humans because of the sorts of beings they are (stable friendships? healthy food to eat? productive and meaningful work?). But as Mulgan shows, utilitarians generally and Singer in particular will find these unattractive.

David Clough's essay is entitled 'How to respect other animals: lessons for theology from Peter Singer *and vice versa*'. Before summarizing his essay, it may be helpful to pause to notice the framing that it embodies, because it is characteristic of what the conference as a whole sought to achieve. On a surprising number of issues, mainstream Christian ethicists and utilitarians reach the same practical or policy conclusion. But even in those cases where they do, their underlying reasons might vary greatly. And that, in turn, can cause subsequent disagreement on practical matters, especially in tricky cases. Furthermore, the process of reasoning by which one side reaches its conclusion may actually be (to the other side) itself morally deforming. The duties we have to animals are a perfect example. Despite what Singer says about the neglect of animal welfare in church history, the fact is that Christians reach pretty much the same range of conclusions about animals as do utilitarians. There are plenty of Christian vegans and vegetarians, for example. But a common Christian reason for not using animals for good is that the act of killing is itself morally deforming. Thus, even if we could kill animals without causing fear or pain, we should avoid it when possible, because life itself has an intrinsic worth and the taking of life harms that good and may even, reflexively, harm us when we kill. Although Singer would agree with the practical conclusion, this *reasoning* will not only be unpersuasive to him, it could itself be seen as morally harmful because notions like the sanctity of life can work against the minimization of suffering. In other words, *promoting animal welfare* turns out to be a more complex endeavour than simply *avoiding animal suffering*. Indeed, those two notions can even be at odds.

This general framing of the issue is what Clough adopts in an engaging and witty essay (complete with references to *The Jungle Book*, Monty Python, and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). As he shows, Singer's suggestion that the Bible is to blame for the West's current mistreatment of animals is doubly mistaken: the Bible is not as anti-animal as Singer suggests *and* humans (even apart from the Bible) are not nearly as beneficent to animals as he would have us believe. Furthermore, there are points on which Christian principles would offer greater protection to animal well-being than would a utilitarian. This raises, again, the question of how the good is conceived. Although Singer does not eat lamb, it would seem he could.

After all, they are almost always allowed to spend their (brief) lives roaming freely, they can be killed painlessly, and they are replaced by another generation, so that there is no less preference satisfaction in the world after their deaths. Clough argues that we should still be troubled by the killing of nine-month-old lambs and that this is because it is intrinsically good for their lives to run a full course.

The final two essays on practical issues explore global poverty, but from different perspectives. As Singer's chapter makes clear, this is the single issue on which he views utilitarian and Christian ethics to be in the greatest harmony. In contrast to classical liberalism, with its presumption in favour of property rights (in which giving to the poor is supererogatory), both utilitarianism and Christianity have consistently taught that our duties to the poor are very demanding. Toby Ord is a utilitarian philosopher who has received attention outside the academy for his pledge actually to live consistently with what he sees these utilitarian demands to be, and donate the remainder of his career earnings to the very poor. In this essay, he defends this view against some common objections, relates it to Singer's parable of the shallow pond, and finally situates it within some of the major Christian teachings on generosity to the poor. He pays special attention to the claim that we should doubt Singer's theory because it leads to overly demanding obligations. Ord criticizes such claims by analysing what is actually meant by the charge of overdemandingness and by showing that alternative theories suffer from the opposite problem: underdemandingness.

Gregory addresses the same issue, but from a theological perspective. He makes two key points: first, recent work from social history indicates that we only conceptualize 'the poor' as a sympathetic category thanks to the emphasis that the first Christian preachers placed on aiding the poor, and how rich-poor came to replace citizen-alien as the most important social categories in the late Roman era. Second, although Gregory's emphasis is chiefly on the common ground shared by Christians and utilitarians, he does explore one area of difference within that larger area of agreement. Christians and utilitarians seem to give different accounts of how special obligations, such as to family or neighbours, relate to general obligations to all humans as such. This is explained by comparing the parable of the Good Samaritan to Singer's parable of the shallow pond.

PART I

Framing the debate

Where did utilitarianism come from?

John Perry

Introduction

I first heard of Peter Singer on my first day of college. I was an undergraduate at the University of Minnesota and my first class was Introduction to Philosophy. As I waited for it to begin, the professor failed to appear. None of my fellow students, as fresh from high school as I was, knew the appropriate protocol for such a situation. How long should we wait? Was there someone we should call? As we debated the options, the classroom door burst open and a dishevelled, sweaty, panicked man staggered in. Gasping for breath, he managed to say, 'I'm so sorry to keep you waiting. Something dreadful has happened. You see, on my way to work this morning, I walked past a shallow pond . . .'

He proceeded to describe his horror at seeing a small child drowning in the pond. Due to a moment's hesitation, wondering whether rescuing the child would ruin his new \$400 pair of shoes, he had acted too slowly. The child had died. He was visibly upset and we tried to console him, while not wanting to condone the moment of selfishness in which he had valued a child's life less than his shoes.

As you will probably have guessed, the professor eventually let us in on the secret. He was enacting a parable first told by an Australian philosopher named Peter Singer, and there really was no shallow pond. In fact, the pond represented Africa, for in the minutes that we had been discussing the professor's costly hesitation, many real children had died easily preventable deaths, if only we had bought them food or vaccines instead of buying ourselves music CDs (this was before the iPod). The professor was not himself a utilitarian, but he was sympathetic and he presented Singer's case clearly and fairly, partly because he shared Singer's atheism (in both cases, theirs was rooted in childhood stories of religious inconsistency or hypocrisy¹). I did not share their

¹ Singer mentions two problems: he read that Jesus cursed a fig tree for not bearing fruit and his school chaplain drove an expensive car. For my professor, the Calvinism of his childhood church left him wracked with fear that he was predestined to do all sorts of embarrassing things, like stand on the

atheism, but I was nonetheless intrigued. More than any other philosopher we studied that term, Singer was a baffling mix of straightforward common sense and wild implausibility.

One of the reasons I was so fascinated was how his perspective bumped up against my ethical views as they were informed by my Christian faith. On the one hand, in class discussions, utilitarians were the only allies Christians had in demanding radical, sacrificial generosity in giving to the poor; the classical liberals thought it might be nice to give, but not obligatory. Indeed, the Parable of the Shallow Pond sounded to me like a classic rabbinic retelling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the unsuspecting audience is cast in the role of the 'bad guys' who neglect a needy stranger with a series of lame excuses. On the other hand, Singer's view that abortion and infanticide were more or less the same thing, and both morally permissible, troubled the Christians and liberals alike – not to mention most of the utilitarians.

Another reason was Singer's unflinching consistency. His theory generates mathematically certain, black and white answers to almost any moral problem. There was something about my late-teenage mind for which meticulous, brutal logic held a kind of comfort. I know that will sound patronizing or condescending, but I do not mean it that way. It is simply part of my own autobiography that, at nineteen, I expected moral theory to function like a flowchart and now I do not. Perhaps a final reason I was intrigued is something that developed over my college career: the historical period in which utilitarianism emerged came to seem crucially important for understanding ethics today. As the religious and political unity of Europe collapsed various 'replacement theories' emerged from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, especially those of Locke, Kant, and Mill. These thinkers did not see their view as one plausible option among many, but instead each was equally convinced that his theory alone was the one that any rational person would accept. So, on the one hand, we have a theory with incredible intuitive appeal; it can be convincingly and dramatically portrayed in parables by twentieth-century philosophers and first-century rabbis. But, on the other hand, it turns out that utilitarianism, far from receiving universal assent, remains extraordinarily controversial and distinctive. It did not emerge promiscuously and spontaneously from a wide range of human cultures (as, for example, the Golden Rule did) but only in a very precise historical context and via a particular intellectual genealogy.

church pew and shout swear words. He didn't do that, but he was afraid he would. Though I am a Christian, I recognize that there are some quite plausible reasons to reject theism; these ones probably don't belong at the top of the list.

It was characteristic of moral philosophers in that period to be unreflective about the history of ethics, and so it was easy for them to pretend that their views had no genealogy. Each thinker interacted with his immediate predecessors as foils, but almost never did they step outside their immediate context to ask how they got there, or what conceptual burdens they may have brought. The only exception was when they compared their views, which they saw as messianic, to the monkish ignorance of the distant past. Unfortunately, this exception only made matters worse, for it reinforced in their minds that they were uniquely immune from the presuppositions of their historical context. Alasdair MacIntyre sees this tendency as characteristic of contemporary philosophy generally:

We all too often still treat the moral philosophers of the past as contributors to a single debate with a relatively unvarying subject-matter, treating Plato and Hume and Mill as contemporaries both of ourselves and of each other. This leads to an abstraction of these writers from the cultural and social milieus in which they lived and thought and so the history of their thought acquires a false independence from the rest of the culture. Kant ceases to be a part of the history of Prussia, Hume is no longer a Scotsman. For from the standpoint of moral philosophy as *we* conceive it these characteristics have become irrelevances. Empirical history is one thing, philosophy quite another. But are we right in understanding the division between academic disciplines in the way that we conventionally do?²

The answer to this question is clear. We are worse off for dividing history and philosophy as we do, and it is one of theology's gifts to the wider academy – whatever else one thinks of religion or theism or Christianity – that it models how to integrate systematic reflection on a body of knowledge with the study of texts, together with history, together with practical ethics. Many of the essays in this volume point with excitement to Singer's new openness to an objective account of morality. For my part, I am far more excited by his renewed interest in Sidgwick because it shows he is taking history more seriously, and because Sidgwick is himself more sensitive to historical genealogies than the others. Sidgwick knew that he could not do his job well without thoroughly understanding all of his predecessors – Hutcheson, Clarke, Shaftesbury, Hume – and we would be wise to learn from his example.

In the context of the present volume, all of this prompts a question: where did utilitarianism come from? The story of the origin of Christian

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd edn; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 11.

ethics would, by comparison, be fairly easily answered, for Christianity intentionally conceives of itself as a historically embodied tradition. But what of utilitarianism? The question can be answered in one of two ways: either with a historical account (what is the genealogy of the idea and in what socio-political context did it emerge?) or with a conceptual account (how might someone come rationally to embrace utilitarianism?). *Historically*, Singer does not spend much time on the question, though when he does, he depicts its emergence via the common Enlightenment trope of the overcoming of superstition. *Conceptually*, he portrays utilitarianism as a 'default' position, the first base for all moral reasoning. In what follows, I will present a different account of utilitarianism's origins. Doing so will help us better understand utilitarianism and how it compares to other (and in my view, superior) teleological theories of ethics, such as eudaimonism.

My alternative: Christian eudaimonism

Before I proceed further, it is only fair that I begin by saying something about my own perspective – given that Singer is so clear and candid about his. I agree with Singer that, at bottom, ethics concerns what promotes flourishing or well-being or happiness. The well-being of humans is especially important but it is not all that matters; the flourishing of non-human animals, the natural world, and even of God is also morally significant.³ Nicholas Wolterstorff helpfully appropriates the term *shalom* from the Hebrew Scriptures to describe this all-encompassing well-being of the cosmos.⁴ In technical terms, this means Singer and I both endorse teleological theories of ethics, which might (in the widest possible sense) both be labelled consequentialist; however, my 'consequentialism' is eudaimonist not utilitarian.⁵

³ It may seem odd to speak of humans contributing to God's flourishing. Certainly I cannot affect God's well-being in the way that I affect my friend's, but humans can honour God's goodness and beauty, and this matters morally.

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Though Wolterstorff's ethics is grounded in goods, he explicitly rejects eudaimonism, partly because he assumes eudaimonism is concerned with selfish pursuit of the good. It can descend into that, but I do not see that as a reason to reject eudaimonism as such.

⁵ The term consequentialism was coined in Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33:124 (January 1958): 1–19, but I am appropriating the word for different purposes. Here and throughout I use consequentialism to mean any theory of ethics that is, at bottom, concerned with

By eudaimonist, I intend to emphasize two points of contrast with utilitarianism. First, the good which is the ground of ethical action is both objective and plural. It is objective, because some things are worth desiring whether anyone desires them or not (such things will also be worth training oneself to desire). It is plural, because the good comes to humans in concrete forms, such as friendship and knowledge and aesthetic appreciation and meaningful labour, which cannot be ranked or summed on a single scale. There is no available decision procedure, specifiable in advance, which would definitively settle how such goods ought to be weighed in all particular cases. Yet this does not leave us without guidance about how rightly to achieve such goods, which brings me to my second point of contrast with utilitarianism. The pursuit of these goods is guided by rules and ideals specified in terms of generic norms of action. In other words, there is a place for rules, but those rules are understood by reference to ‘morally problematic or (more rarely) praiseworthy kinds of actions, for example, murder, theft, adultery, and almsgiving’.⁶ These norms are the core of traditional or common morality, what Sidgwick calls ‘Common-Sense morality’.⁷ The crucial feature of these norms, however, is that they are not by themselves definitive guides to human action. This is not because they can be overridden (as in utilitarianism); rather, it simply recognizes that the norms are expressed in natural language. There may always be future, borderline cases about which we ask, ‘But is *this* act murder – or do we need to refine further how we define the concept of murder?’ As Jean Porter writes:

promoting well-being or flourishing or happiness, which includes post-Sidgwickian utilitarianism (as Anscombe intended) but also includes various forms of eudaimonism, which she would have categorized under a different heading.

⁶ Jean Porter, ‘Christianity, Divine Law, and Consequentialism’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48:4 (1995): 415–42 (420).

⁷ There are different views about where this common morality arises from, and how to subject it to rational critique (rather than blindly accepting whatever ‘most people’ think). This is not the place to settle such questions, except to say that what I have outlined here does not commit me to one or another source of common morality. The Christian tradition is a rich source of reflection on these normative concepts and how they relate to the goods at hand. For the most part, the rules should not be viewed as *extrinsic* to the goods being sought, but as arising from the nature of those goods. They are more like the ‘rule’ that one cannot buy true friendship, and unlike the rule that a field goal is worth three points. When we interrogate the norms of common morality, as we sometimes must, we are asking, what is the point or purpose of the concept in question as it relates to the goods being sought. This is very clearly explained in *ibid.*, 421–2. A quite different source than the Christian tradition would be the work of social psychologists like Jonathan Haidt, to whom I turn below, and his moral foundations theory. There is no reason that such objectively measurable norms, rooted in human nature, cannot also form the basis of a viable eudaimonism. In fact, Christians would have reason to be surprised if there was not some kind of connection between human nature, moral goods, and moral rules.

[Any] generic concepts in a natural language, cannot be defined so precisely that it is always possible to say with certainty that one of them does or does not apply to a specific case . . . Our basic moral concepts do have a specific meaning, which is given initially by the cases which we, as a community, would take to be paradigmatic instances of the concept in question, or else, take to be paradigmatic illustrations of a situation in which the relevant concept does not apply.⁸

Thus one may never murder to achieve some good, but what counts as murder may always be in need of further clarification, especially for borderline cases. When we need additional clarification, it will be sought by reasoned reference to paradigm cases: we know that Cain killing Abel out of jealousy was murder, but is Hawkeye killing Duncan out of mercy the same sort of thing? All of this explains why I am sympathetic to Singer's project, yet also why I am not a utilitarian.

It is worth acknowledging quite openly that Singer's utilitarianism and my eudaimonism are each open to particular objections. The most obvious problem with Singer's view is that without an objective account of happiness, the happiness or preferences of the wicked will count for him just as much as those of the innocent. On his view, whether the Holocaust was morally good or bad depends on the empirical question of whether Nazis preferred to kill Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals more strongly than those victims preferred to live.⁹ My eudaimonist view does not have this difficulty, for it allows me to say that the preference to commit genocide, or deriving happiness from it, are intrinsically malformed human desires. I can say to the Nazi, 'It doesn't matter what you think makes you happy; you ought to develop better taste.' While this helps me avoid Singer's problem, it creates for me a different problem that is the mirror image of Singer's. Eudaimonism can become paternalistic or, at its extreme, totalitarian, because it occasionally rejects a person's testimony about what makes her happy. If you say that you would prefer to spend your days sitting alone in a field mindlessly counting blades of grass, or lip-syncing to Justin Bieber albums, or watching professional wrestling, then I would seem (eventually) compelled to say something like, 'Although you believe that is the best life for you, you're wrong. You would be happier if you developed some better tastes: for friendship, for productive labour, for Mozart, for Shakespeare (though even *The Simpsons* would be an improvement).' At the end of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 420–1.

⁹ Nigel Biggar and Peter Singer, 'Putting a Value on Human and Animal Life', *Standpoint* (July–August 2011).

day, Singer and I seem forced to bite the bullet and concede that any theory is not without its difficulties, yet we each prefer, for complex reasons, to be left with different sorts of difficulties. But more importantly, we can recognize that, whatever these disagreements, viewed through a wider lens, Singer and I do agree on the very big question of grounding ethics in the good.

Where utilitarianism came from: a historical answer

So, where *did* utilitarianism come from? Later I will discuss its conceptual origins (how would someone come to embrace it rationally or intellectually?), but first, where did utilitarianism *historically* come from? To what family tree does it belong? What is its genealogy? I will present a number of possibilities that I consider mistaken, before offering what seems a more plausible account of utilitarianism's family history – and explaining why it matters that we get it right.

The first candidate could be considered the Standard Story and it runs as follows. Natural law ethics – Christianized and church-controlled – more or less dominated the West for over a millennium, but this began to break down in the sixteenth century. This was due to a variety of factors, such as the political fragmentation of Europe following the Protestant Reformation and a new 'anthropological' awareness of moral pluralism thanks to global exploration. Natural law is premised on a *summum bonum* for all humans, but if there is no single ultimate good for all humans, then we will need an alternative ethics if we are to avoid killing each other (as Locke saw all around him, in the aftermath of the Civil War in England and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France). Thus modernity produced three replacement theories: Locke had his contractarian liberal theory of rights, Kant his deontological rationalism, and Mill his utilitarianism. What these share, in contrast to the natural law theory they sought to replace, is a preference for agreement over comprehensiveness; they will not give you the meaning of life, as Aristotle and Aquinas would, but they will tell you not to kill your neighbour merely for being Lutheran. In this Standard Story, then, utilitarianism is one of three main moral theories meant to replace the failure of natural law by finding a lowest common denominator on which an increasingly morally and religiously pluralistic society can ground its ethics.

A second candidate is a sharpened and polemical version of the first; it emphasizes secularism as utilitarianism's hallmark. On this account, the leading modern moral theories arise because the preceding moral theories

are, like Nietzsche's God, dead. Parfit writes, 'Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will reach agreement.'¹⁰ Utilitarianism is not the only alternative Parfit would have us consider, but it is certainly among them. What makes it new is that it is part of the project of doing ethics without God. This genealogy is present through Singer's work as well, but most explicitly in *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*.¹¹ Utilitarianism is made possible by casting off the shackles of superstition: belief in the sanctity of life, speciesist idolatry of the human species, and so on. On this account, utilitarianism is the firstborn child and heir of the Enlightenment. Central to it is Singer's belief that Darwin's theory of evolution destroyed the teleological view of the universe on which natural law was based. This last point is made more explicit in James Rachels's version of the story, which holds that 'the Aristotelian worldview, on which natural law ethics depended, has been replaced by the outlook of modern science'. This world-view was especially offensive to Rachels because it was so 'stunningly anthropocentric'. Yet, he grants, 'Aristotle may be forgiven, however, when we consider that virtually every important thinker in our history has entertained some such thought. Humans are a remarkably vain species.'¹²

A third genealogy is offered by utilitarianism's critics; it suggests that utilitarianism is fundamentally morally corrupt, and a temporary aberration within moral philosophy. So, Bernard Williams concludes his exchange with the utilitarian J.J.C. Smart by writing, 'The important issues that utilitarianism raises should be discussed in context more rewarding than that of utilitarianism itself. The day cannot be too far off in which we hear no more of it.'¹³ Elizabeth Anscombe had taken this claim further in the article where she coined the term consequentialism, writing, 'But if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration – I do not want to argue with him; he shows a

¹⁰ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 454.

¹¹ Peter Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹² As a rule of thumb, if you find a view silly that is endorsed by 'virtually every important thinker in our history', then it probably cannot be dismissed so easily. James Rachels, 'A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy', in James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, eds, *The Right Thing to Do* (4th edn; Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 7.

¹³ J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 150.

corrupt mind.¹⁴ This none-too-subtle barb, widely quoted out of context, can make Anscombe's position seem less sophisticated than it actually is. She certainly is brash (calling Sidgwick 'vulgar' and Mill 'stupid'), but her genealogy is in fact complex.

Anscombe's view is that moral philosophy goes badly wrong with Sidgwick, because Sidgwick reduces moral considerations solely to consequences in a way that previous ethicists had not. This is a turning point for modern moral philosophy; it is 'the denial of *any* distinction between foreseen and intended consequences, as far as responsibility is concerned'.¹⁵ Where this becomes more subtle, however, is when Anscombe admits she is herself not quite clear of the solution to the larger problem moral philosophy finds itself in. The root of the problem is that the legal conception of ethics, important for Judaism and Christianity but also Stoicism, came to dominate in the West. Yet the notions of duty, obligation, and ought that make sense within that framework have persisted outside of it, and this has badly muddled our thinking on ethics. Though Anscombe lacks a clear solution, she suggests that we perhaps should simply do without the *general* notion of wrongness (she claims Aristotle got along quite well without any such general notion) and instead rely on norm-specific notions, such as unjust, dishonest, or ungrateful.

Though Williams's and Anscombe's genealogies differ, what they share is a rejection of utilitarianism largely on the grounds that it is willing to entertain options that should not even be considered – that should not even be on the table. That criticism is put more sharply by recent Roman Catholic moral theology, with its rejection of Catholic proportionalism as but a species of utilitarianism. This is explicit in various proponents of 'new natural law': in the legal philosophy of John Finnis, the pastoral theology of Germain Grisez, and popularized and politicized by Robert George. It is also given ecclesial support in John Paul II's encyclicals, especially *Veritatis Splendor*. For these, utilitarianism is chiefly defined not, as one might expect, by its being secular, but rather by its denial of absolute moral rules.

Even those without a strong desire to praise or denigrate utilitarianism find the broad outlines of the story a useful framing. Western ethics is a 'big picture' choice between teleology and deontology. Introductory philosophy textbooks still embrace this approach, and no doubt this is what countless half-interested college freshmen are taught by their graduate student instructors. Michael Sandel's hugely popular *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* tells the same story, though with a small twist. It divides the

¹⁴ Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', 17. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

big picture choice three ways, between theories promoting welfare (teleological), promoting freedom via carefully prescribed rules and rights (deontological), and promoting virtue. So too in the best and most recent textbooks of Christian ethics. Robin Lovin puts the options right in his title: *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: Goals, Duties, and Virtues*. Sam Wells and Ben Quash's *Introducing Christian Ethics* is only slightly different, proposing a three-way division between theories of right action, right outcome, and right relationships. In more technical terms, all of these locate the choice between theories in which the good is prior to the right, and those in which the right is prior to the good. Such a division makes good pedagogical sense when it comes to introducing newcomers to complex histories and concepts; however, it can be misleading when it comes to understanding the emergence of utilitarianism.

There are no doubt other family histories of utilitarianism, but these are the most common and they explain why many assume that Christian and utilitarian ethics have little to say to one another, for they belong to different eras or epochs of human moral development. For utilitarianism's supporters, its birth heralds an era of salvation, free from the monkish ignorance of the past. For its opponents, it marks a fall from paradise. As it happens, however, each of these genealogies is mistaken.

Utilitarianism was originally a Christian endeavour, and its earliest systematic defences were works of moral theology. William Paley's *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* remained standard fare on university reading lists for many years, while Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, published the same decade, was virtually unknown. In less than a century, however, theological utilitarianism had been entirely eclipsed. John Stuart Mill, who took his cue from Bentham rather than Paley, offered a version of the theory associated with deep scepticism towards religion, and whose practical conclusions were regarded as anti-Christian. This confirmed the suspicions of some of Paley's Christian critics, who had been worried from the start about where utilitarianism might lead were it placed in the hands of a committed reformist.¹⁶ For them, Bentham and Mill were proof enough. (Imagine if they had met Peter Singer.)

What the 'standard' genealogies share is a mistaken assumption that utilitarianism is a new species of ethics, especially by its being teleological rather than deontological. This assumption of uniqueness is shared by both

¹⁶ See D.L. Le Mahieu, 'Introduction' in William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002). Online: oll.libertyfund.org/simple.php?id=703.

its critics and supporters. Stepping back a few paces, what should be most striking is how much the various rival theories have in common with utilitarianism. Generally speaking, they *share* the assumption that ethics is fundamentally about the good or well-being or flourishing. Thus even Locke defines ethics as ‘seeking out those rules and measures of human actions, which lead to happiness, and the means to practise them’.¹⁷ (In this, as is so often the case, Kant may indeed be the exception.) How this concern for well-being should be weighed and expressed is, of course, the subject of considerable disagreement, but we cannot understand where utilitarianism came from – especially its early theological roots – unless we first notice the many points of agreement between English moral philosophers and theologians of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

One reason that we often fail to notice this is that so much of the attention of twentieth-century moral philosophy has been on the nature of the moral *ought*. This is clearly where Anscombe’s attention lies; for her, what unites the pre-modern theories is a distinctively Christian–Jewish–Stoic *legalism* and the disappearance of this legal framework is the root of the trouble. My view, contra Anscombe, is that what unites the pre-modern theories is in fact a Christian–Jewish–Aristotelian *eudaimonism*, and this continues into modernity, just where it appears to have been abandoned.¹⁸ On this view, despite the many and important differences between, say, Hume and Hutcheson and Butler and Paley and Mill and Bentham and Sidgwick, they share the view that ethics, in its widest possible sense, concerns promoting the well-being of oneself and others. They differ on how to measure well-being, and the role rules should play in advancing that well-being, and how one can come to see in what that well-being consists. They also disagree on whether morality is guided by reason or passion or a moral sense – but viewed from an adequate distance, these are all squabbles within a common family.

Some family squabbles do reach the point of divorce, and it could plausibly be argued that, in Bentham and Singer, we now have something

¹⁷ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3:21.3.

¹⁸ I am largely in agreement with MacIntyre, who argues that what these thinkers (and he includes Kant as well) share is more important than their differences. His focus is on how they presuppose a three-part teleological ethical framework: ‘untutored human nature, man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos* and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other’ (*After Virtue*, 54). These are their building blocks, yet once they have become sceptical of there being any fundamental human nature or *telos*, they do not know how to fit them together in a coherent theory. If they abandoned the whole schema *in toto*, that would have been one thing. But they did not. They kept trying to build a puzzle with pieces that would not fit.

formally detached from the common ground shared by pre-modern eudaimonists and early modern intuitionists and moral sense theorists. Even if we grant this, it is important to be careful in identifying what led to the divorce.

A small, though significant, chapter in the story concerns the purpose to which the classical utilitarians put their theory. The details of this story cannot be fully rehearsed here, though two important histories of ethics cover the ground well: Schneewind's *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* and Irwin's *Development of Ethics*.¹⁹ As both show, the interesting development that coincides with the birth of utilitarianism is not a turn to a teleology of happiness, as if that were an *alternative* to other bases like moral sense or the Bible's commands. Rather, the significant change is that with utilitarianism, ethics becomes an engine of social reform. For Mill, this was always at the forefront. He might have been satisfied to accomplish his social goals without utilitarianism; it was values such as liberty, greater gender equality, and so on that truly concerned him. Much the same could be said for Singer, who is driven by an admirable sensitivity to suffering, an agenda that is served by his moral theory – not the other way round.

Paley is an instructive example of this transition. He offers, from a Christian perspective, a critique of common alternatives to his utilitarianism. Civil law, moral sense, the law of honour, innatism: he demonstrates the inadequacy with each of these as moral foundations because they tend simply to reproduce convention or tradition with too little critical evaluation. Custom is often 'mistaken for the order of nature' and will only 'find out reasons and excuses for opinions and practices already established – will seldom correct or reform'.²⁰ In its place he proposes the principle that 'whatever is expedient is right'.²¹ All this sounds socially progressive or reformist, but when we turn to the details, it is clear that Paley is no revolutionary. He offers his theory with full confidence that it will usually reinforce existing moral rules and institutions, because those are what best promote well-being.²² Yet in making the arguments in this way, he has already destabilized his own position. If the real rule is expediency – if we are confident that following God's will means promoting the general happiness – why should we not test *all* rules against this standard? That is precisely what Bentham does. And it is this same tradition of practical ethics, with a

¹⁹ J.B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ch. 4; Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics: Volume 3: From Kant to Rawls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch. 79.

²⁰ Quoted in Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics*, 124. ²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 125.

²² Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 369.

reformist agenda, that guides utilitarianism from Mill to Singer. This felt dangerous to the leaders of the great Victorian reform movements, not because they opposed reform (they championed it), but because they believed that without a substantive conception of their goal, mere ‘expediency’ would corrupt it. Hence it is unsurprising that one of Paley’s earliest critics was the great social reformer, abolitionist, and evangelical Christian, William Wilberforce.²³ Paley was the odd one out, caught between two very different reformers, and it is not surprising that his particular brand of theological utilitarianism was squeezed out.

Sidgwick agrees that it was Bentham who finally created the rift between utilitarianism and other, milder forms of consequentialism. Yet he thinks Bentham was cornered into this as a defensive manoeuvre against another, more important, enemy. The rift that really matters runs between egoism, on one side, and intuitionism and utilitarianism, on the other. As Sidgwick puts it, ‘Utilitarianism and Egoism may fairly be regarded as extremes between which the Common-Sense morality [or intuitionism] is a kind of *media via*.’ Whenever egoism gains ground, Sidgwick says, it draws ‘Utilitarianism and Intuitionism into their old alliance’.²⁴

In saying this, Sidgwick reveals something of how he understands utilitarianism’s family tree. The great rivals are not deontology and teleology, but *egoism* and teleology, and the great villain is Hobbes. Hobbes believes that he has a natural right to his car, but he also has a right to my car, if he can get it. Once someone is willing to say that sort of thing, with a straight face, then the game has changed. Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Clarke: they dance around the possible responses, but they always assume (as Paley later would) that common morality will coincide with the good of the whole. Bentham – perhaps driven by his reformism, but also by the fact that he was relentlessly, even coldly, logical – bites the bullet. Maybe common morality sometimes threatens the common good, and if so, so much the worse for common morality. (Sidgwick downplays how frequently the two will conflict, saying that it has been exaggerated by ‘most utilitarians’.²⁵) So when Hobbes says that he has a natural right to my car, if he can get it, it falls to Bentham to call this ‘nonsense’ – which is exactly what he does, and in as many words. The problem is that the only way Bentham can see to do

²³ D.L. Le Mahieu, ‘Introduction’, n.p.

²⁴ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1877), 75. The phrase ‘their old alliance’ is particularly evocative, emphasizing that there was an earlier coherence that utilitarianism, under threat from egoism, shattered. In the second edition, he lays the blame clearly on Bentham; by the seventh edition, he shares the blame between Bentham and Paley.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

this involves calling *all* natural rights nonsense. This helps, up to a point, because it means Hobbes no longer has a right to my car. The problem is that now *I* don't have a right to my car either! (Except contingently, depending on whether you or I or Hobbes having the car maximizes the greatest happiness.)

Sidgwick lets Bentham off too easily here. Benthamite utilitarianism was surely not the only, or best, response to egoism. The century and more that lies between Hobbes and Bentham was filled with promising threads that might have been taken up as alternatives, and Sidgwick helpfully sets these out for us.

Utilitarianism appears in friendly alliance with Intuitionism. It was not to supersede but to support the morality of Common Sense, against the dangerous innovations of Hobbes, that Cumberland declared 'the common good of all Rationals' to be the end to which moral rules were the means. We find him quoted with approval by Clarke, who is commonly taken to represent Intuitionism in an extreme form. Nor does Shaftesbury, in introducing the theory of a 'moral sense,' seem to have dreamt that it could ever impel us to actions not clearly conducive to the Good of the Whole: and his disciple Hutcheson expressly identified its promptings with those of Benevolence. Butler seems to have been the first who distinctly pointed out the occasional discrepancy between the apparent well-being of society and Virtue as commonly understood. When Hume presented Utilitarianism as a mode of explaining current morality, it was seen or suspected to have a destructive tendency. But it was not till Bentham's time that it was offered as a method for determining conduct, absolutely complete in itself: the conclusions of which were to overrule all traditional precepts and supersede all existing sentiments.²⁶

Most intriguing in this list is Hume, whom Sidgwick counts as a utilitarian. Hume *seemed* to have the 'destructive tendency', he says, but really it was Bentham who did. In fact, Hume is a fascinating figure in tracing the origins of utilitarianism, because his 'utilitarianism' is so different from the classical hedonistic utilitarianism that eventually triumphs via Bentham and Mill. He is also important to our discussion because Singer credits one part of

²⁶ *Ibid.* Recall that what Sidgwick says here about Bentham is exactly what Anscombe says about Sidgwick in the genealogy she provides in 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Can their conflicting claims be reconciled? Up to a point they can. The solution is that Bentham really is the source of the break between common and utilitarian morality, but that he was insufficiently historically aware to know what he was doing. He did not fully understand why. Sidgwick, who *is* historically aware, sees what is going on: Hobbes is the great rival to Benthamite utilitarianism. Not knowing any other way out, Sidgwick opts *intentionally* for the latter, knowing full well the implications for the earlier consensus that had held together common and utilitarian morality. Thus Anscombe is partly right to name Sidgwick, even if her condemnation of him is unreasonably harsh.

Hume's thought as an important influence. To explore this further, I turn to the second way of answering the question, 'Where did utilitarianism come from?' So far we have been considering this historically, but Singer spends more time answering the conceptual question of how someone might come to embrace utilitarianism rationally.

It will be helpful if I first summarize the current section. We have seen that the great rivals in moral theory may not be deontology and teleology, even though the Standard Story of Western philosophy often supposes they are. With the possible exceptions of Kant and voluntarist divine-command theorists, many of the theories that appear anti-consequentialist belong in the consequentialist *genus*, though not the utilitarian *species*. This challenges both the genealogies of utilitarians like Singer – who portray utilitarianism as the great Enlightenment saviour, a new Copernicus that overcomes monkish superstition with rationalism – and of anti-utilitarians like Williams, Geach, and Anscombe, who see utilitarianism as a temporary aberration in the history of ethics, bound to die out once people come to their senses.

What I have shown is that the actual history of utilitarianism is different. It emerged first, and most influentially, as a theological project – as part of a broader conversation, chiefly in England, running from the late seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Most of the philosophers and theologians in that conversation took for granted that well-being or flourishing or 'the Good of the Whole' was, in some ultimate sense, foundational to ethics, yet they were not utilitarians. It obviously suits utilitarians today to appear as the only teleological theory on the menu, but that is misleading. There are various, plausible alternatives. The classical utilitarian trajectory launched by Bentham is but one thread in a rich tapestry and not a particularly attractive thread either. I do not intend in what follows to attempt a full rebuttal of utilitarianism, but I hope, via Hume, to show that three features of utilitarianism shared by Bentham and Singer are based on unsound and unjustified presuppositions. In particular, they are committed to moral monism (the view that all expressions of the moral good can be expressed on a single scale), they believe mathematics is the ideal form of rationality and that it is achievable in ethics, and that empirical considerations of human nature are of little moral importance, because otherwise ethics may turn into a matter of taste.

Where utilitarianism came from: a conceptual answer

How would someone come to embrace utilitarianism rationally or intellectually? Here is Singer's account. Having an ethical outlook means, Singer

says, giving *reasons* for why some actions or ways of life are right. But some sorts of reasons, such as self-interest, don't count as ethical reasons. This is because 'ethics takes a universal point of view'.²⁷ Of course, there are many different ways to express this, from R.M. Hare's universal prescriptivism to Kant's categorical imperative to Rawls's original position to the impartial spectator of the English moral sense theorists to the command to love your neighbour as yourself, found in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. According to Singer, refusing this universal perspective, such as in egoism, is to refuse ethics as such. Once we have accepted a universal or agent-neutral perspective, how do we get from that to a full-fledged ethical theory?

Here, Singer's answer begins to look slightly sneaky. Beginning solely from the foundation of agent-neutral reasons for actions might lead us to quite different, and irreconcilable, moral theories. But that won't do, because we want a theory that everyone with an ethical outlook can affirm. Our theory should depend on nothing else but the commitment to universalizability: 'The universal aspect of ethics, I suggest, does provide a ground for at least starting with a broadly utilitarian position.'²⁸ In other words, everyone who takes an ethical outlook is *at least* a utilitarian. They might go on to embrace various amendments or supplements to this, but we cannot expect these to be universally compelling, for they will depend upon controversial premises. 'If we are going to move beyond utilitarianism, we need to be given good reasons why we should do so.'²⁹

With a nod to the seventeenth century, Singer supports this by asking us to imagine gathering fruit in a pre-political state of nature. When I encounter some desirable fruit, my first step, once I decide to think ethically, is to consider not only my own preference for the fruit, but yours too – and everyone else's. At this point, he says, we're already thinking like preference utilitarians, and it is only a small step (and in many circumstances an inconsequential one) to the classical utilitarianism of Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick.

What if I think that some other factor, rather than my preferences, ought to be my guide, such as that whoever harvests the fruit first has a right to it or whoever needs it most should be given it? To that suggestion, Singer responds:

If I take one of these views but can offer no reason for holding it, other than the fact that *I* prefer it – I prefer a society in which those who find natural objects have a right to them, or I prefer a society with a sense of fairness that

²⁷ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

rewards effort, or I prefer a society in which everything is shared equally – then my preference must be weighed against the contrary preferences of others. Perhaps, though, I want to maintain that this view is not just my preference, but I *really* have a right to the fruit I found, or everyone *really* is entitled to an equal share of nature's abundance. If so, then that claim needs to be defended by some kind of ethical theory. Where are we to get such a theory? Some substantial moral argument is needed.

What this shows is that we very swiftly arrive at an initially preference utilitarian position once we apply the universal aspect of ethics to simple, pre-ethical decision-making. The preference utilitarian position is a minimal one, a first base that we reach by universalizing self-interested decision-making. We cannot, if we are to think ethically, refuse to take this step.³⁰

In other words, if I wanted to defend, for example, the classical liberal view proposed by Locke that harvesting fruit in the state of nature makes it my property, the only way that I could do that is by a universalized consideration of the preferences of those involved – for universalized preferences are the only tool in my ethical toolbox so far. So whatever moral theory I want, it must first pass through the preference utilitarian test. But what if I propose that we should begin with people's moral intuitions, such as their aversion to theft or murder, rather than their preferences? Even if these intuitions are universal, they may 'be the result of our evolutionary heritage and therefore an unreliable guide to what is right'.³¹

The first thing to note about Singer's account is that, as I've already hinted, it is a suspiciously convenient story for utilitarians to find that all rational people are, by default, utilitarians. Part of its plausibility is that the rival state of nature stories, such as Hobbes's and Locke's, are indeed based on universal preferences, as Singer claims. Hobbes begins from the premise that what everyone wants most is to avoid an early and violent death, while Locke begins with the view that everyone wants enough property to live a stable, secure life. But they disagree with Singer, because they deny that the chain of reasoning can stop at that point. We are compelled by the force of logic to go further: for Hobbes, to create a Leviathan to rule us, and for Locke, to contract together to form a limited political community that will safeguard our rights. There is no first base, no safe stopping point, prior to that.³² In this way, Singer's 'first base' metaphor is misleading. There are no discrete stopping points like there are in baseball – or on staircases or

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13–14. ³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³² Something similar can be said of Kant's ethics, though in a different way, because he does not begin with universalized preferences, but rather universalized reason.

escalators, or (because aren't these really all just variants of foundationalism?) in adding floors to a building.

It is true that Hobbes and Locke conceptually *pass through* a consideration of common preferences; however, this entails (for them) further considerations, such as rights, the institution of property, and so on. Singer thinks that we all run to first base together and stop. Then, whoever wants to go on to second base bears the burden of proof to justify it. Hobbes and Locke, despite starting where Singer does, would see the chain of reasoning as more like a train on a railway track. Even if we concede, for the sake of argument, that all trains cross the 'universalized preference' bridge, it is the passengers who want to get off the train early that bear the burden of proof. At any rate, Singer does not give us a universally compelling reason to choose between his preferred stopping point and Hobbes, who goes one station further, and Locke, who goes perhaps two or three stations further.

All of these thinkers do have one point in common, however, which explains why they agree as much as they do: they each see ethics as a lowest common denominator endeavour. We may not agree on the meaning of life or the *summum bonum*, but we can agree that, for example, we all want fruit, or not to die violently, or our own happiness. On this, Singer is explicit: 'I shall propose something less ambitious'.³³

These 'lowest common denominator ethics' make sense if we recall the historical context in which the state of nature arguments first emerged: the strife of Civil War-era England. We can also see why Singer would find it appealing, writing amidst the culture wars of the late twentieth-century West, in which debates like the morality of euthanasia or abortion are seemingly interminable and irresolvable. But this reveals a hidden premise in all of the lowest common denominator theories: in the midst of a social crisis, or in a quest for social reform, they expect not only universal assent but also *mathematically certain* and compelling answers, because in situations of crisis or deep-down pluralism relying on deliberation seems too weak. Thus it is no surprise to find that Hobbes, Locke, and Bentham all, at various points, invoke mathematics as a metaphor in their ethical theories, because they see the deductive reasoning of geometry as the ideal form of rationality. That is why their process of reasoning can be depicted in foundationalist images, like baseball diamonds or escalators or trains, because these fit the deductive reasoning of mathematical proofs.

³³ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 11.

Everyone who gets on the escalator gets to the next floor; everyone who boards the 4:50 from Paddington will be taken to Oxford.

In this, Singer is solidly within the main line of modern philosophical ethics. As Alasdair MacIntyre shows, Hume and Kant both began with the 'initial assumption that *either* morality is the work of reason *or* it is the work of the passions'. Because Hume cannot find a basis in reason that will ground ethics, he concludes that morality must be founded on the passions. Kant, on the other hand, 'founds it on reason because *his* arguments have excluded the possibility of founding it on the passions'.³⁴ I am suggesting that Singer makes the same assumption – and then some.

This contrast between aesthetic and mathematical reasoning gets us to the core of dispute between utilitarianism and other members of the consequentialist genus. Among philosophers of the early modern period, there emerged the suspicion that if a moral precept or principle could not be demonstrated with certainty, then it was a matter of *taste* – and taste here was used quite deliberately, both as a metaphor for the human sense exercised when eating and, more broadly, as a form of aesthetic judgement. This comparison occurs in Locke, Hume, Sidgwick, Kant, and others; they perceive the alternatives as the horns of a dilemma and most prefer to be impaled on the horn of rational certainty rather than aesthetic judgement. On this, I wish to make two points. First, they do not have particularly strong reasons for supposing that all possible moral theories fall into one or the other of these camps. They are not really the horns of a dilemma. Second, even if those are the alternatives, the metaphor of taste might have something positive to offer. In other words, sound moral judgement might, in some respects, be analogous to taste.

One of the earliest, and wittiest, reflections on taste and ethics is Locke's deconstruction of the notion of a single *summum bonum* for all humans, which he accomplishes via the metaphor of taste.

The mind has a different relish, as well as the palate; and you will as fruitlessly endeavour to delight all men with riches or glory . . . as you would to satisfy all men's hunger with cheese or lobsters; though very agreeable and delicious fare to some, are to others extremely nauseous and offensive . . . Hence it was, I think, that the philosophers of old did in vain inquire, whether *summum bonum* consisted in riches, or bodily delights, or virtue, or contemplation: they might have as reasonably disputed, whether the best relish were to be found in apples, plums, or nuts, and have divided themselves into sects upon it.³⁵

³⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 49.

³⁵ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2:21.56.

He is here mocking the splintering denominations of his time, as well as the philosophical schools of ancient Greece and Rome, by comparing them to fruit fan clubs. At first glance, it might appear that Locke is endorsing moral relativism: ‘Some people like kindness, others like lobster, but who’s to say which is right? It’s all a matter of taste.’ But Locke is no relativist, and so his point here is a narrower one. Because happiness is itself a matter of taste, and taste is arbitrary, it cannot by itself be equated with moral rightness. We will need a surer foundation, which for Locke is ethics modelled on a closed theoretical system (in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) or social contract (in the *Second Treatise*). As it happens, Locke is not entirely consistent in offering an account of ethics free of the contingencies of human nature, something that American theo-conservatives today eagerly point out.³⁶ My concern here, however, is simply to highlight what Locke presents as the alternatives: moral theory must provide the certainty of a contract or a mathematical system; if not, it will be no better than my preference for cheese over lobster.

In an important, often overlooked, chapter of *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick also considers whether moral judgement might be something like taste. Whereas Locke was concerned with taste as a pluralist or relativist challenge to the *summum bonum*, Sidgwick is concerned by the gap between *pleasure* and *objectively good taste*. ‘We are agreed that some persons have more and some less “taste”’: and it is only the judgement of persons of good taste that we recognize as valid in respect to the real goodness of the thing enjoyed.³⁷ Yet the people who have the best taste in a given field do not always derive the most pleasure from it. ‘We are familiar with the fact that connoisseurs of wines, pictures, &c., often retain their intellectual faculty of appraising the merits of the objects which they criticize, and deciding on their respective places in the scale of excellence, even when their susceptibilities to pleasure from these objects are comparatively blunted and exhausted.’ Similarly, the person with poor taste may find greater pleasure in bad wine or art than the expert does from the best.

These are common enough objections, and hardly insurmountable for the thoughtful eudaimonist. What is interesting is the conclusion Sidgwick draws. There seem to be many pleasures available from any given object or practice or conduct, he says, yet among all the pleasures available, what attracts the person of good taste ‘is generally a specific kind of pleasure’.³⁸

³⁶ For example, Greg Forster, *Starting with Locke* (New York: Continuum, 2001), ch. 4; Jeffrey Sikkenga, ‘Review of *The Pretenses of Loyalty*’, *Perspectives on Politics* 10:2 (2012): 489–90.

³⁷ Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 98. ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

Wine might be healthy without being *good wine*; a beautiful horse might nonetheless be a *bad horse*. He thinks he has scored a decisive winning point here. Who's to say which of the available qualities, in a wine or horse, indicates goodness? His implication: it is arbitrary. It is no more reasonable than finding beauty in material objects, 'which is normally accompanied with a specific pleasure which we call "aesthetic," but has often no discoverable relation to the general usefulness or agreeableness of the thing discerned to be beautiful'.³⁹

Taste, therefore, can never meet the standard Sidgwick demands of moral judgements about right conduct, which is that it must issue in an 'authoritative prescription to do it'.⁴⁰ To his credit, he recognizes that his expectation is something new. Already in his day, modernity has shifted the conversation such that we are no longer talking about quite the same thing as the ancients.

[The Greeks'] speculations can scarcely be understood by us unless with a certain effort we throw the quasi-jural notions of modern ethics aside, and ask (as they did) not 'What is Duty and what is its ground?' but 'Which of the objects that men desire and think good is truly or most desirable, the Good or the Highest Good?' or, in the more specialized form of the question which the moral intuition introduces, 'What is the relation of the kind of Good we call Virtue, the qualities of conduct and character which men commend and admire, to other good or desirable things?'⁴¹

Here Sidgwick perceptively notices shifts that were then well under way in early modernity, but which many of his predecessors had been swept up in, rather than accepting deliberately. Indeed, this historical sensibility is part of Sidgwick's genius; he recognizes that ethical theory *develops* (though it does not always progress). Modern ethics had become increasingly juridical; it conformed to patterns of legal reasoning in a way that pre-modern ethics had not. So stark is this change that the alternative 'can scarcely be understood by us'. The concept of moral rightness, like a legal verdict, immediately implies an 'authoritative prescription' to do something. The concept of goodness does not, because "goodness" admits of degrees'.⁴²

Throughout early modern philosophy, there are many more instances of ethics being compared to taste, but these two will suffice for my purposes. Locke's argument is clever, but it does not show that the choice really lies between ethics as 'mere taste' and ethics as mathematically demonstrable. Locke himself does believe that, and elsewhere attempts to show that ethics is a demonstrable science, but *why* he insists on dividing knowledge so

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 96. ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 95. ⁴² *Ibid.*, 96.

rigidly into the certain and uncertain, he leaves unjustified.⁴³ He simply says that if ethics lacks the certainty of mathematics, it will be subject to 'inconveniencies'.⁴⁴ This is a clear example of MacIntyre's point that, in modernity, the choice for one sort of moral theory is made only *negatively*; that is, by excluding an alternative that is allegedly the *only* other alternative.⁴⁵

Sidgwick's argument against taste is more sophisticated, but does not ultimately fare much better. When we judge a horse or wine to be good, this is not arbitrary. It depends on what the point of the horse or wine is, with regard to the practice or concept at hand.⁴⁶ If we disagree about whether this bottle of Riesling or that thoroughbred is good, we need not throw up our hands in helpless confusion. Rather, we enquire into the different criteria that might be leading to our different judgements. There is nothing mysterious or esoteric about what an expert equestrian looks for in a horse. If it is meant for farming or racing or jumping, the relevant qualities or 'virtues' will be clear.⁴⁷ As for expert equestrians, so too for wine connoisseurs: the purposes of wine are to produce one or more of a variety of tastes on the palate, to facilitate human interaction and conversation through alcohol, to supply certain nutrients, and so on. Wine that lacked any of these – non-alcoholic grape juice, say – would not be good wine. Now, it is of course true that there is a measure of subjectivity in deciding the criteria and in judging when the criteria are met, but this by itself hardly undermines the judgement as such. It means that such judgements will not have the precision of a closed theoretical system like geometry, but why should they?

In principle, Singer could concede much of this, even on his own utilitarian grounds. Even if we base all ethics on maximizing happiness or preference satisfaction, it is often very hard to see what actions will accomplish this, especially in the very long run. If so, our judgements about right conduct may be more like judgements about, say, the best art, or horse or wine, and less like a mathematical proof. But suppose Singer did concede this. Where might our conversation go next? One account that I think Singer ought to find attractive is Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*,

⁴³ The closest he comes is Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 3:14. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:3:19.

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 49.

⁴⁶ This is how Aristotle uses the term 'good'. See the discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 1998), ch. 7.

⁴⁷ Of course, there may also be some 'virtues' or qualities of excellence that emerge more contingently from the history of the practice at hand – from its tradition. So, particular horses will be judged good because the proportions of their limbs are similar to some famous horse of the past, or to an imagined paradigm of what the well-proportioned horse looks like.

which offers a richer conception of moral goods, and avoids several of the problems identified above. Haidt, who describes his view as a utilitarianism inflected by Hume and Durkheim, might provide something of a preliminary point of contact between various forms of eudaimonism embraced by the Christian contributors to this book and Singer's utilitarian alternative. Though I would prefer the former, when it comes to making common cause, I may have to take what I can get, and Haidt might be a step in the right direction.

In defence of human nature

Consider what other trajectories ethics might have followed from the moral sense theorists and Hume to today. The trajectory that Singer follows, through Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick, is notable for its disregard of human nature. By human nature I here mean, what are the features of humans as a species that characteristically contribute to happiness or well-being? This seems like one of the first questions to tackle if you want to build an ethics on human happiness. Is there anything we can say generally about what makes people happy, beyond the very minimal answers that we find in Hobbes (humans fear violent death), Locke (humans want security of property and person), and Singer (humans prefer to realize their preferences)? Suppose we grant Locke's point that Aristotle and Aquinas were sometimes too specific in prescribing what they thought would make all humans flourish. Even then, can we really say nothing more than that humans in the state of nature want fruit? Reflection on such questions would seem to be an essential prerequisite to any ethics that is meant to promote human happiness.

Singer addresses this only rarely. In *Practical Ethics* there are only passing remarks. For example, he argues that we should accept private enterprise as an economic system, rather than communism, because 'only a radical change in *human nature* – a decline in acquisitive and self-centred desires' would make communism possible. 'Because no such change in human nature is in sight, we might as well accept' the inevitable inequalities of the free market.⁴⁸ This is the *sort* of reasoning from human nature that I think consequentialist ethics (of any sort – utilitarian or eudaimonist) must engage in. But it would be better to be even more substantive than this, for on reflection the only feature of human nature Singer identifies here is the one on which Locke and Hobbes agree: humans are acquisitive and

⁴⁸ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 38.

self-centred. In another place, Singer considers that a special concern for close kin is a feature of human nature, and so this must moderate what we expect from humans in terms of altruism – yet we should still strive to improve human nature. So Singer does perceive that there are some characteristics of humans generally that are relevant for moral deliberation (though again, the only characteristic he mentions is self-interest). He does go beyond this in one place, arguing that because those who give to the needy are statistically happier than those who do not, this is a further reason to say that we ought to give to the poor.⁴⁹

There are three reasons I can perceive for why Singer appears unwilling to say more. One is that he has inherited from Mill an overly narrow set of options about what ‘nature’ might refer to.⁵⁰ A second reason he gives explicitly: ‘Human nature is so diverse that one may doubt if any generalization about the kind of character that leads to happiness could hold for all human beings.’⁵¹ He has in mind psychopaths, though after a few pages discussing the challenge posed by psychopaths to the concept of human nature, he simply abandons the topic without resolving it. Third is that he seems to believe that any happiness-making characteristics sufficiently general to constitute a ‘nature’ will be the products of evolution, so that what these incline us to may not make people *in our situation* happy. For example, evolutionarily speaking, human nature may promote warlike aggressiveness. But we don’t think warlike aggressiveness ought to be promoted, so human nature must be morally irrelevant. That is too quick. Surely the correct response is not to reject all recourse to human nature. We can certainly accept that humans might have, for evolutionary reasons, inclinations to violence, but we can also see that humans flourish best in the absence of violence. That is, humans are happier when they can live with their families, with sufficient food and without threat of violence from others, with time for productive labour and play and artistic endeavour, able to see their children grow, and to develop friendships – *these* are all morally relevant features of human nature by which we can see that any evolutionary inclinations to violence are typically obstacles to human well-being. It does not constitute an objection to this for me to concede that

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 287–8. Conveniently for my purposes, he takes this insight from Jonathan Haidt, to whom I shall shortly turn.

⁵⁰ He writes: ‘As John Stuart Mill pointed out in his essay *On Nature*, the word “nature” either means everything that exists in the universe, including human beings and all that they create, or it means the world as it would be, apart from human beings . . .’ (*ibid.*, 4–5). In fact, Mill’s analysis in that work is more complex.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

violence can sometimes promote well-being (because in some cases it helps in the long run to secure a life of peace by overthrowing tyrants) or to concede that the features of the happy life that I have listed may themselves be the products of evolution.

How might Singer go further? Here is one brief example, which I offer not because I'm concerned with this particular issue, but simply to indicate the *sort* of reasoning that considerations of human nature might assist. Most people want to have sex. Indeed, many people want to have a lot of sex, and their desire to have it is very strong. There are fairly straightforward evolutionary reasons for why this is true of males in particular. Does this feature of human nature matter morally? One way that it might is that conceptions of human happiness or well-being that involve strict restrictions on sex might be unlikely to succeed. Of course, this is not by itself a reason not to have strict restrictions on sex, but it ought to be a factor – just as preference for kin is a factor in Singer's conception of generosity and selfishness is a factor in Singer's acceptance of capitalism. As it happens, realist considerations like these are one of the reasons that Protestant clergy are not required to be celibate. Yet we can go beyond even this. Human children, compared to the offspring of other species, require a great deal of socialization, education, and individual attention if they are to flourish. This means that, if their happiness is our goal, the contexts in which they will best be raised will be narrower than if that were not the case. For example, they will need parents with the time, resources, and commitment to provide that attention. As it happens, it is by weighing precisely these considerations that Thomas Aquinas concludes that sex should be confined to marriage, that monogamy is ideal, and that polygamy is a plausible but lesser alternative.⁵² We might not agree with the details of Aquinas's conclusion, and I would not expect Singer to share all of them, but surely this *sort* of reasoning is essential if our ethics is intended to promote human happiness.

'You've got to examine tongues'

Here we might usefully turn to the work Jonathan Haidt. Haidt is hardly a Thomist; he is a Humean, of sorts, but this will prove helpful given Singer's affinities with Hume and Hume's significance for Sidgwick. We should acknowledge from the outset that there are some significant problems with Haidt's project. On some of these, Singer and I would agree against Haidt; on others, Haidt and Singer would unite against me. Here my focus is on

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III:122–4.

what I think Haidt gets right. He proposes a quite different trajectory that utilitarianism might have followed from Hume to today. This *embraces* the analogy with taste, and avoids Bentham and Kant, whom Haidt considers a mere ‘tangent’. Haidt describes a restaurant called The True Taste, which serves only sweet flavours: sugar, honey, tree sap, and so on. The restaurateur is a biologist who

discovered that activation of the sweet receptor produced the strongest surge of dopamine in the brain, which indicated to him that humans are hard-wired to seek sweetness above the other four tastes. He therefore reasoned that it is most efficient, in terms of units of pleasure per calorie, to consume sweeteners, and he conceived the idea of opening a restaurant aimed entirely at stimulating this one taste receptor.⁵³

This is not a real restaurant, of course. It is a metaphor for how ethics has gone badly wrong in the dominant moral theories of the past two centuries. Bentham runs The Utilitarian Grill, which serves only sweets, and Kant has The Deontological Diner, where everything is salty; at each, there is only one flavour on the menu.

The tangent would have been avoided, Haidt argues, if only we had listened to Hume and other intuitionists and moral sense theorists. Hume recognized that a moral science was possible, but it would not be like mathematics. It required a study of human passions, for in acting, humans are led by their passions, and moral reasoning follows, after the fact. We should not fear the analogy between moral judgement and aesthetic judgement; we should embrace it. In Hume’s words:

Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular Being; in the same Manner as the Distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular feeling of each Sense or Organ. Moral Perceptions therefore, ought not to be class’d with the Operations of the Understanding but with the Tastes or Sentiments.⁵⁴

According to Haidt, Bentham and Kant couldn’t accept this because they were, by personality, extreme systematizers.⁵⁵ That may be true as a matter

⁵³ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 112.

⁵⁴ Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, quoted in Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 125. Haidt notes that this quote is not included in the final edition of Hume’s *Enquiry*.

⁵⁵ Haidt supports this with a somewhat silly tangent of his own, asking whether Bentham and Hume were such extreme systematizers because they had Asperger’s syndrome. As it happens, there is a fair amount of scholarly evidence from psychologists to support this in Bentham’s case, though I’m not sure why it should matter.

of their psychological make-up, but I'm more interested in the intellectual reasons they give – or don't give.

From all of this, Haidt draws two conclusions. The first is that moral concepts and normative ethical categories appear to come to humans in particular forms. So, if we study different human cultures, in different historical periods, and humans at different stages of development (children, teenagers), we find that ethical judgements arise from a handful of 'moral foundations'. Haidt currently identifies six moral foundations, such as care, loyalty, and sanctity, though his theory does not depend on a precise number. In his metaphor, humans are born with a rough draft of these foundations already imprinted on them, but upbringing, social circumstances, and so on, alter how those cash out in different contexts. This fits the analogy with taste. All humans are born with the same taste receptors, for sweetness, saltiness, and so on, but these are activated by quite different types of cuisine, and the sort of cuisine one is raised with obviously alters the tastes one appreciates.

Haidt does not mean this, by itself, to be a normative theory.⁵⁶ His point is that to understand moral judgements as humans make them in the real world, we must begin by studying human nature.

Moral judgment is a kind of perception, and moral science should begin with a careful study of the moral taste receptors. You can't possibly deduce the list of the five taste receptors by pure reasoning, nor should you search for it in scripture. There's nothing transcendental about them. You've got to examine tongues.⁵⁷

It's obvious how rationalists like Kant and Plato violate this, but utilitarians like Bentham and Singer do too, though in a different way. Kant and Plato would say that you should not examine 'tongues' to study ethics, because that would be too contingent to be a universal moral law. The utilitarians would say that studying 'tongues' will show us that everyone likes *some* tastes, but because ethics must be universal, and taste varies from one person to the next, we can't say anything more. Indeed, Singer comes very close to saying just that, when he cites Hume as the basis for his being a preference utilitarian rather than a hedonistic utilitarian. If reason is the servant of the passions, as Hume says, then there's no rationally accounting for pleasure. All we can do is base our moral theory on the raw data of universalized preference satisfaction, and nothing else. Haidt rejects this. He replies that there is a great deal we can understand about moral taste by empirical study

⁵⁶ Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 120. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

of moral judgement, and that this is where we ought to begin: by looking at tongues.

Haidt does not suppose that empirical observation of moral judgements will, by itself, automatically generate a full-fledged moral theory; no more so than looking at tongues would produce a whole school of culinary arts. We still need to reflect on how the various moral foundations combine in the happy human life and in the flourishing society, and this will at points lead us to conclude that some judgements drawn from those moral foundations are mistaken, however widespread. Thus Haidt's is not an uncritical intuitionism. He does not suppose that all moral judgements observable in humans are sound judgements. At a very minimum, some are based on what would have benefited human flourishing at an earlier stage of evolution, and so intuitions must be subjected to critical reflection.

Against moral monism

The second, and perhaps more important, conclusion Haidt draws from his Humean ethics-as-taste analogy is that we must oppose *moral monism*. Haidt describes a moral monist as 'anyone who insists that there is one true morality for all people, times, and places – particularly if that morality is founded upon a single moral foundation'.⁵⁸ In rejecting monism, Haidt is not endorsing relativism; he is not saying that all tastes are equally good. Rather he is saying that there is more than one good taste – sweet, savoury, and so on – and that these can be combined in diverse ways to produce equally good, though different, dishes.

Haidt credits Isaiah Berlin with the clearest statement of how monism differs from pluralism. Berlin saw monism as a great philosophical error, and sometimes he writes as though every other philosopher in history was guilty of it. Sometimes he is more cautious, and attributes it more precisely to certain Enlightenment philosophers who, 'dazzled by the spectacular successes of the natural sciences in their own century and its predecessors . . . believed that, provided the right method was discovered, truth of a fundamental kind could be uncovered about social, political, moral and personal life'.⁵⁹ Berlin's alternative is pluralism: 'There is not an infinity of [values]: the number of human values, of values which I can pursue while maintaining my human

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁵⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5–6. There is a crucial link here with Mill. As Schneewind shows, Mill's early thinking is deeply indebted to Henri de Saint-Simon and his followers; this is one of Berlin's key examples of what's wrong with moral monism. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics*, 163.

semblance, my human character, is finite – let us say 74, or perhaps 122, or 27, but finite, whatever it may be.⁶⁰ Haidt agrees that monism is an error, and can even be dangerous:

Human societies are complex; their needs and challenges are variable. Our minds contain a toolbox of psychological systems, including the six moral foundations, which can be used to meet those challenges and construct effective moral communities. You don't need to use all six . . . But anyone who tells you that all societies, in all eras, should be using one particular moral matrix, resting on one particular configuration of moral foundations, is a fundamentalist of one sort or another.⁶¹

Berlin and Haidt could be saying something different, and more radical, than what I attribute to them. They might be saying that any and all ethical systems that claim to be objectively true and universally applicable are fundamentalist. If that is their view, then I do not agree with them. After all, I think that a particular form of eudaimonism as expressed through the Christian tradition is true. What I mean to endorse, and what I think Berlin is saying in his more measured moments, is that some ethical systems – usually those with an unreasonable expectation that ethics can be modelled on the natural sciences – assert that all ethical values reduce to a single value, which ought to be maximized. Bentham, Singer, and Sidgwick are moral monists in this sense. Singer may be undecided at the moment about whether the single foundation is preferences or pleasure, but he is certain that there can be one and only one moral value and all other sub-values must be made commensurable with it.

From these conclusions of Haidt's, I draw some observations of my own. Haidt's more empirical basis for utilitarianism would allow a renewed affinity between utilitarianism, intuitionism, moral sense theory, and eudaimonism. There are obvious, and I think fruitful, affinities with Thomas Aquinas, though his moral foundations were biological whereas Haidt's are intuitive or sentimental.⁶² Both can make sense for Christians, who would view intuitions and biology as subject to God's providence and creative purpose, and as gifts that help guide us to a life of flourishing and well-being. Unfortunately, Singer does not appear open to these possible affinities with Haidt, for two reasons.

The first would appear to be that Haidt's proposal still feels too teleological for his tastes. Singer wonders why we should suppose there is *any* moral meaning in our intuitions. Isn't that belief precisely what Darwin

⁶⁰ Berlin, *Power of Ideas*, 12. ⁶¹ Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 316.

⁶² This will exclude some versions of Thomism, such as the new natural law of Finnis and Grisez.

destroyed? So, for Singer, drawing moral conclusions from the fact that humans are averse to unfairness and betrayal (as Haidt does) would be just as silly as drawing moral conclusions from the fact that humans have biologically complementary sex organs (as Aquinas does). Both violate the ‘no ought from is’ rule. But understood in those terms, does not all of utilitarianism break the rule? Is not the whole point of consequentialism that the ‘is’ of making-happy entails the ‘ought’ of pursuing it? Here I think we encounter a confusion about what Hume’s argument against deriving an ought from an is actually entails.⁶³ Hume believes that facts *are* morally relevant. Virtue is ‘whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation’ and that can only be established empirically, through examining ‘a plain matter of fact, to wit, what actions have this influence’.⁶⁴ Singer also thinks facts are morally relevant, if we recall that his account of how one would come to embrace utilitarianism depends on drawing moral conclusions from the fact of everyone’s desiring fruit – and also from his observation (citing Haidt!) that giving makes people happier than receiving. To be sure, in all of these cases, we still need a reason for why the particular facts in question are morally relevant. Thus, Singer needs to show why desiring fruit is morally relevant, Haidt needs to show that intuitions are morally relevant, and Aquinas needs to show why biological capacities are morally relevant. Each does provide such arguments, and some are more persuasive than others.

What Singer is rightly worried about is that the *mere* assertion of a given fact could imply a moral conclusion, especially when the facts are evolutionary in origin. In the only place where I have been able to find Singer substantively engaging Haidt, this is what he argues. We cannot let moral intuitions have ‘*any* normative force’ because they are likely just a product of evolution.⁶⁵ Or as he puts it in *Practical Ethics*, ‘We cannot *just* rely on our intuitions, even those that are widely shared, since these could, as we have seen, be the result of our evolutionary heritage and therefore an unreliable guide to what is right.’⁶⁶ But who suggested that we could ‘*just*’ rely on our intuitions? Certainly neither Hume nor Haidt nor, for that matter, Aquinas. In each case, they believe that the facts of intuitions or nature or sentiments must be subjected to critical reflection. Haidt’s way of describing this involves the image of a rider on an elephant, who exerts a limited

⁶³ Much of this confusion is cleared up in Charles Pidgen, ‘Hume on Is and Ought’, *Philosophy Now* 83 (July–August 2012). Online: www.philosophynow.org/issues/83/Hume_on_Is_and_Ought.

⁶⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), 203.

⁶⁵ Peter Singer, ‘Ethics and Intuitions’, *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 331–52 (331), emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 14, emphasis added.

rational control on the passion of the elephant. In another place, he writes of intuitions as written in rough draft on humans, which can be revised by culture, rational reflection, and so on. Christian theology distinguishes between those aspects of human nature that fit with God's purposes for human flourishing and those that are due to selfishness and sin. Yet Singer seems to think this middle way, of critical reflection on intuitions and human nature, is impossible. Why such a stark either-or?

That we must choose finally and decisively between the certainty of mathematics and moral relativism or scepticism is a common, unspoken premise among utilitarianism's great minds. Terence Irwin treats this well in the chapter on Sidgwick in his *Development of Ethics*. Irwin shows that Sidgwick had a significant debt to Greek ethics, but that what made him unable to accept their eudaimonism was that he considered it too vague. Sidgwick expected that an adequate moral theory must be definite enough to give a concrete course of action even to someone 'with no antecedent commitment to morality of beliefs about moral goodness'.⁶⁷ Yet we find similar expectations in a wider range of thinkers; not just the arch-systematizers Bentham and Kant, but also Hobbes, Locke, and Mill. Perhaps their aversion to ethics being analogous to taste is partly explained by the wider socio-political quest for certainty that followed from the turmoil of the early modern period. Tellingly, this exactly fits MacIntyre's assessment that, Hume included, their conclusions are built 'negatively'; that is, they all begin by deciding that the alternative to their view (which they assume is the one and only alternative) is impossible. Kant thinks that ethics cannot involve the passions (or it would not be universal), so what he is left with is pure reason; Hume assumes that it cannot be pure reason, so it must be passion.

We have already seen that Singer does not want to follow Hume this far, for then he would be with Haidt – ethics on the analogy with taste. If MacIntyre is right, Singer's only other escape would be to side with Kant against Hume. But surely Singer cannot side with the greatest of the anti-utilitarians? So one might think. On the contrary, he writes:

Perhaps here, after finding ourselves in broad agreement with Hume for so much of this paper, we find the need to appeal to something in Hume's polar opposite, Immanuel Kant. Kant thought that unless morality could be based on pure reason, it was a chimera. Perhaps he was right. In the light of the best scientific understanding of ethics, we face a choice. We can take the view that our moral intuitions and judgements are and always will be emotionally

⁶⁷ Irwin, *Development of Ethics*, 428.

based intuitive responses, and reason can do no more than build the best possible case for a decision already made on nonrational grounds. That approach leads to a form of moral skepticism, although one still compatible with advocating our emotionally based moral values and encouraging clear thinking about them. Alternatively, we might attempt the ambitious task of separating those moral judgments that we owe to our evolutionary and cultural history, from those that have a rational basis. This is a large and difficult task. Even to specify in what sense a moral judgement can have a rational basis is not easy. Nevertheless, it seems to me worth attempting, for it is the only way to avoid moral skepticism.⁶⁸

This is, almost to a word, what MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, written twenty-five years previously, predicted that the heirs of Kant and Sidgwick would have to say. Yet surely the either-or options on which Singer's choice is premised are too stark. Surely Haidt (or Aquinas, come to that) is right that ethics can look critically and self-reflectively on human nature: what is it that characteristically makes humans happy or helps them to flourish, given the sorts of beings they are? Further, once we let go of this aversion to studying human nature, including intuitions, it becomes easier to resist the temptation of moral monism.

For Singer, as for classical utilitarians generally, their commitment to a particular form of rationality further entails a monist conception of the good. In other words, although we might be tempted to think of the good in *pluralist* terms – friendship, art, knowledge – which must be balanced by some complex, prudential deliberation, this remains a temptation that Singer will refuse. Yet, he clearly is tempted. For one thing, an objective and intrinsic conception of goods would allow him to better meet the challenge of Tim Mulgan's contribution to this volume: we cannot know what the preferences of our distant descendants will be, or what will make them happy. So in deciding what duties we owe them, we appear to need an objective conception of what should make other persons happy, even apart from anyone's wanting them (precisely because we don't know what they would want). In *Practical Ethics*, Singer considers a similar question: how do we judge whether it would be better, overall, for people to exist rather than not?

In the Peopled Universe, there are several billion self-aware beings. They lead rich and full lives, experiencing the joys of love and friendship, of fulfilling and meaningful work, and of bringing up children. They seek knowledge, successfully adding to the beauties of nature, cherish the forests and animals

⁶⁸ Singer, 'Ethics and Intuitions', 351.

that pre-date their own existence, and create literature and music that is on a par with the works of Shakespeare and Mozart.⁶⁹

Elsewhere he considers the ethics of gathering blood for use in medical emergencies. Should we be willing to pay for blood, or would it be better if it were only donated? He concludes:

In the case of blood supplies for medical purposes, when we choose between a social policy based on altruism and one based on commerce, we are choosing between two different types of society. It may well be better, for a variety of reasons, that there are some things that money cannot buy; some circumstances in which we must rely on the altruism of those we love, or even of strangers in our society. I support efforts to resist the creeping commercialisation of every aspect of our lives . . .⁷⁰

In both of these passages, Singer's conclusion seems exactly right. There is something better about a society in which not everything is commodified, in which altruism prevails over monetary exchange, in which people enjoy friendship, meaningful work, Shakespeare, and Mozart. Yet here Singer refuses to bite the bullet: 'an idea of intrinsic value that is not dependent on preferences sacrifices one of the great advantages of any form of utilitarianism that is based on just one value, which is that there is no need to explain how different values are to be traded off against one another'.⁷¹

Indeed this *is* one of the sacrifices of a pluralist conception of the good: its value cannot be measured on a single scale, be that happiness, pleasure, or something else. Single scales are always *more convenient*. But this only works if one's ideal form of moral reasoning has the precision of mathematical deduction. We don't expect this in other types of deliberation. What is the best painting? This cannot be answered on monist value grounds, for all sorts of factors might be relevant: the painting's age, its continuity or contrast to previous works, its place within a particular school of painting, its meaning within the artist's own life, its physical condition, its socio-political significance, and so on and so forth. Now, choosing the best painting in this way does indeed 'sacrifice one of the great advantages of' choosing on a single value. How much simpler it would be to assert a single value, like age or price, to make all aesthetic values commensurable! But aesthetic judgement is not the sort of deliberation for which mathematical precision is appropriate. Singer is unwilling to pursue this option because he

⁶⁹ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 116.

⁷⁰ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 169. This passage does not appear in the book's 3rd edn.

⁷¹ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn, 119.

is so committed to a single, monist first base for ethics. But *that* preference is presumed rather than argued for.

Morality ('the peculiar institution') is not enough

It is unclear why Singer holds so relentlessly to these twin components of his theory (its monism and mathematical rationality), though if I speculate as generously as possible, my guess is that the explanation runs something like this. Above (p. 35), I quoted Sidgwick's observation that there had been a shift in modern philosophy, due to which classical ethics 'can scarcely be understood by us', that is, by moderns such as Sidgwick himself.⁷² This is because Greek ethics was a quest to discover the best life and the highest good. Modern ethics concerns a narrower question: What is my duty? And it proceeds to answer this narrower question by a narrower method, which Sidgwick calls 'quasi-jural'. Others have noticed this shift.

Bernard Williams suggests that we should refine our terminology to clarify the distinction. The 'ethical' would refer to a broad range of considerations about the good life. Morality, which he calls 'the peculiar institution', is a narrower subset of the ethical. It concerns duty to others in a quite specific sense. Williams suggests that morality, in this sense, 'should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in Western culture'.⁷³ Ronald Dworkin makes a similar distinction: ethics 'includes convictions about which kinds of lives are good or bad for a person to lead, and morality includes principles about how a person should treat other people'.⁷⁴ I am not particularly concerned with the details of how we divide up the meanings of 'ethical' and 'moral', though both Williams's and Dworkin's suggestions seem serviceable to me. My concern is to point out that what we, as moderns, characteristically mean by morality nowadays (questions of duty posed in legal form) is a historically contingent manifestation of a broader set of questions about the good life.

Sidgwick realizes what he is doing in embracing the 'quasi-jural notions of modern ethics': he is choosing to answer one question but not the other, to answer the question of the moderns and not that of the Greeks. But most of the other thinkers in Sidgwick's tradition do not realize that they are making this choice, even when they are. Singer in particular seems not to.

⁷² Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 95.

⁷³ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 6.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Kwame Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), xiii.

He assumes that the only thing ethics could be is this narrower, legal, deductively certain, and monist conception that we inherit, most directly, from Kant.⁷⁵ This explains why he must ultimately resort to Kant to refute Hume, for only Kantian pure reason, modelled as it is on a closed theoretical system like law or mathematics, can provide the certainty demanded by the modern ‘moral’ law.

My view is that we are made worse off by this narrowing, and I suspect most Christians would agree, though Christians who reject eudaimonism may welcome the shift. Utilitarians, however, should share my objection to the narrowing, for it is one of the assets of utilitarianism that it is expansive in the factors it considers morally relevant. It strives to account for the big picture, for *all* of the consequences of our actions. My conduct should not be judged merely by what will make me happy today, but by what sort of person it will make me, by what sort of habits today’s actions will foster, by what sort of community will develop when such habits are widespread, and so on. To limit our considerations to duty in the narrow sense, to what is legally certain (the ‘authoritative prescription’ that Sidgwick describes), is to miss much of what makes utilitarianism attractive.

This does not mean that the ethical–moral distinction is not conceptually important. It is useful for some purposes, such as to serve as a clue to which aspects of the ethical should be subject to legal enforcement. So, part of the good life is being kind, friendly, and hospitable, but we do not criminalize those who are not. We confine legal sanctions to more narrow breaches of duty, because these can be specified with the precision demanded of statutes and can be adjudicated jurisprudentially. So the ethical–moral distinction has its place. The problem is when the wider concerns of ‘the ethical’ disappear, and we are left with only ‘the moral’. For some of the reasons I have outlined, Singer ought to resist this; he should be concerned with ethics just as much as morality. Unfortunately, his criteria of a monist, mathematical rationality makes this impossible. Of course, the ethical keeps creeping back (‘They lead rich and full lives, experiencing the joys of love and friendship, of fulfilling and meaningful work, and of bringing up children’; ‘It may well be better, for a variety of reasons, that there are some things that money cannot buy’), while Singer tries valiantly, with Kant’s assistance, to sweep it back under the carpet.

Consider a young teenager, unintentionally pregnant, who asks her parents, ‘What should I do?’ The mother, a preference utilitarian, says,

⁷⁵ Jean Porter, ‘Christian Ethics and the Concept of Morality: A Historical Inquiry’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26:2 (2006): 3–21.

'Why, dear, you should do whatever you would prefer to do. Abort, adopt, keep the baby: it's up to you.' The father, a hedonistic utilitarian and disciple of Mill, says, 'You should do whatever will make you happy. After all, so long as your actions harm no one else, you are at liberty to choose whatever path you like best.' Having read chapter 6 of Singer's *Practical Ethics*, they know their daughter's duties: if she chooses to abort, she should kill the fetus as painlessly as possible. Presumably if she chooses adoption, she has a certain measure of responsibility to ensure that the adoptive parents are caring. Beyond that, she should do what she prefers to do.

If that is the only practical ethical advice that her parents could give her, they would be bad parents, for this barely begins to answer her question, 'What *should* I do?' Singer would agree that good parents will say a lot more than 'do what you prefer', but he probably believes that the extra advice the parents give beyond this will be too particular to count as *moral* guidance. I disagree. The daughter's question is one of practical ethics. A satisfactory answer demands a much broader range of considerations than whether the fetus is a person, even though those considerations may not be specifiable in the narrow language of moral law. The narrower range of considerations that Singer limits himself to do have a special kind of importance, especially when deciding whether abortion should be legal, but they only scratch the surface in telling us what we *should* do. At most, they close off possible courses of action.

My remarks in this section are meant as a kind of plea for broadening the scope of what Singer takes 'practical ethics' to be. Morality, narrowly construed, not only leaves out too much, it can cause us to believe that it is the whole of the ethical life. When this happens, it deforms the sort of reasoning we think suitable for answering practical ethical questions, and it forces on us unhelpful (i.e. monist) conceptions of the good. I fully grant that this broadening is neither easy nor simple. Sidgwick perceives the challenge, and ultimately refuses it. It would require us, he says, to 'throw the quasi-jural notions of modern ethics aside, and ask . . . not "What is Duty and what is its ground?" but "Which of the objects that men desire and think good is truly or most desirable, the Good or the Highest Good?"'⁷⁶ To which I would reply: Yes, it would require that, and so much the better. In response, Singer may wish to note that the 'ought' generated by the first of these questions (do your duty) has important

⁷⁶ Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 95.

differences from the 'ought' of the latter (pursue the good), even though the two are closely related; to this I would have no objection.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Throughout, I have been arguing that we can better understand utilitarianism if we pay attention to where it came from. Both historically and conceptually, we see that utilitarianism is a particular species within a wider teleological or consequentialist genus. Pre-modern natural law was certainly teleological in this way, for it was concerned with what best produced human flourishing, understood ultimately as having friendship with God. The early modern philosophers and theologians who first sought alternatives to that Christian eudaimonism nonetheless maintained the basic premise: Locke, Hutcheson, Butler, and Hume all agreed that ethics was in some fundamental sense about human lives going well, about human happiness. The form that this happiness would take was largely compatible with the common morality that they shared; on practical matters, even Hume was quite conventional. Thus moral theories that we tend to think of as opposed turn out to share significant common ground. In particular, they are on the same side of what (by many accounts) is the truly great divide between deontology and teleology.

Within this messy amalgam, utilitarianism emerges originally as a Christian ethic, on the premise that God's benevolent ordering of the world has made it so that the morally good life is the happy life. Though this held sway briefly, the classical utilitarianism of Bentham overshadows and ultimately defeats this theological utilitarianism. The contrast between them was exacerbated by the fact that utilitarianism's rise coincided with a period of significant social reform in England. These reforms were led by Victorian Christians like the abolitionist William Wilberforce, who was a critic of utilitarianism. However, we should not neglect the contribution of those like Bentham and Mill who rejected Wilberforce's Christianity but, precisely because they were utilitarian, shared his goals. Thus had utilitarianism been born in a period of less social upheaval and reform, it is not

⁷⁷ Singer might also appeal to the distinction in R.M. Hare's work between critical and intuitive moral reasoning, on which he sometimes relies, suggesting that the broader considerations I endorse are admissible at one level but not the other. On this I would be sceptical, as it has never been clear to me whether Hare's two-level distinction has any actual normative force in Singer's moral theory; I suspect it does not. See John Hare's discussion of this two-level moral reasoning in his contribution to this volume, and Singer, *Practical Ethics* 3rd edn, 78–9.

impossible that the tension between it and common morality would have been less stark; at any rate, that was Sidgwick's belief.

As it happened, however, the trajectory that modern utilitarianism took was the highly systematized path of Bentham, Sidgwick, and Singer. By tracing this path, we have come to see certain problems with it. First, it is committed to a particular vision of rationality as the only possible mode by which ethics can proceed: the deductive certainty of mathematics or geometry, in which all questions have a unique, necessary, demonstrable answer. Second, the classical utilitarians are interested in only one way of evaluating the good: that is, by rendering all expressions of the moral good commensurable and measurable on a single scale. Third, they are surprisingly averse to considerations of human nature. I say 'surprisingly' because if their goal is the promotion of human flourishing or well-being, it seems that one of the very first things they would want to know is what characteristically contributes to well-being, given the sort of creatures that humans are. One way to understand why Bentham and Singer follow this path is their aversion to any sort of analogy between aesthetic taste and ethics. In a move that is ironically Kantian, they each assume that Hume's alternative is no alternative at all. They hold the above three beliefs not so much because of any positive reasons *for* them, but because of their dissatisfaction with what they suppose is the only available alternative.

Against this I have argued that we do not have reason to expect mathematical or contractual precision when it comes to judging human action, that we do not have reason to expect all expressions of the human good to be commensurable or measurable on a single scale, and that we cannot ignore the moral importance of human nature. While my own preference would be to express these considerations via the eudaimonist ethics that has been at the heart of the Christian tradition for over a millennium, I presented some aspects of Jonathan Haidt's work, on the assumption that this might be a more palatable point of contact for Singer, as it is utilitarian, Humean, and secular.

Engaging with Christianity

Peter Singer

An autobiographical introduction

Since this chapter originated at a conference about Christian ethics engaging with Peter Singer, I thought it might be appropriate to begin by telling you about Peter Singer's engagement with Christianity.

I grew up in Melbourne, Australia, in a home with a Jewish cultural background but no Jewish religious belief. I can't recall a time when I believed in God. I suppose there were times when I was an agnostic, rather than an atheist, because sometimes during my childhood or early teenage years it seemed to me an interesting speculation that there might be some kind of personal force behind the existence of the universe, but for the overwhelming majority of my life, that possibility has seemed to me sufficiently implausible for me to accept the label 'atheist'.

I have one positive and two negative reasons for my atheism. The positive reason is the one reputed to have been uttered by Laplace, when Napoleon asked him where God figured in his account of the cosmos: 'I had no need of that hypothesis.' In other words, the world seems sufficiently explicable without positing a God, or at least no more explicable if we do posit one, so why add one?

The first negative reason is that, although I live in a society in which most religious believers are Christians, it is obvious that they did not come to that belief independently of being brought up in Christian families. I don't know anyone who grew up in a Jewish family who became a Christian (with the exception of some relatives who grew up in Austria before the war and took on a Christian identity in an attempt to escape anti-Semitism) and I know only one or two people who grew up in Christian families and converted to Judaism, and they did so when they fell in love with a person who was Jewish. On the other hand, I know many people who grew up in both Jewish and Christian families who are no longer religious believers. From this I conclude that if people who are

now adherents of one religion had been brought up a family that believed in a different religion, most of them would have believed in that religion. So the grounds for belief in Christianity seem to me no stronger than the grounds for belief in Hinduism or Islam or Judaism – which is to say, they are not strong at all.

The second negative reason is the argument from evil – an argument that has always seemed very powerful to me, perhaps because of my sensitivity to pointless suffering. That there is pointless suffering in the world seems to me indisputable, as is the incompatibility of such suffering with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being. Although Christians sometimes try to explain the existence of evil by saying that God gave us free will, this is an inadequate response since some suffering has nothing to do with free will – for example, the suffering of humans and animals dying slowly from hunger caused by a drought. What possible reason could the God of the Christian tradition have for creating a world in which that happens? And please don't tell me that it is because of Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Apart from that being a totally obnoxious doctrine that would make God a moral monster, punishing completely innocent people because of the sin of an ancestor long ago, it fails to explain why animals, who are not descended from Eve, should suffer.

My serious engagement with Christianity began when I went to secondary school. My parents, who had come to Australia as refugees from the Nazis, wanted their son to get the best possible education, and they believed that this was to be obtained from a private school. The leading private secondary schools in Melbourne were, at that time, all Christian denominational schools. My parents chose Scotch College, a Presbyterian school, partly because it was not far from where we lived, and partly because Scottish Presbyterians had a high reputation as educators. Going to Scotch meant that every day I attended morning assembly at which I listened to a reading from the Bible, joined in the singing of a hymn, and mumbled the Lord's Prayer in chorus with a thousand other boys. We had a weekly class in religious instruction, which was mostly Bible stories, and chapel services three times a year, which involved more hymns and prayers, and a sermon from the school chaplain.

Because morning assembly and the chapel services could be dull, I sometimes passed the time by reading the Bible that we had to bring with us on those occasions. That led me to notice, and wonder about, certain passages, such as the one in which Jesus curses a fig tree because he would have liked some fruit, but the tree has none. Later the disciples pass the spot again, and notice that the tree has withered and died. When I asked our

religious studies teacher why Jesus made the tree die, he told me that it was to show that what is barren is not good. But Mark is too honest to make that excuse viable: he says the tree had no figs because it wasn't the season for figs (Mark 11:11–21). Think of the many people who would have enjoyed the figs that the tree would have produced, when the season came around, year after year. Jesus' curse suggests a mean destructive streak in a man who was supposed to have been morally perfect.

Then there is the passage in which Jesus causes the devils from the man called Legion to go into a large herd of pigs – according to Mark, there were about two thousand of them (Mark 5:9–13; Luke 8:30–33; Matthew 8:28–32). The pigs then rush down the hill and drown themselves in the Sea of Galilee. Even apart from any concern about the deaths of the pigs, this seems to completely disregard the interests of the owners of the pigs. No wonder that, in Matthew's version, the whole town comes out to meet Jesus and pleads with him to leave the region!

Also at school, I read the passage in which Jesus tells the rich man to give all he has to the poor, and adds that it is as hard for a rich man to go to heaven as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. I wondered how that squared with the fact that the most expensive car in the school parking area was the chaplain's shiny black Mercedes.

My Princeton colleague Eric Gregory has told me that in taking such passages literally, I am siding with the fundamentalists. That raises some interesting questions about which Bible stories we choose to regard as true and which we take as metaphor or in some other way. Perhaps only fundamentalists believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Or that he was divine, rather than an ordinary preacher with some good ideas and some that were not so good? But that is not my topic today.

My scepticism about Christianity became more reflective when I went to university and began to take courses in philosophy. At the University of Melbourne, most of the philosophers I admired were hard-headed, rigorous thinkers – and atheists. Some of them were active in campus life outside the classroom. They gave lectures critical of arguments for the existence of God. The positions they subjected to criticism were mostly held by Catholics, but they did not spare the widely shared Protestant view that logic and argument are irrelevant because we know God by faith alone. I joined the university's rationalist society, an association of free-thinkers, with a strong component of philosophy students among its members.

My opposition to religion was not due only to the weakness of the case for religious belief. Many of the things to which I objected in the society in

which I lived were kept in place by the support of organized religion. Among these was hostility to sex outside marriage. That included the idea that masturbation is sinful, which engendered an enormous amount of guilt among young people of my generation. In Australia at the time, books like D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, and even ancient classics like the *Kama Sutra* were prohibited because of their sexual content. This censorship was backed by the Christian churches. Laws against sodomy and repressive attitudes towards homosexuality also got religious support, especially from the Roman Catholic Church, as of course did laws against abortion, which drove many women to illegal abortionists. I supported the Victorian Council for Civil Liberties in its campaign against censorship. I worked on the university's student newspaper, and wrote an article on the plight of girls and young women who were pregnant and did not want to have a child. That led me to become active in the Abortion Law Reform Association.

As a philosopher, my engagement with Christianity varies according to the different issues on which I have worked. I will focus on four different areas: questions about animals, questions about taking human life, questions about the obligations of the rich to the global poor, and general issues of ethical theory.

Animals

In my writing on animals, I have presented Western attitudes to nature as a blend of Hebrew and Greek thought. In contrast to some other ancient traditions, for example those of India, both the Hebrew and the Greek traditions put humans at the centre of the moral universe. The biblical story of creation in Genesis, for example, makes very clear the Hebrew view of the special place of human beings in the divine plan. Humans, and only humans, are made in the image of God, and given dominion over the animals. After the flood, the grant of dominion is repeated, and the fact that animals should fear and dread humans is expressly stated to be in accordance with God's wishes.

The most influential early Christian thinkers had no doubts about how man's dominion was to be understood. When Paul asked whether God cares for oxen, in the course of a discussion of the Old Testament command to rest one's ox on the Sabbath, it was only a rhetorical question – *obviously* God could not care for oxen, so the command has to be explained in terms of some benefit to humans (1 Corinthians 9:9). Augustine agreed. He offered an explanation for the puzzling stories in the New Testament in

which Jesus appears to show indifference to both trees and animals – the cursing of the fig tree and the drowning of the Gadarene pigs – but it is not an explanation to my liking. According to Augustine, these episodes are intended to teach us that ‘to refrain from the killing of animals and the destroying of plants is the height of superstition’.¹

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it absorbed elements of Greek philosophy, but unfortunately not those elements that were more sympathetic to animals. Instead, the Greek influence was entrenched in Christian philosophy by Thomas Aquinas, for whom Aristotle was simply ‘The Philosopher’. Aristotle regarded nature as a hierarchy in which those with less reasoning ability exist for the sake of those with more, and ‘brute beasts for the sake of man – domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones (or at any rate most of them) for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools’.² On this issue Aquinas, in his own major work, the *Summa Theologica*, followed Aristotle almost word for word, adding that the position accords with God’s command, as given in Genesis. In his classification of sins, Aquinas has room only for sins against God, against ourselves, and against our neighbours. There is no possibility of sinning against non-human animals, or against the natural world, and no direct obligation to avoid cruelty to animals. (The only reason Aquinas offers against such cruelty is that it may lead to cruelty towards humans.)³

Is it fair to judge Christianity primarily by the teachings of Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas? Some Christians concerned about animals and the environment have reminded me of the existence of gentler spirits, like Basil, John Chrysostom, Francis of Assisi, and the saintly hermits who live in the wilderness and, according to many legends, become close to animals and treat them with kindness and respect. These figures exist, of course, but for most of Christian history they have had little impact. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, preventing cruelty to animals, for the sake of the animals, has never been a focus of moral teaching. Today there are Christians like Andrew Linzey, Matthew Scully, and David Clough who speak up for animals but they too, at least so far, have not persuaded the hierarchies of their churches to make concern for animals a prominent part

¹ Augustine, *The Catholic and Manichean Ways of Life*, trans. D. and I.J. Gallagher (Boston: Catholic University Press, 1966), 102.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, I:8, quoted in Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 267.

³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q72, a4; II-I, q102, a6; II-II, q25, a3; q64, a1; q159, a2.

of their moral teachings. Benedict XVI, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, spoke out against factory farming, but alas did not do so as pope.

In all these respects, the Christian tradition is inferior to, for instance, Buddhist thinking, in which compassion for all sentient beings is a central precept. It has to be admitted, however, that in practice the treatment of animals is no better in countries with a Buddhist background than it is in those in which Christianity was long dominant. Perhaps religious teachings about how we should treat animals are largely ineffective.

Taking life

Consider this passage from John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae*:

As far as the right to life is concerned, every innocent human being is absolutely equal to all others . . . Before the moral norm which prohibits the direct taking of the life of an innocent human being 'there are no privileges or exceptions for anyone. It makes no difference whether one is the master of the world or the "poorest of the poor" on the face of the earth. Before the demands of morality we are all absolutely equal.'⁴

John Paul II here claims an absolutely equal right to life for all human beings. Many other Christian ethicists, both Catholic and non-Catholic, echo this claim. Many of them also take the view that it is always wrong intentionally to take an innocent human life. I refer to the combination of these two claims as the doctrine of the sanctity of human life.

I believe that the doctrine of the sanctity of human life is mistaken, for two reasons. First, it is speciesist. Christians do not hold that all sentient life is of equal value, nor does Christian ethics prohibit the direct taking of the life of any sentient being. According to the standard Christian view – and the words of John Paul II – species membership itself is held to raise the value of life and ground the prohibition against taking life. Thus the life of an anencephalic human infant, unable even to recognize its mother and presumably utterly lacking in conscious awareness of its environment – or any potential for development into a conscious being, let alone a rational one – is supposed to have the same value as the life of any other human being, and is supposed to have *greater* value than the life of a normal chimpanzee. This bias in favour of our own species is akin to racism. It draws a circle around our own species, and confers special moral status on its members, despite the fact that some members of our species are evidently

⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, §57. The internal quotation is from the same pope's *Veritatis Splendor* (1993).

inferior, in morally relevant characteristics like consciousness, self-awareness, and rationality, to normal members of some other species.

Charles Camosy has argued that the official view of the Catholic Church is not speciesist, and it is true that, on the Catholic view, you do not have to be a member of the species *Homo sapiens* to be a person. Angels are persons. The Holy Spirit is a person. If there are rational extraterrestrials, they will be persons too. What is important is to have a rational nature. Camosy has a point, if we focus on such imaginary beings, but the words of John Paul II, quoted above, are paralleled in thousands of other statements by Catholic leaders and in practice, the Church considers every member of the species *Homo sapiens*, no matter how genetically abnormal or brain damaged from birth they may be, as a person, and gives them a moral status higher than it gives to any non-human animal. Anencephalic humans do not have a rational nature, because they lack the brain required for such a nature, yet as far as I am aware no Catholic leader has said that it is permissible to kill anencephalic humans to use them as organ donors to save the lives of infants with better prospects.

The second reason why I think the Christian view of the sanctity of human life is mistaken is that when it comes to the crunch, in many areas of life-and-death decision-making, the only way Christian ethicists reach anything close to a tolerable outcome is by chipping away at the scope of their own claims, drawing doubtful moral distinctions like that between ordinary and extraordinary means of treatment, and between what we directly intend to bring about by our actions, and what we merely foresee will happen as a result of them. The ways in which these distinctions are applied make little sense unless one believes that some human lives are not of the same value as others. I have defended these claims at length in *Rethinking Life and Death* and in *Practical Ethics*, but I will briefly summarize these arguments here.

Take, first, the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means of prolonging life, or as some now prefer to state it, between means that are proportionate and those that are disproportionate in terms of the burden they impose. The problem is not with the distinction that is being drawn, at least not when it is stated in terms of which means are proportionate, and which are not, to the benefit gained by extending a human life. That we should draw such a distinction is, of course, in accordance with consequentialist thinking. The point is that the way the distinction is applied is inconsistent with the idea that all human life is of equal value. For the distinction is standardly used to justify withdrawing life support from, for example, a baby with anencephaly, or from an adult with no prospect of recovering consciousness. In many of these cases, intensive medical care can

prolong the life of the human organism for years, or even decades. If the patient were conscious, communicative, and capable of enjoying his or her life, we would never consider it legitimate to withdraw life support when the patient might still live for years or decades. So the fact that, in the case of the anencephalic or the irreversibly unconscious adult, Christians regard it as justifiable to withdraw life support on the grounds that it is an extraordinary means of treatment, or that it imposes a disproportionate burden on the patient or the hospital's resources, shows that they do not consider the prolongation of the life of a human being without consciousness to be of equal value to the prolongation of the life of a conscious human being. That is, of course, a sensible judgement. Indeed, the opposite view – that if you have a choice between saving the life of a human being who is irreversibly unconscious, and saving the life of a normal, fully conscious human being, there is no obvious way to decide which to save, and you may as well toss a coin – strikes everyone who is not in the grip of an ideology as crazy.

Even the idea of brain death, which neither the Roman Catholic Church nor any other major Christian denomination has challenged, denies the equal value of all human life, for the death of the brain is not the death of the human organism. Human beings whose brains have irreversibly ceased to function are still living human organisms. They can, with appropriate medical care, survive for weeks or months. When women are pregnant at the time of the injury that causes their brains to cease to function, their bodies can, again with appropriate medical care, nourish and gestate a fetus for some months, until it is ready to emerge into the world. Hence to declare that the heart of such a living human organism may be removed from the chest and given to another human being is again incompatible with the idea that all human life is of equal value. It is, of course, entirely in accordance with the view that I would defend, namely that the human *person* has ceased to exist, and that the continued life of the human organism is of no value to the person who was previously embodied in that organism. But to take that view leads to the justification of euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, in at least some circumstances.

In a similar manner, some applications of the doctrine of double effect are incompatible with the idea that all human life is of equal value. Consider, for example, the use of double effect in cases in which a physician relieves the pain of a terminally ill patient, knowing that the amount of pain relief being given will shorten the patient's life, or removes the cancerous womb of a pregnant woman, knowing that doing so will bring about the death of the fetus. The appeal to double effect allows the physician to justify the acts by saying that, in the first case, it was done with the intention of relieving

pain, and in the second case, with the intention of saving the life of the pregnant woman. But as responsible moral agents, we ought to reach our decisions on the basis of all the reasonably foreseeable consequences that flow from them. The doctrine of double effect itself recognizes this, in requiring that the good consequences we are intending to bring about be proportionate to the harm done as a side effect. (Otherwise double effect could justify giving a lethal drug to a healthy person with a temporary headache, if that were the only way to relieve her pain.) In the case of pain relief for the terminally ill patient, we may rightly judge that the relief of pain is more important than the extra days that the patient might live, if less pain relief were given; and similarly we may rightly judge that maximizing the chances that the pregnant woman lives is more important than allowing the fetus to develop to a point at which it could live outside the woman's body. But if these decisions are justified, it is because prolonging a human life is not always good, and because the life of the fetus is not equal in significance to the life of a woman.

In considering Catholic teaching on these issues, one must admire the ingenuity with which humane Christian theologians and moral philosophers seek ways to get to conclusions that lead to the best results possible, without violating the framework in which they work. Yet at the same time one cannot help but see that the framework is being stretched to the point at which something has to give. In my view what has to give is the view that all human life is of equal value, irrespective of the quality of that life or the mental capacities of the human being.

Before leaving this topic, I should add that there is another view that some Christians maintain about human life that I agree with: that human life begins at conception, or at least very soon after it. (The qualification is to allow for a degree of doubt about whether a cluster of cells that still has the possibility of dividing into two or more separate human beings can be considered a human individual.) Many people who are opposed to abortion are bewildered that their opponents seem unable to grasp this simple biological fact. It might be easier for those who favour liberal abortion laws to accept this biological fact if they were clearer in distinguishing the existence of a living human organism from the existence of a being with a right to life, or a person. Just as I view the human organism with a beating heart, but an irreversible loss of all brain function, as a living human organism, so I am willing to regard the human embryo as a living human organism. In neither case does anything follow from this fact about whether we are justified in ending the life of that living human organism. To reiterate the point I made earlier, it would be speciesist to think that mere species membership

determines moral status. We should treat beings in accordance with their actual characteristics, not in accordance with their species.

Obligations to the poor

In contrast to the sharp differences that exist between my views and those of mainstream Christian ethics in regard to the moral status of animals, and the sanctity of human life, when it comes to our obligations to help the poor, my views are substantially in harmony with mainstream Christian teachings. As I have already mentioned, Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven. That comment came after he had said to a rich man: 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor' (Luke 18:22–25; Matthew 19:16–24). He praised the Good Samaritan who went out of his way to help a stranger and urged those who give feasts to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind (Luke 10:33; 14:13). When he spoke of the last judgement, he said that God will save those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, and clothed the naked. It is how we act towards 'the least of these brothers of mine' that will determine, Jesus says, whether you inherit the kingdom of God or go into the eternal fire (Matthew 25:31–46). He places more emphasis on charity for the poor than anything else.

These teachings were not lost on earlier generations of Christians. Paul proposed that those with a surplus should share with the needy, so that 'your surplus at the present time should supply their needs, so that their surplus may also supply your needs, that there may be equality' (2 Corinthians 8:14). The Acts of the Apostles tells us that members of the early Christian community in Jerusalem sold all their possessions and divided them according to need (2:43–47; 4:32–37). Although the Church and many of its leaders subsequently accumulated great wealth and power, major Christian thinkers continue to emphasize the obligation to help the poor and often to support strong claims based on the view that everyone has a natural right to what is needed for his or her sustenance, and that this right extends even to the property of others. Ambrose, one of the four original Great Doctors or teachers of the Church, said that when you give to the poor, 'You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.'⁵ The *Decretum Gratiani*, a twelfth-century

⁵ Quoted in Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), §23.

compilation of canon law, takes the same view: 'The bread that you withhold belongs to the hungry; the clothing you shut away, to the naked; and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless.' Thomas Aquinas quoted both Ambrose and the *Decretum Gratiani* in support of the view that whatever we have in 'superabundance' – that is, above and beyond what will reasonably satisfy our own needs and those of our family, for the present and the foreseeable future – 'is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance'.⁶

This is truly a radical message. These are mainstream Christian thinkers, and they are saying that sharing our surplus wealth with the poor is not a matter of charity, but of our duty and their rights. Aquinas even went so far as to say: 'It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another's property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need.'⁷ In modern times too, the Roman Catholic Church has reiterated this view. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council reminded Christians of the saying of the Fathers: 'Feed the man dying of hunger, for if you have not fed him you have killed him.' Two years later, in *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI quoted the passage in which Ambrose says that what you give to the poor is really already theirs and added: 'We must repeat once more that the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. The rule which up to now held good for the benefit of those nearest to us, must today be applied to all the needy of this world.'⁸

All this is very close to the view I have held since 1972, when I wrote 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' at the height of the refugee crisis resulting from the Pakistani army's savage suppression of a movement for autonomy in what was then East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. I then argued that people in affluent countries who were not helping the refugees were not simply failing to be charitable but were doing something seriously wrong. The situation is not, of course, limited to occasional humanitarian crises. Even in the absence of war, drought, earthquake, or other disasters, extreme poverty kills millions of children every year and forces more than a billion to be unable to meet their basic needs reliably. If we can prevent something as bad as extreme poverty, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong to not to do so. By giving to effective aid agencies, we can prevent

⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q66, a7. ⁷ *Ibid.*, II-II, q66, a7.

⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967).

at least some extreme poverty, so this is what we ought to do, and we do wrong if we do not do it.⁹

My problem with Christians on this topic is not the Christian doctrine, but the failure on the part of most churches to take it seriously and act on it. I understand, of course, that it is easier to avoid directly killing the innocent than to give away most of one's wealth, and I certainly do not claim to be doing all that I should be doing, so I can sympathize with others who fall short. Nevertheless Christians could and should do much better. Christian churches are, in many countries, immensely influential institutions, and it is a tragedy that they spend moral capital on issues like opposing gay marriage (which harms no one) rather than on the issue that is surely at the core of the Gospels and is responsible for the deaths of millions and the suffering of many more. Every year, while the Roman Catholic Church teaches 'Feed the man dying of hunger, for if you have not fed him you have killed him', rich Catholics have lived in luxury and in good standing with their church, while a minimum of 7.6 million children under five have died, most of them from avoidable, poverty-related causes.¹⁰ In 2009 a Brazilian doctor was excommunicated for performing an abortion on a nine-year-old child who had been raped by her stepfather.¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI has said that politicians who support laws permitting abortion 'exclude themselves from communion'.¹² Where are the comparable statements directed against those who fail to aid the poor? When will a church leader suggest excommunicating wealthy Catholics who do not give to the poor?

Ethical theory

Presumably all philosophers who engage in applied or normative ethics must at times ponder exactly what they are doing when they make ethical judgements. Can such judgements be true or false, or are they simply expressions of subjective attitudes? For many years I considered myself a non-cognitivist, which means I took the view that ethical judgements do not make claims that can be true or false. I also agreed with David Hume's view of the limited role that reason can play in practice. When it comes to

⁹ 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972). My fullest statement of my position is *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009).

¹⁰ United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 'Levels & Trends in Child Mortality', Report 2011, 1, www.childinfo.org/files/Child_Mortality_Report_2011.pdf.

¹¹ 'Excommunicated Doctor Hailed for Abortion on Child Rape Victim', www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/03/11/brazil.rape.abortion.

¹² Associated Press, 'Pope Condemns Abortion on Latin America Trip', 9 May 2007, www.nbcnews.com/id/18569939.

action, Hume famously said, reason is ‘the slave of the passions’ because only our desires or wants can move us to action. More specifically, at least since I studied with R.M. Hare at Oxford in 1970–1, I accepted his view that when we make a moral judgement, we are prescribing that an action be done, and doing so in a manner that is universalizable – that is, we must prescribe that the action be done not only because it happens to benefit ourselves, but no matter what position, among all those affected by our action, we occupied. Hare himself, in his later writings, tried to argue that a proper understanding of the logic of moral concepts such as ‘ought’, when combined with facts about our desires and those of others, leads to the conclusion that we ought to be utilitarians, maximizing the interests or preferences of all those affected by our actions.

I have long had doubts about non-cognitivism and about Hume’s view of practical reason. In 1981, in *The Expanding Circle*, I indicated that a more substantive conception of practical reason might be needed to support an idea like universalizability. Nevertheless, from time to time, over the past thirty years, I have tried to find ways of defending something like Hare’s position.¹³ The last of these attempts was in a paper entitled ‘The Groundwork of Utilitarian Morals: Reconsidering Hare’s Argument for Utilitarianism’ that I presented to a New York University conference on The Foundations of Morality, held in 2009.¹⁴ In the discussion that followed the paper, I met with objections that I could not answer. That, coupled with the experience of teaching a graduate seminar on Derek Parfit’s then-forthcoming *On What Matters*, led me to the view that Hume may have been right about motivating reasons, but this does not show that there cannot be objective reasons for action, which make some actions irrational, no matter what a person desires. We can distinguish normative reasons for action from motivating reasons for action.

Parfit’s most striking example of a person with a normative reason for action that is not motivating for him is that of the person with ‘Future Tuesday Indifference’. This person cares about his welfare, just as you or I do, except that he does not care about what happens to him on any future Tuesday. He prefers to suffer a mild pain today, rather than have agony next Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, but he prefers to suffer agony next Tuesday rather than a mild pain today. A

¹³ *The Expanding Circle*, reissued (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also my ‘Reasoning towards Utilitarianism’ in D. Seanor and N. Fotion (eds) *Hare and Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 147–59.

¹⁴ A draft version of the paper is available at www.philosophy.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/9622/singer.doc.

Humean might say that such a person has bizarre desires, but cannot say that he is irrational. The prospect of pain on a future Tuesday does not motivate him to do anything to avoid that pain. Yet surely he is irrational. As Parfit puts it: 'That some ordeal would be much more painful is a strong reason not to prefer it. That this ordeal would be on a future Tuesday is no reason to prefer it.'¹⁵

I therefore now consider that objectivism in ethics is more defensible than any form of non-cognitivism. More specifically, I favour non-naturalist objectivism, the position defended – at length – by Parfit in *On What Matters*, and, not coincidentally, by one of the philosophers that Parfit and I most admire, the nineteenth-century utilitarian Henry Sidgwick. Non-naturalists hold that normative statements – for example, judgements about what is right or wrong, or about what we have most reason to do – state truths that are not part of the natural world.

Since most Christian ethicists believe that ethical judgements can be true or false, my shift to ethical objectivism does reduce the gulf between us. A Christian could be a non-naturalist objectivist for exactly the reasons that have led me to this position. But the change does not bring me close to distinctively religious positions about the foundations of ethics. As an atheist I do not, of course, think that the fact that an action is right has anything to do with it being commanded by God. Some Christians believe this to be the case, but most serious Christian ethicists are aware of the difficulty in holding such a view while still maintaining that it is meaningful to assert that 'God is good.' And as a non-naturalist atheist, I reject the view that some other Christians take, that we can learn what is right or wrong from observing our human nature, or acting in accordance with the 'purpose' for which some parts of our body were 'given' to us. Evolution has no purpose and cannot tell us what is right or wrong. It is true that people who use their sexual organs only for activities like masturbation, or sex when effective contraception is used, will not leave any descendants, and that if everyone did this, our species would die out. We can also agree that it would be a bad thing if our species were to die out; but since we are in no danger of leaving insufficient descendants to continue the species, this tells us nothing about what we ought to do.

My shift from universal prescriptivism to non-natural objectivism is a change in the position I hold about what it is to make an ethical judgement, or, as philosophers call it, a change in my meta-ethics. It does not, therefore, imply any necessary change in my views about the content of our ethical

¹⁵ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), I: 56.

judgements, or what we ought to do. There is nothing in the change in my meta-ethical stance that inclines me to abandon utilitarianism. Sidgwick was a non-naturalist objectivist and a classical utilitarian, who believed that the only thing that is intrinsically good is pleasure or happiness, and the only thing intrinsically bad, pain or misery. Parfit is also a consequentialist, of sorts, although in *On What Matters* he argues for a convergence between plausible forms of Kantianism, contractualism, and consequentialism. But other non-naturalist objectivists in ethics, like W.D. Ross, have not been consequentialists. Despite the logical independence of normative ethics from meta-ethics, there is now some tension between my meta-ethics and the specific form of utilitarianism I have defended, namely preference utilitarianism. For preference utilitarianism seeks to maximize the satisfaction of preferences and minimize the thwarting of preferences, without making judgements about which preferences are good or bad, except in so far as the satisfaction of some preferences may require the thwarting of other preferences. If, however, some preferences are simply *irrational*, that raises the question why we should satisfy such preferences, other things being equal?

To that question, an answer may be available. We could argue that while we should seek as far as possible to ensure that *our own* preferences are in accord with reason, the preferences of others will still remain (along with those of my own preferences that I have failed to bring into accord with reason) brute facts about the world. So there will be these preferences, whether they are rational or not, and the preference utilitarian can hold that it is better that they be satisfied than that they be thwarted. It is certainly consistent to hold that the satisfaction of any preference is intrinsically good and the thwarting of any preference intrinsically bad, even if the preferences are not in accord with reason. Finally, the preference utilitarian is not committed to satisfying the present preferences of the person with Future Tuesday Indifference, for the preference utilitarian seeks the maximal satisfaction of preferences *over time* and thus will not ignore the strong preference for avoiding agony that such a person will have when Tuesday finally comes around, and is no longer a *future* Tuesday, and the agony is actually occurring. But all of this needs more thought than I have so far been able to give it. At the time of writing, I am still reconsidering whether preference utilitarianism is more defensible than, for example, classical hedonistic utilitarianism, or some other form of consequentialism that has more than one intrinsic value.¹⁶

¹⁶ My further thoughts on this question are presented in Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Engaging with Peter Singer

Charles C. Camosy

Introduction

A conversation between Peter Singer and Christian theologians might seem counter-intuitive. Singer's basic project claims to be one designed to undermine the foundations supporting a Christian view of the world. It is not just that Singer cannot imagine a God who allows all the suffering that exists on this earth. He also holds that our culture has a 'moral hangover' from a period, long past its prime, where we mistakenly took Christian religious belief seriously – and we need to purge this last remaining vestige of its religiosity from the incoherent way we live our ethical lives. At times Singer seems unable or unwilling to do anything other than dismiss Christian sources of Scripture and tradition, and resorts to sloppy caricature when critiquing Christian positions.

But the reaction of the overwhelming majority of theologians to Singer's work has not been much better. Indeed, many Christians see those who embrace Singer's viewpoint – let's call them Singerites – as little more than crass utilitarians making dubious calculations leading to everything that is wrong with a culture of death. Not that long ago, I told one of my favourite established Christian ethicists that I was meeting with Singer. He responded with a worried glance and said, 'Be careful, Charlie, you're going to like him.' Embedded in this reaction are several assumptions which are shared by a plurality of Christian theologians: (1) it would be surprising for a Christian ethicist to like Singer; (2) liking Singer might make one be more open to his ideas; and (3) being open to Singer's ideas is something about which we should 'be careful'. For some of us, this might be an academic worry, but for others it is almost a moral concern: there is something seriously wrong with taking Singer seriously.¹ Perhaps because (it is

¹ Garth Hallett suggests that the 'vogue of virtue-centered ethics among contemporary Christian ethicists' helps explain the neglect of approaches which display Singer's focus casuistry, analytic reasoning, and utility. *Priorities and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13.

thought) his views are more dangerous than others, it is risky even to entertain them. I know colleagues, for instance, who refuse to assign his work in classes, dismiss him as a ‘popularizer’, and adopt just about any tactic possible to marginalize his point of view. To the extent they engage his actual arguments at all, many do so without reading him carefully, and instead respond to caricatures of his views that have developed into a kind of received wisdom in the theological academy. And despite the fact that three of his grandparents were killed in the Holocaust, many Christians associate Singer’s views with those of Nazi Germany.

But there are good reasons to challenge this polarized relationship. Many are aware that Singer has basically adopted the two-level preference utilitarianism of his mentor at Oxford, the great R.M. Hare, but fewer seem to be aware that Hare identified as a Christian, went to weekly church services, and even found a prominent role for theological imagery and ideas in his writings. Indeed, it is not clear that Hare’s ethical theory is coherent without the perspective of the ‘archangel’ or without invoking ‘providence’. Some might find Hare’s connection of Christianity and utilitarianism strange, or dismiss it as exceptional, but we should not forget the historical fact that utilitarianism arises out of a Christian context. It would therefore be odd if there were not shared values, attitudes, and assumptions to explore. One important example of common ground, as we will see in more detail below, is that many traditional Christians display a broadly consequentialist structure to their moral reasoning. Singer wants to produce the consequence of maximal preference satisfaction, whereas many Christians (especially Thomists) understand the moral life teleologically – with the proximate goal, some say, of the flourishing of all creation (with a special emphasis on vulnerable persons), and an ultimate goal of achieving union with God. Though, as an atheist, Singer would not know what to do with the latter goal, I submit that there is much common ground with regard to the former.

Some might understand the lack of fruitful interaction between contemporary utilitarianism and Christian ethics as strong evidence for Alasdair MacIntyre’s claim that the Enlightenment project has failed and that we are languishing about in its postmodern ruins: maybe nobody can talk sensibly about ethics. But in light of the overlap that exists between the traditions of preference utilitarianism and Christian teleology, I think this is a mistake. Few Christian theologians have taken Singer seriously as an interlocutor, and Singer has not meaningfully engaged with the work of the best Christian theologians. Interaction has not failed; rather, it has yet to be seriously attempted. And the fact that almost all Christians and Singerites

miss the common ground described in more detail below is, I believe, evidence of the power of defining one's approach and identity in opposition to that of another. We should instead engage in the spirit of the conference from which these essays come – namely, that of intellectual solidarity. Though the Church hasn't always been the best at intellectual solidarity with non-Christians, there are important counter-examples, the most obvious being Thomas Aquinas's reliance on the pagan Aristotle. The Roman Catholic theologian David Hollenbach helpfully defines intellectual solidarity as:

an orientation of mind that regards differences among traditions as stimuli to intellectual engagement across religious and cultural boundaries. It is an orientation that leads one to view differences positively rather than with a mindset marked by suspicion or fear. It starts from a posture that welcomes foreign or strange understandings of the good life in a spirit of hospitality, rather than standing guard against them. This receptive orientation expects to be able to learn something valuable by listening to people who hold understandings of the good life different from one's own. It also expects to be able to teach something valuable to those who are different by speaking to them respectfully about one's own understanding of the human good . . . It is a disposition based on the hope that we can actually get somewhere if we decide to listen to what others think a good life looks like and in turn tell them why we see the good the way we do. Differences of vision are not so total that we are destined to remain eternal strangers to one another.²

In that spirit, then, this essay will survey various examples of overlap and disagreement which could form the basis for interesting and important conversation between Peter Singer and Christian ethics. On the issues of poverty and non-human animals, for instance, we will find widespread common ground – even with regard to fundamental premises and conclusions. And with abortion, euthanasia, and the end of life we will see that the fundamental disagreement is quite narrow, and often rests upon theoretical assumptions about objective value which Singer is in the process of rethinking.

Duties to the poor

One issue in which at least a significant number of Christians and Singerites can see at least some significant common ground is with regard to our duties

² David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 138.

to the poor.³ Both Singer and the Church, for instance, recognize this as a pivotal time in the history of the battle against poverty.⁴ In Singer's recent book *The Life You Can Save*, he says:

We live in a unique moment. The proportion of people unable to meet their basic needs is smaller today than it has been at any time in recent history, and perhaps at any time since humans first came into existence . . . Not only do we know a lot about the desperately poor, but we have much more to offer them in terms of better health care, improved seeds and agricultural techniques, and new technologies for generating electricity . . . Economist Jeffery Sachs has argued convincingly that extreme poverty can be virtually eliminated by the middle of this century.⁵

The Church also recognizes the moment currently before us. In preparation for the great Jubilee celebration in the year 2000, the Pontifical Council, *Cor Unum*, produced a document with the goal of 'the elimination of hunger and malnutrition and the guarantee of the right of proper nutrition'.⁶ In addition, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, teaming with its international arm, Catholic Relief Services, is in the midst of an intense Zero Poverty campaign to mobilize 1 million people to join the fight against global poverty. In addressing factors like international peace-keeping and peace-building, global trade and agricultural practices, migration patterns and causes, debt relief, and organizational/individual assistance, the Church is aiming squarely at eliminating absolute poverty. Indeed, the Zero Poverty campaign is motivated in part by the Church's belief that such poverty 'is unacceptable in the 21st century'.⁷

But this topic is more than simply a focus of the present moment for both approaches. One could argue that Singer arrived as a player on the academic scene with his now famous 1972 article 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'.⁸ This foundational focus on poverty was continually highlighted in

³ Eric Gregory, in addition to his contribution to this volume, has already addressed the topic. See his contribution to Douglas Hicks and Mark Valeri (eds), *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁴ When I refer to the views of 'the Church' throughout this article, though I hope it will be clear from the context, I will most often mean the current teaching of Roman Catholicism. This might raise the eyebrows of some readers, so let me be clear that this is merely a shorthand way of referring to my particular approach to Christian ethics, and not meant to be part of a larger argument that, say, other Christian churches do not count as real churches or that other Christians do not count as real Christians. Furthermore, many of the ideas for which I advocate are shared by my Protestant colleagues and friends.

⁵ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009), xii.

⁶ *Cor Unum, World Hunger – A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity* (1996), Introduction.

⁷ 'Caritas Launches Zero Poverty Campaign', www.zenit.org/article-28176.

⁸ Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (Spring 1972): 229–43.

subsequent works, and Gerard Maguiness has even argued that this article served as a kind of ‘early manifesto of themes’ that would emerge as his career unfolded.⁹ *The Life You Can Save* consolidates aspects of arguments he has made over the last four decades, but its central argument remains largely unchanged from the 1972 article. Modern-day Roman Catholic movements also go back to the very beginnings of Christianity and are also of foundational importance. Indeed, though Jesus himself rarely speaks of hell, when he does so it is almost always connected to a failure of one’s duties to the poor.¹⁰ The early Christian Church took this message of Jesus so seriously that, when it had the resources to do so, it largely served as the social welfare system of the ancient world. Singer himself built on precisely this historical fact when, in the second edition of his very important book *Practical Ethics*, he suggested we give 10 per cent of our resources to those in absolute poverty given that this was the tithing percentage required by the social welfare mechanism of the age: the Catholic Church.¹¹

In making their arguments about duties to the poor, both approaches appeal to a central narrative analogy. This is Singer’s famous ‘shallow pond’ thought experiment:

On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather’s cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for parents or a babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don’t wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him, and change your clothes, you’ll be late for work. What should you do?¹²

And many readers will be familiar with Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan:

⁹ Gerard H. Maguiness, ‘Assisted Suicide, Self-Love, and a Life Worth Living’ (PhD dissertation, Pontifical Lateran University, 2002).

¹⁰ In recounting a rich man’s refusal to help a poor beggar, for instance, Jesus notes that the rich man ends up in torment in hell (Luke 16:19–31). He famously said that that love of money is the root of evil and that a rich person will struggle to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24). And in one of the most important stories of the Christian tradition, Jesus famously divides the heaven-bound from the hell-bound based on whether or not they fulfilled duties to ‘the least ones’ in their communities (Matthew 25:31–46).

¹¹ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 246.

¹² Singer, *The Life You Can Save*, 3.

Jesus replied, 'A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?' (Luke 10:30–36)

Both of these stories are told in order to elicit a particular moral intuition: one should provide aid to those who need it. But both Singer and the Church go further and claim that it is morally wrong *not* to provide aid.

At first, one might not grasp the dramatic effect which acceptance of this claim should have on our lives. Yet Singer rightly points out that if we were to take it seriously, our lives would be changed dramatically. Apart from items that are necessary to live, is everything else you are spending as important, or nearly as important, as the life of a child? The answer to the question, of course, is supposed to be obvious. It looks as if we must radically rethink how we use our resources, not simply because we get a feather in our cap for being 'charitable', but because it is our *duty* to do so. Indeed, we are morally *blameworthy* if we do not sacrifice things of lesser value in order to save the lives of children in this way. For the vast majority of those in the developed world (including almost everyone reading this book), we have income of which we can dispose without giving up the basic necessities of life, and this income should be donated to aid agencies serving the needy. Just how much we will think ourselves obligated to give will depend on what we consider 'nearly morally important' compared to the lives we could save. But for most of us it would mean a radical rethinking of how we live our lives.

And *how* blameworthy are we for failing to meet this high ethical demand? Let us consider the person in the drowning child thought experiment who simply walks by and lets the child die because they preferred to keep their shoes from being ruined. Given that, presumably, the person who lets the child drown does not *intend* her to die means that this is not the equivalent of first degree murder, but Singer persuasively claims that it still counts as something like unintentional or reckless homicide – the kind of charge that might be levelled at someone who, say, kills another while driving a car irresponsibly.

We have already seen above that Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, a central story for every Christian (and even for many outside the faith), also attempts to show that we should aid those in need. But could a Christian agree with Singer that it is *wrong* not to aid? I argue that the answer is yes. Mass-going Catholics will recall the following Act of Contrition in the Penitential Rite: 'I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do.'¹³ Sin, then, is not only what we *do*, but also what we *fail* to do.¹⁴

But what about the seriousness of refusing to aid? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, interestingly, discusses this topic of 'refusing to assist another in danger' under the fifth commandment of the Hebrew Bible's Decalogue, 'Thou Shall Not Kill':

The moral law prohibits exposing someone to mortal danger without grave reason, as well as refusing assistance to a person in danger.

The acceptance by human society of murderous famines, without efforts to remedy them, is a scandalous injustice and a grave offense. Those whose usurious and avaricious dealings lead to the hunger and death of their brethren in the human family indirectly commit homicide, which is imputable to them.

Unintentional killing is not morally imputable. But one is not exonerated from grave offense if, without proportionate reasons, he has acted in a way that brings about someone's death, even without the intention to do.¹⁵

And in case there is any confusion about what is meant by this teaching, let us look at another normative source for Roman Catholics, the Second Vatican Council:

Since there are so many people prostrate with hunger in the world, this sacred council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the aphorism of the Fathers, 'Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him,' and really to share and employ their earthly goods, according to the ability of each, especially by supporting individuals or peoples with the aid by which they may be able to help and develop themselves.¹⁶

¹³ This version has recently been updated from the International Commission on English in the Liturgy.

¹⁴ To recall Matthew 25 once again, *all* the sins that separate the goats from the sheep are *failures to act*.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn, §2269. This middle paragraph quotes the fourth-century bishop, Ambrose of Milan.

¹⁶ *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §69.

The Church has a position, then, that is nearly identical to Singer's. Not only is it wrong not to aid, but some of the holiest people in the tradition – along with those articulating the current teaching – consider it to be a kind of killing or homicide. When there is no explicit intention to kill, a refusal to aid is not considered murder, but one is still guilty of a 'grave offense' if one does not have a proportionate reason for not aiding a person in danger. This connects nicely with Singer's point that we are only justified in ignoring the poor if we would be forced to sacrifice something of similar moral importance.¹⁷

Non-human animals

Singer is perhaps best known for championing the moral status and ethical treatment of non-human animals – and it is also the issue about which he seems to be the most passionate and insistent. He might be the person most responsible for bringing such issues to the Western world's attention. And he is surely right to highlight the fact that many billions of non-human animals are the victims of horrific and speciesist practices – most clearly exemplified in the practice of intensive factory farming. The narrative Singer gives for how we got into this situation is the following:

Western attitudes to animals have roots in two traditions: Judaism and Greek antiquity. These roots unite in Christianity, and it is through Christianity that they came to prevail in Europe. A more enlightened view of our relations with animals emerges only gradually, as thinkers begin to take positions that are relatively independent of the Church; and in fundamental respects we still have not broken free of the attitudes that were unquestionably accepted in Europe until the eighteenth century.¹⁸

Singer highlights an admittedly problematic strand of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which understands human beings as the pinnacle of creation and non-human animals as having only *derivative* value such that we may do with them as we please – even torturing and killing them for trivial reasons like our enjoyment of the taste of their flesh at an inexpensive price.

This challenge can helpfully push the Church to rediscover non-speciesist resources in its complex tradition with regard to 'the non-human' – including some that are rarely mentioned in current theological

¹⁷ This is another clear instance of the importance of the principle of double effect, despite Singer's criticism of it in his contribution to this volume. It is never acceptable to intend the death of an innocent person, but one would need a proportionate reason in order to let another die without such an intention. We will look at this principle in more detail below.

¹⁸ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 2002), 186.

discourse. For instance, all non-human animals (and, indeed, all creatures) are declared good *independent of human beings* in the very first passages of the Bible – and just a chapter later non-human animals are explicitly created to be our companions because ‘it is not good that man should be alone’ (Genesis 2:18). Later Christian theology (and most notably that of Thomas Aquinas) would go on to locate human beings in a fairly unimpressive place in the hierarchy of creation, certainly nowhere near the top, and falling well below angels, for instance. Angels, like human beings, are persons – that is, substances of a rational nature. Christian theology, therefore, has room to admit of the possibility that non-human creatures on this earth (primates, dolphins, elephants, etc.), given that they may also be substances of a rational nature, may *share* with angels and human persons the title of ‘person’.

Furthermore, though it allows the use of animals for food and clothing, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* imposes strict limitations for this practice. Indeed, there must be a ‘need’ to cause non-human animals to suffer and die:

dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. Animals are God’s creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals . . . It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.¹⁹

The prior two popes had views consistent with this teaching. Benedict XVI is well known for being an animal lover; apparently he has to be reminded that he cannot take in stray cats from the surrounding Roman streets, and throughout his life he has often been given pets as Christmas presents. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals has even latched on to this fact and heralded his words in their advertisements. One that received a significant amount of public attention focused on his answer to the following question asked by German journalist Peter Seewald not long before he became pope, and during which time he was the doctrinal watchdog for the entire Church, ‘Are we allowed to make use of animals, and even to eat them?’ Here is his response:

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, §2415–16.

That is a very serious question. At any rate, we can see that they are given into our care, that we cannot just do whatever we want with them. Animals, too, are God's creatures. Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible.²⁰

In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict writes about our need to be faithful to a 'covenant' between humans and the rest of creation. Indeed, his view of non-human animals appears to flow from a determined focus on ecological ethics more generally. Sometimes called 'the Green Pope', Benedict was something of an ecological hero for making explicit efforts to strongly connect moral imperatives toward creation with the Church's broader social teaching. Tellingly, this theme was part of Benedict's first homily as pope:

The external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast. The earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.²¹

The social teaching of Pope John Paul II also had an important ecological focus. He took the teachings of his predecessors on 'the dangers of consumerism' and of a 'desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow' and applied them with a concern not just for human beings, but for all of creation.²² He says:

Once again it is evident that development, the planning which governs it, and the way in which resources are used must include respect for moral demands. One of the latter undoubtedly imposes limits on the use of the natural world. The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an

²⁰ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 78–9.

²¹ Quoted in Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, *Ten Commandments for the Environment: Pope Benedict Speaks Out for Creation and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009), 2. Under Benedict's watch, the Vatican has become the world's first carbon neutral country by offsetting its carbon emissions through renewable energies and carbon credits. Benedict has personally led on the topic of renewable energy by instituting projects to put thousands of solar panels on various Vatican buildings – reducing carbon dioxide emissions 'by about 225 tons' and 'saving the equivalent of eighty tons of oil each year' (*ibid.*, 8–9). John Allen notes that the project captured the 2008 Euro Solar Prize, awarded by the European Association for Renewable Energy. This already impressive project is part of an even more impressive commitment to have 20 per cent of the Vatican's energy come from renewable resources by 2020.

²² John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), 113, 37.

absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to ‘use and misuse,’ or to dispose of things as one pleases.²³

Matthew Scully recalls John Paul II’s words in an address to European farmers in the autumn of 2000 in which he asked them to resist the temptations of productivity and profit that work to the detriment of respect for nature, for when we forget this principle, becoming tyrants and not custodians of the earth, ‘sooner or later the Earth rebels’.²⁴ And, as Scully notes, John Paul II applied this reasoning specifically to how we treat non-human animals:

Many would be surprised to hear [John Paul’s] call to follow the example of St. Francis, who ‘looked upon creation with the eyes of one who could recognize in the marvelous work of the hand of God. His solicitous care, not only toward men, but also toward animals is a faithful echo of the love with which God in the beginning pronounced his “fiat” which brought them into existence. We are too called to a similar attitude.’

‘It is necessary and urgent,’ said the pope in marking the eight-hundredth anniversary of the saint’s passing, ‘that with the example of the little poor man from Assisi, one decides to abandon unadvisable forms of domination, the locking up of all creatures.’²⁵

Though the English-speaking press apparently failed to take notice, John Paul II made his most striking claims about the dignity of non-human animals during a papal audience in 1990. Drawing on the biblical theology of what it means to have the ‘breath of life’, the pope claimed that ‘animals possess a soul’ and that we ‘must love and feel solidarity with our smaller brethren’.²⁶

But this exchange should not be all about Christianity finding resources that cohere with Singer’s approach – especially when the Church can push him on various topics as well. Because he is a preference utilitarian, Singer finds it difficult to condemn the wanton slaughter of certain animals (for pleasure, sport, etc.) in a way that doesn’t violate their preferences – perhaps, say, by painlessly killing of a non-self-aware creature with no interest in continuing to live. But the Christian tradition – which can appeal to the intrinsic goodness of non-human animals apart from human beings, the *telos* of all members of the created order, the spiritual reality of

²³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), 102, 34.

²⁴ Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2002), 434, 388.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁶ People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, ‘Pope Benedict XVI Continues Tradition of Papal Concern for Animals’, www.peta.org/features/pope-benedict-xvi.aspx.

non-human animals, and the morally problematic nature of the (often vicious and violent) act of snuffing out a non-human animal's life – has resources to condemn practices that Singer does not.

Euthanasia and the end of life

Peter Singer's championing of euthanasia, which has made headlines on more than one occasion,²⁷ seems hopelessly at odds with the Church's view that understands any attempt to aim at the death of an innocent person as intrinsically evil. Indeed, the Church claims that euthanasia is hostile to life itself and part of a violent culture of death.²⁸ Nor has the blowback come solely from Christians: the advocacy group Not Dead Yet, for instance, sent a letter to the editor of the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* claiming that Singer devalues the lives of those with special needs.²⁹ In an appendix to the second edition of *Practical Ethics* (which he titled 'On Being Silenced in Germany') Singer details several examples where his invitations to present his scholarship were withdrawn under pressure from disability-rights groups. Sometimes his speaking events were cancelled, and on occasions where they were allowed to go forward, Singer was often whistled at or shouted down. On one occasion, much of the crowd simply repeated the chant 'Singer raus! Singer raus!' The chant was so loud and sustained that he was forced to abandon his presentation.³⁰

But if we take a closer look at the actual arguments, we find that the Church and Singer actually share many things in common on other kinds of end-of-life issues – including a growing scepticism about using brain death as a criterion to determine whether or not a human organism has died. Indeed, Roman Catholic legal theorist John Finnis and Singer already had explicit, public agreement on this point some years ago.³¹ We also find that

²⁷ In a now famous story, Singer was even willing to apply his view on the end of life theoretically to his own mother who had advanced Alzheimer's disease. Indeed, he was willing to say that his spending significant resources on her care, despite her not being a person under his definition, revealed that consistently applying his view might be 'more difficult than [he] thought'. Michael Specter, 'The Dangerous Philosopher', *The New Yorker* (6 September 1999).

²⁸ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 80.

²⁹ 'Peter Singer in NY Times Magazine: Disability Community Responds', www.notdeadyetnewscommentary.blogspot.com/2009/08/peter-singer-in-ny-times-magazine.html.

³⁰ Singer, *Practical Ethics* (1993), 357. Singer, who, as we saw in the introduction, is the grandson of three persons killed in Nazi concentration camps, claimed that he had 'the overwhelming feeling that this was what it must have been like to attempt to reason against the rising tide of Nazism in the declining days of the Weimar Republic'.

³¹ John Finnis, 'Brain Death and the Sanctity of Life Ethic', paper given to the Philosophy Society, University of Oxford (14 May 1998).

both approaches refuse to make a distinction between acts and omissions in many aspects of end-of-life care and treatment – indeed, both acknowledge that one may be held morally responsible for others’ deaths whether one actively kills them or refuses to aid them. For the Church, euthanasia will be any act *or omission* which of itself or by intention causes death.³² Both also agree that one may be morally justified in removing life-sustaining treatment, or giving death-hastening pain medication, and that consequence-centred or ‘proportionate’ reasoning may be used to determine whether it is justified. Indeed, in what is a remarkable example of overlap, both Singer and the Church (despite disagreeing on some of the moral reasoning behind doing so) are at times willing to accept precisely the same act at the end of life: giving a patient a large dose of pain medication that will dramatically speed his death.

Of course, the Church will deny that it is ever acceptable to aim at the death of an innocent person. Though we will see below that Singer also has a place for moral rules – including a rule which (all things being equal) prohibits the killing of persons – he makes an exception when someone autonomously asks to be killed. In these situations, says Singer, the medical community is justified in killing. But in response, Christian ethicists have often pointed out that the developed West is a secular world dominated by the social structures of consumerism and hyper-autonomy. These combine with autonomy to give us something very different from authentic freedom. As Leon Kass points out:

Truth to tell, the ideal of rational autonomy, so beloved of bioethicists and legal theorists, rarely obtains in actual medical practice. Illness invariably means dependence, and dependence means relying for advice on physician and family. This is especially true of those who are seriously or terminally ill, where there is frequently also depression or diminished mental capacity that clouds one’s judgment or weakens one’s resolve. With patients thus reduced – helpless in action and ambivalent about life – someone who might benefit from their death need not proceed by overt coercion.³³

And often such dependence, even if it doesn’t involve will-shattering depression or another similar malady, leads to a different kind of strain on autonomous choice. We have created a culture that worships youth, vigorousness, and production of capital; and rather than taking care of our aging family members in the mainstream of our communities, it is now simply

³² *Evangelium Vitae*, 65.

³³ In Kathleen M. Foley and Herbert Hendin (eds), *The Case Against Assisted Suicide* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 371, 24.

expected that we will push older persons to the margins where we will not have to encounter them. In such a culture, older persons (often desperately lonely and depressed) will fail to see their own value and often come to believe that they are a 'burden' on their family and community. In light of this social situation, it is understandable why so many bioethicists believe that, at least in some circumstances, a *duty* to die follows from the right to die.

Singer responds to these worries by claiming that we do not see worrisome slippage in places like the Netherlands where euthanasia has been legal for at least a generation. But while there might be no reason *in principle* why regulations surrounding patient consent and what counts as unbearable suffering couldn't actually be enforced, the Dutch test case, coupled with an honest acknowledgement about the reality of our culture and of our human nature, gives us several good reasons for being sceptical that sufficiently tight restrictions could ever be imposed in practice in the Netherlands or anywhere in the West. Nigel Biggar points out

the difficulty of ever achieving democratic consensus on where to draw the line with the consequence that it is drawn liberally; the predominant position of the value of individual autonomy in cultural common sense; and the influence of an expanded interpretation of the vocation of medicine that raises its sights beyond the mere promotion of physical health to the Promethean, utilitarian ambition of eliminating human unhappiness.

Indeed, it would take 'the taming and retraining of some of the most powerful cultural prejudices' to feel reasonably comfortable such regulations could be formulated and enforced.³⁴ Consider the following, which supports Biggar's prediction about the role individual autonomy plays in a slippery slope:

A group of older Dutch academics and politicians have launched a petition in support of assisted suicide for the over-70s. They hope to attract over 40,000 signatures, enough to get the issue debated in parliament under citizens' initiative legislation. Under Dutch law, euthanasia can only be practised if the patient is suffering 'unbearable pain'. The doctor must be convinced the patient is making an informed choice and a second doctor must also give his or her opinion. But the new lobby group says people aged over 70 who are *tired of life* should also have the right to professional help in ending it.³⁵

³⁴ Nigel Biggar, *Aiming to Kill: The Ethics of Suicide and Euthanasia* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), 151.

³⁵ 'Tired of Life? Group Calls for Assisted Suicide', *Dutch News*, www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2010/02/tired_of_life_group_calls_for.php, emphasis added.

It is something close to diabolical that, after creating a culture of which older persons do not feel a part and in which they do not feel welcome, a society would then create a method by which older persons could kill themselves more easily. Ironically, it is a hyper-focus on autonomy which is facilitating a slide down precisely the kind of slippery slope such a focus was supposed to avoid. It turns out that in a consumerist, youth-worshipping culture, giving older persons the choice to kill themselves makes them anything but free. No, even if one believes that Peter Singer is right about euthanasia in the abstract, we should think twice about legalizing it in cultures where consumerism, youth, and autonomy reign supreme.

Of course, another disagreement between Singer and the Church with regard to this topic is about the *moral status* of various human beings at the end of life or with mental disabilities. However, this disagreement is actually one which, I believe, follows from his approach to abortion and infanticide.

Abortion

Singer believes that what makes killing justifiable at the beginning of life is virtually identical to that which justifies much killing at the end of life, namely, the fact that not all members of the species *Homo sapiens* are persons. In order to count as a person, one must be a rational, self-aware creature. From human organisms with end-stage Alzheimer's disease or in a permanent coma, to those who are prenatal or neonatal, their membership in a particular biological species is not morally significant. Because they are not rational or self-aware, they are not persons and do not have the preferences necessary to have what Singer would describe as a right to life.³⁶ Fetuses and infants have 'no higher moral status than we give to a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-consciousness, awareness, capacity to feel and so on. Because no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person.'³⁷ Singer argues not only for the right to kill fetuses and adults who are not rational or self-aware, but also, infamously, for the right to kill newborn babies.

The Church's position that abortion and infanticide are 'unspeakable crimes'³⁸ seems about as far from Singer's as it could possibly be. Yet closer examination reveals that the disagreement between the two approaches with regard to public policy on abortion is actually quite narrow. Both agree that

³⁶ Singer does accept the usefulness of the concept of 'rights' – and the rules that follow from them – insofar as they maximize preference satisfaction.

³⁷ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (2011), 136. ³⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 51.

public policy cannot retreat into a privacy-centred moral neutrality with regard to the moral status of the fetus or whether or not one can kill the fetus. Both agree that, assuming that a fetus is a person, any unintended negative effects of making abortion illegal would not justify its continued legalization. Both agree that a judicial approach to abortion, especially as it currently exists in the United States, is a mistake – and would prefer a legislative process to the judicial rulings of *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. Both agree that one has a moral duty to support a fetus for nine months – again, with the qualifier that the fetus is a person. Both have non-speciesist definitions of personhood given that both can and do see personhood as existing outside the species *Homo sapiens*. Both also see a direct, logical connection between one’s view of abortion and one’s view of infanticide. Both, unfortunately, also give short shrift to the moral status of women and how it is impacted by abortion policy.

Their very narrow *disagreement* is with regard to what role, if any, potential should play in determining the moral status of the fetus. Both approaches agree that *passive* potential (or mere probability) adds nothing to the moral status of an entity, but the Church’s ‘substance’ position is that any being of a rational *nature* – that is, a being with *active* potential for personal traits – counts as a person. Membership in the species *Homo sapiens*, though not significant in and of itself, does indicate what really matters morally about the fetus and infant: their being substances of a rational nature. Though it goes beyond the scope of this essay to make the full argument here, I have argued elsewhere that without understanding the human person as a substance, we can make no sense of many common intuitions: that human persons persist through time, that one remains the same human person even when unconscious, that those who have mental disabilities remain persons, and more.³⁹ At any rate, though it ends up having dramatic implications when it comes to conclusions about public policy, the disagreement between Singer and the Church on abortion turns out to focus on a narrow (though very complex) issue which can be fruitfully engaged.

Ethical theory

Perhaps one could accept that there is broad and surprising overlap with regard to *practical* ethics, but what of ethical theory and methodology? Perhaps we accidentally share some agreement on practical issues – a kind of

³⁹ Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 1. Much of the material in this essay is taken from my argument there.

Rawlsian overlapping consensus – but isn't there fundamental disagreement about how to reason morally and in what the moral life consists? After all, Singer's goal as a utilitarian is to maximize preference satisfaction, while the Church speaks of 'justice' and 'intrinsically evil acts' in ways which seem to directly contradict his approach. Is there not also a basic disagreement about moral anthropology? The Church will obviously not accept the view that the value of individual human persons may be radically reduced to their relevant interests in a broader, even universal, calculation of preferences. Rather than simply being bundles of contingent preferences, they understand persons to be substances with irreducible dignity. But despite these important differences,⁴⁰ the overlap remains strong even on the theoretical level. As mentioned above, Singer will reject the Church's claims about a person's ultimate end consisting in union with God, but he shares much with what the Church describes as our *proximate* end, the common good of persons and flourishing of all creation.⁴¹

It goes beyond the scope of this essay to make the full case,⁴² but I believe that both approaches may be able to accept the following seven theoretical principles:

1. The moral life is about directing one's choices toward the universal common good and flourishing of others – especially the most vulnerable. It is in this sense consequentialist.
2. The good and flourishing of others consists in something that can be studied and is therefore something about which we can know objective facts. It is in this sense teleological.
3. Concern for the flourishing of others is a prerequisite for, and therefore directly connected with, one's own flourishing.
4. Obeying *moral rules* is important for the long-term flourishing of others and for one's own flourishing.
5. In relatively rare situations, moral rules *may be broken* in the interest of promoting the flourishing of others and, again, for one's own flourishing.

⁴⁰ As we will see below, Singer is fundamentally rethinking some aspects of his ethical theory in ways that might make this difference seem less significant.

⁴¹ Indeed, the Church claims that 'intention is a movement of the will toward the end: it is concerned with the goal of the activity. It aims at the good anticipated from the action undertaken. Intention is not limited to directing individual actions, but can guide several actions toward one and the same purpose; it can orient one's whole life toward its ultimate end. For example, a service done with the end of helping one's neighbor can at the same time be inspired by the love of God as the ultimate end of all our actions' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1752).

⁴² See Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics*, ch. 5.

6. The flourishing of others and of ourselves is indicated primarily by happiness.
7. Happiness is not indicated merely by 'feeling happy' but rather the long-term fulfilment which comes from achieving goals in a life of meaning.

This is a remarkable list. And with the rise of the study of human happiness as a serious academic discipline, I propose that both Singerites and Christians can engage in productive debate both about which principles and norms are best for producing happy and flourishing lives (or, perhaps more easily, those principles which are best for *avoiding* lives which are *not* flourishing) and when and how often it might be acceptable to violate such principles and norms. Not every dispute could be adjudicated this way, of course – and not everything that is true about human flourishing is objectively clear to everyone (hence its limitations as a tool for dialogue in moral debate). But we can come to substantial agreement about some things with regard to the flourishing (and non-flourishing) of human beings, and we can use this agreement as a basis for productive arguments about the usefulness of various moral norms.⁴³

Indeed, though he is ultimately interested morally in net preference satisfaction, as a *two-level* preference utilitarian Singer says the following:

There is something to be said, however, against applying utilitarianism only or primarily at the level of each individual case. It may be that in the long run, we will achieve better results – greater overall happiness – if we urge people not to judge each individual action by the standard of utility, but instead to think along the lines of some broad principles that will cover all or virtually all of the situations that they are likely to encounter . . . These principles should include those that experience has shown, over the centuries, to be generally conducive to producing the best consequences.⁴⁴

Given that the Church has been self-consciously and systematically thinking for two millennia about what principles and norms best produce such flourishing, Singer should embrace the Church as a conversation partner – both in terms of what principles promote human flourishing, and when and if such principles should be ignored.

Singer's important shift

One of the most exciting signs of hope for the conversation between Singer and Christian ethics is Singer's rethinking of some fundamental

⁴³ For an important attempt at doing this, see Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

⁴⁴ Singer, *Practical Ethics* (1993), 92–3.

assumptions in his ethical and meta-ethical theory. He hints at this shift in the third edition of *Practical Ethics*, but he reveals more details in his contribution to this volume. Part of the shift appears to have been facilitated by the ongoing work of the philosopher Derek Parfit, who has apparently convinced Singer to become more open to objectivity in his moral theory. For most of his career, Singer has accepted David Hume's view of practical reason in ethics: namely, that, because it applies to means and not ends, reason cannot move us to moral action. What we happen to desire is neither rational or irrational – even if we prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of one's finger. But Singer now considers this view to be mistaken. Despite many decades of defending it, Singer no longer holds Hume's view of practical reason. One of Parfit's arguments considers someone who on normal days prefers not to be in severe pain, but discounts such pain if it happens on Tuesdays. Such a person, if given a choice between slight pain on Monday and severe pain on Tuesday, prefers the latter to the former. Parfit appears to have convinced Singer, contra Hume, that this is an objectively irrational preference.

For some this might not sound like a major shift, but especially because he must now find a way to *ground* such objectivity, this is a major shift for Peter Singer. For now, he apparently sides with Parfit in claiming that objective judgements are justified by rational intuition. We come to see certain objective ethical truths, says Singer, 'in something like the way in which we come to see that two plus two equals four'. Indeed, 'insofar as we are rational beings, we will respond to the reasons that morality offers'.⁴⁵ But once one opens the door to objectivity in one's moral theory, it is quite difficult to limit its place. And Singer now appears on the verge of accepting theoretical claims about objective moral value in ways that were unthinkable just a few years ago.

Indeed there are several contexts in which preference utilitarianism, without some reference to objective moral value, fails to give satisfactory answers. Here is a list, the first three of which Singer himself admits are problematic:⁴⁶

1. Deciding whether or not to bring a new being into the world to replace another;
2. Deciding if the world is better off with people or without;
3. Discovering our moral duties to distant future people;

⁴⁵ Peter Singer, 'The Most Significant Work in Ethics Since 1873', *Times Literary Supplement* (20 May 2011).

⁴⁶ For an argument for each of these, see Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics*, ch. 6.

4. Resolving a conflict between satisfying current preferences and future preferences;
5. Deciding which kinds of future preferences to permit or create in someone;
6. Finding a basis for ordering preferences such that one preference trumps another preference.

Could Singer really accept a moral theory with the kind of moral objectivity necessary to answer these problems? Interestingly, Singer claims that the following are examples of 'the good life':

- Close personal relationships, in particular living in loving companionship with someone who understands you and with whom you can enjoy an intellectual as well as an emotional and physical relationship
- Understanding, defending, and passing on to others the highest and most humane ideas of wisdom, goodness, and beauty that can be gathered from thousands of years of human literature, philosophy, and art.⁴⁷

At least as they are articulated here, these claims go well beyond what preference utilitarianism alone can offer us.

And this might be just the beginning. Singer, I believe, must invoke specific and normative metaphysical claims about the flourishing and happiness of human beings in order to rank various preferences, decide which future preferences to permit or create, and try to discover what will promote the well-being of distant future people. To his credit, even at this late point in his career, he appears to be on the metaphysical path to facing up to these difficult questions. It is likely to be a path that will force him to rethink many things – including his moral anthropology. If we need to consider something beyond preferences when determining what is in the best interests of a person, then we must reject a moral anthropology which understands the human person as merely a placeholder for a bundle of contingent preferences. And if objective goods are required for the flourishing and happiness of a human person, and we are required to see these goods over time within his understanding of a 'coherent life plan',⁴⁸ then how far away are we from talking about a person as a 'kind of thing' – as a *substance with a nature* – that persists through time? As we have seen above, if Singer could ever accept the claim that a person is a substance with a nature – rather than a bundle of contingent preferences – then much of the most serious disagreement with Christian ethics melts away.

⁴⁷ Peter Singer, *Pushing Time Away* (London: Granta, 2005), 242.

⁴⁸ Singer, *Practical Ethics* (2011), 290.

Of course, one reason why Singerites are loath to venture into these deep metaphysical waters is that they seem pretty close to going off the deep end into theism, or something like it. But the postmodern academic world has provided the groundwork for the revival of theology as a serious academic discipline given postmodernism's insistence that faith-based first principles ultimately drive the narrative when any of us, secular or religious, ascribe meaning to the molecules bouncing about the universe.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as John Hare has pointed out, a Singerian utilitarianism might actually *require* something like traditional Christian beliefs. If one decides to forgo the level of 'moral rules' in favour of the 'critical level' of explicitly utilitarian moral reasoning this 'requires complete information and complete impartiality'.⁵⁰ Indeed, R.M. Hare speaks about the human person at this level of reasoning as taking the perspective of 'the archangel' – a being who 'has the unlimited impartiality and unlimited information necessary to carry out critical thinking successfully'.⁵¹ Singer appears to require this as well:

Occasionally, however, we will find ourselves in situations in which we are able to think clearly, calmly, and in a manner sufficiently free from bias, and in which, thinking in this mode, we can see that following the usual moral rules will not have the best consequences.⁵²

But our finite and flawed human natures appear to prohibit us from ever having anything even approaching this capacity. Our finitude limits us such that we cannot meaningfully imagine the total impact of our actions on the flourishing of others – especially over dozens or hundreds of years. And John Hare also points out that we cannot hope to take 'the point of view of the universe' due in part to the human capacity for self-deception:

For example, I may magnify the intensity of my own preferences, so that they outweigh the preferences of others in the moral calculus; or I may cloak self-interest in the disguise of normative principles with the appearance of objectivity.⁵³

Many secular approaches to ethics have Singer's moral requirement to turn from a self-interested point of view to an ethical one which takes something like the point of view of the universe. But Henry Sidgwick, a man who

⁴⁹ See in particular the following works: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Jeffery Stout, *The Flight from Authority* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ John Hare, *The Moral Gap* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 19. ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵² Reply by Peter Singer in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffrey A. Schaler (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2009), 456.

⁵³ Hare, *Moral Gap*, 25.

Singer describes as ‘the greatest of all utilitarians’, claimed that such a turn required religious belief.⁵⁴ And if the views of Sidgwick and John Hare are correct, then something like the power of God’s providence and grace is necessary to jump the ‘moral gap’ that exists between what many like Singer claim we ought to do and what we actually can do in light of our finite and flawed human nature. Indeed, if ‘ought implies can’ then non-theists who argue for the ‘oughtness’ of taking something like Singer’s point of view of the universe should provide an explanation for how it is possible for human persons to take such a view. In what many would no doubt consider to be an ironic twist, it may turn out that one must hold something like traditional Christian beliefs in order to accept the practical possibility of preference utilitarianism.⁵⁵ Yet another tantalizing area for conversation between Peter Singer and Christian ethics.

Conclusion

Even if one is sceptical about the more optimistic goals laid out in this essay, at the very least we can move beyond our current polarized discourse. Many Christians share with Singerites a deep commitment to the flourishing of persons and all of creation, and we can therefore work together on issues where there is overlapping consensus: ecological devastation, duties to the poor, and the dignity of non-human animals. We can have important discussions and debates about what counts as human flourishing and the best principles for getting there. We can continue to sharpen the arguments of the issues that divide us, and work toward coherency in our public discourse on these matters.

If those who take Singer’s approach are united in the spirit of intellectual solidarity with the Church, and vice versa, I submit that we will see a fundamental trajectory in common. There is indeed a need for a Copernican revolution, but rather than reacting primarily against a disproportionate focus on the human person as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, the revolution should instead react against Western culture’s disproportionate focus on the human person *as a consuming, private,*

⁵⁴ See Peter Singer and John Hare, ‘Moral Mammals’ in *A Place for Truth*, ed. Dallas Willard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 186. Singer also claimed that Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* is ‘quite possibly the greatest treatise on ethics that has ever been written’. He also claims that the question of whether Sidgwick actually believed in a God is something that ‘scholars still discuss’.

⁵⁵ Though they do not need to be Christian beliefs, per se. Interestingly, at the opening session of the Oxford conference, Singer admitted that he ‘regrets’ not having a god to ground an answer to the question: why be moral?

and supposedly autonomous individual. Both Singer and the Church can and should move together against this understanding of the secular Enlightenment⁵⁶ – especially as it runs counter to the other-centredness which both Singer and the Church believe is essential to leading an ethical life. Both can and should join their efforts to create *new lifestyles* which run counter to our culture's obsession with hyper-autonomy and consumerism. These two values (far more than God, love, or maximizing preference satisfaction), sadly, appear to form the sources of our ultimate concern in the secular West.

⁵⁶ Singer faults the Enlightenment's move away from Roman Catholicism for our culture's attitude of indifference toward the global poor. See Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1995), 59–74.

PART II

Theoretical issues

*Morality, happiness, and Peter Singer**John Hare*

In this essay I will try to trace a genealogy, tying Peter Singer's reflections about the relation of morality to happiness to a certain tradition of reflection about this relation. I will point out the connections of this tradition to a set of thoughts about God's role in maintaining the relation. I will then return to Singer and ask the question of what the elimination of this set of thoughts has done to the shape of his moral theory as a whole.

First, I will need to distinguish three different kinds of connection that one might draw between God and morality, in order to make it clear that I am talking about only one of these connections. The kind of connection I am interested in is what I will call a 'providential' connection, that God runs the universe in such a way that moral goodness and happiness are consistent. But I want to distinguish this from two other kinds of connection. First, someone might want to claim that there is a connection of justification, that in answer to the question, 'Why should I be moral?' or 'Why should I take the demand of morality to be a demand upon *me*?', we could say, 'Because God commands it', or 'Because humans are in the image of God', or some such thing. I myself want to defend such a line of justification, but that is not my topic in this essay. Another kind of connection someone might try to draw is a connection of implementation, that God enables us by grace to live in the way God requires, and that we are unable to do so entirely by our own devices. This is a topic I have addressed in my own writing under the heading 'the moral gap'. Again, this is a connection that is full of interest, but one that I will not address in the present essay. I should add one more thing I am not going to talk about, because the title of the essay might be misleading. I am not going to talk about whether morality should be defined in terms of a principle that requires us, as Mill says, to aim at the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or whether we should redefine the basic utilitarian principle in terms of preference satisfaction, or some objective list of human goods.

Singer does not want to bring God in to play any of these three roles, as either providence, or justification, or implementation by grace. He wants, he says, 'to treat ethics as entirely independent of religion'.¹ What does he think is the connection between morality and happiness? I do not claim to have read everything he has written, let alone the voluminous secondary literature. An additional complication is that he is in the process of changing his mind about one of the key principles he initially accepted, namely the principle, from Hume, that in practical reasoning we start from something wanted and that therefore any attempted demonstration of ethics from reason alone fails. Singer has been persuaded by reading Derek Parfit's *On What Matters* that some form of moral realism may be correct. As I read him, however, he is still committed to rejecting an argument sometimes attributed to Kant, though I think Kant does not actually make it, that the requirement of universalizability follows from our nature as reasoning agents.² Second, Singer accepts from Sidgwick the principle that

'I am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational actions for an individual.'³

The target here is an argument by Thomas Nagel that seeing myself as merely one person among others is required by rationality in the same way as seeing the present in my own life as merely one time among others.

Singer accepts that there is no argument from the concept of morality, or from the concept of happiness, that guarantees that the two will go together. We cannot, for example, reduce happiness to the result of virtue, or reduce virtue to the means to happiness. Suppose we accept that morality requires taking what Sidgwick calls 'the point of view of the universe', and does not allow giving preference to oneself or one's own interests just because they are one's own. Happiness does not consist, as Kant thought the Stoics taught, merely in our doing what this kind of morality requires and knowing that we are so doing, so that the virtuous person can be happy on the rack.⁴ The Stoic view reduces happiness merely to the resultant state of the

¹ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.

² See *ibid.*, 320. 'Rational agents may rationally try to prevent each other from doing what they admit the other is rationally justified in doing.'

³ *Ibid.*, 321–2.

⁴ Singer does not use these labels, and I do not mean here to be giving a historically accurate report of these Hellenistic philosophies. I am taking these conceptions of the Stoics and Epicureans from Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*.

self-conscious virtuous agent, *whatever* it is. But neither can we tie happiness, as Kant thought the Epicureans taught, to our inclinations, and then say that virtue is simply whatever produces our happiness so defined. This reduces virtue merely to the means, *whatever* they are, to happiness. We have to concede that these two things, morality and happiness, are different, and we should resist the attempt to reduce one to the other in either of these traditional ways.

Singer adds that even though we cannot deduce moral obligation from our nature as reasoning beings, there is still a relation between morality and reason, which he describes by the analogy of the 'escalator of reason'.⁵ I start from believing that I have a reason to promote my own interests. But then I shall, as a social being, wish to justify my conduct to others, and as I do so, I shall find that the fact that it is I who benefit from some distribution, for example, and you who lose by it is irrelevant. I will find myself moving towards the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer.⁶ But even so, Singer wants to deny, as I understand him, that reason *requires* me to move up the escalator. I may rationally get off it at any point.

I said that I wanted to trace a genealogy. I will proceed, first, by talking about my father, R.M. Hare, who was Singer's doctoral adviser, and whose moral theory, of universal prescriptivism, was very influential in the formation of Singer's own theory. I will call him RMH, and I will focus again on what he says about the connection between morality and happiness. I will do this first from the so-called 'University Discussion' and then from the end of his book *Moral Thinking*.⁷ I will then say something about the conception of God that is operating in these two texts.

In the University Discussion with, among others, Antony Flew and Basil Mitchell, RMH accepts from Flew a version of the verificationist theory of meaning, which has the consequence that we cannot meaningfully *assert* that God exists, since we do not know what *experience* would count as disconfirming this. But he suggests that a religious believer can nonetheless have a 'blik' (roughly, an attitude with which one acts in the world). For example, he describes the blik of a paranoid student, convinced that his teachers (at Oxford, the 'dons') are out to destroy him, and that any apparently kind don is trying to manipulate him into letting down his

⁵ Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 88–124.

⁶ See Roger Crisp, 'Teachers in an Age of Transition', in *Singer and His Critics*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 90–1.

⁷ R.M. Hare, 'The University Discussion', in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955). The discussion took place in 1950. R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

guard. Nothing will count as disconfirming this blik since the student will interpret any experience as consistent with it. Nonetheless, the blik makes a great deal of difference to the student's life. Belief in the regularity of nature is, RMH says, such a blik, because it is itself presupposed in anything we could take as evidence. He then describes his own blik,

which makes me put my confidence in the general non-homicidal tendencies of dons; in my own continued well-being (in some sense of that word that I may not now fully understand) if I continue to do what is right according to my lights; in the general likelihood of people like Hitler coming to a bad end. But perhaps a formulation less inadequate than most is to be found in psalm 75 [where God says]: 'the earth is weak and all the inhabitants thereof: I bear up the pillars of it'.⁸

He repeated and expanded these ideas in the Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion, which he gave at Oxford in 1963, and then the Taylor Lectures at Yale Divinity School in 1968, published under the title 'The Simple Believer'.⁹

In *Moral Thinking* (1981) he is interested in defending the view that 'if we were bringing up a child purely in his own interest, we should try to inculcate into him some *prima facie* moral principles, with the attendant moral feelings'. Parents who have the interests of their children at heart will teach supererogatory principles that go beyond those common to all and those common to particular roles, 'for it does look as if people who set themselves higher moral standards which are within their capacity, or not too far outside it, are in general happier than those who do not set their sights so high'. But this, he says, is an empirical judgement. He concedes that occasions will arise in which the saints' or heroes' principles will require them to make very great sacrifices.

In that case, if the cause is a good one, we shall admire them, and perhaps, significantly, even wish that we were more like them; but we are not required to say . . . that they were acting *on that occasion* in their own interest . . . It may be that the best sort of person to try to become is one who on such rare occasions will act contrary to his own interest in real truth and not, as he often will, merely seem on the surface to be doing that.

So if parents educate their children to admire and practise virtue, they may be bringing it about that in some unlikely contingencies their children have to pay a very high price. Even so, he thinks, the parents should bring up

⁸ R.M. Hare, 'The University Discussion', 103.

⁹ R.M. Hare, 'The Simple Believer', in *Religion and Morality*, ed. G. Outka and J.P. Reeder (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973).

their children that way, because it is usually the case that people who are so brought up are happy. But this judgement depends on empirical assumptions about the way the world goes. He is not here talking about the afterlife:

but, confining ourselves to this world, we have, if morality is to be a viable enterprise, to believe that if we adopt moral purposes and principles, we stand a reasonable chance of carrying them out and not perishing uselessly in the process. [Here he refers back to the Taylor Lectures.] And I myself would bring up any children that I had charge of accordingly.

It is fun to quote this as the product of this declared intention. He goes on, 'This is the secular equivalent (or not perhaps so secular) of seeing that they are, as the Marriage Service puts it, "christianly and virtuously brought up".'¹⁰

I want to say a word about the question of what conception of God is operating in these texts. In a word, the answer is Butler's God, but to explain that I need to say more by way of background. In *Moral Thinking*, RMH uses the notion of an archangel, who is a model of the highest kind of moral thinking, to which we try to approximate. The archangel has 'superhuman powers of thought, superhuman knowledge and no human weaknesses'.¹¹ Archangels are supposedly sexless, but I will use the feminine pronoun in what follows, in order to distinguish her from RMH. She is completely informed about the preferences of all the parties affected by the decisions she makes, and about what would satisfy those preferences, and is completely impartial between those parties. The archangel has two sorts of decisions to make. The first is what to do, situation by situation, and she accomplishes this by a preference-satisfaction version of act-utilitarianism, which RMH calls 'critical thinking'. The second kind of decision is what intuitions or principles *we* should live by when we are not doing critical thinking, but what he calls 'intuitive thinking'. She accomplishes this task by asking about candidate principles whether, if they were generally adopted, people would be better off (this is the 'general acceptance utility' of the principle). But talking about an archangel is just a ruse, here, for not talking about God; and it is an inadequate ruse, for not all archangels, in the tradition, are reliably impartial in this way. Elsewhere, RMH makes it clear that he is in fact talking about God. Most Christians, he says, will think 'that God has, and we have to a much more limited degree, the means

¹⁰ Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 203–5. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

(rational moral thinking) wherewith to resolve at the critical level conflicts which arise at the intuitive'.¹²

RMH accepts Butler's conception of God, but objects to Butler's account of revelation and conscience, and to the accompanying idea of religion as 'submission and resignation to the divine will'.¹³ RMH wants us to *work out* what to do, at both the intuitive level and the critical level, and to do so using the idea of a being without our usual human limitations. If we think we cannot do critical thinking at all, 'we shall have to invoke a Butlerian God to do it for us, and reveal the results through our consciences. But how then would we distinguish between the voice of God and the voices of our nursemaids (if we had them)?'¹⁴ In this passage, RMH is objecting to a merely passive account of our relation to God's directions for our lives. But leaving aside Butler's account of revelation, Butler's God is just the right kind of God to play the role of a model of our own critical moral thinking. Butler says, 'it is manifest that the common virtues, and the common vices of mankind, may be traced up to benevolence, or the want of it. And this entitles the precept, *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*, to the pre-eminence given to it; and is a justification of the Apostle's assertion, that all other commandments are comprehended in it.' For humans, he concedes, stating what virtue and right behaviour consist in requires cautions and restrictions. But, 'in a higher and more general way of consideration, leaving out the particular nature of creatures, and the particular circumstances in which they are placed, benevolence seems in the strictest sense to include in it all that is good and worthy; all that is good, which we have any distinct particular notion of. We have no clear conception of any positive moral attribute in the supreme being, but what may be resolved up into goodness.'¹⁵ C.D. Broad comments about this, and similar passages, that Butler's position is that

God may be a Utilitarian, though this is no reason for our being so. It may be that God's sole ultimate motive is to maximize the total amount of happiness in the universe. But, even if this be the only thing of which he approves as an end, he has so made us that we directly approve of other tendencies beside benevolence, e.g. justice and truth-telling. And he has provided us with the faculty of conscience, which tells us that it is our duty to act in accordance with these principles no matter whether such action seems to us likely to increase the general happiness or not.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, 34. ¹³ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*, Sermon XV.

¹⁴ Hare, *Moral Thinking*, 45–6. ¹⁵ Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, Sermon XII.

¹⁶ C.D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, 1930), 81–2.

Following Broad's account of Butler, which RMH knew well, RMH accepted the account of God's moral thinking, but rejected the account of conscience.¹⁷

Butler's God is in another way a model of critical moral thinking. RMH's proof of utilitarianism in *Moral Thinking* works, he claims, for 'basic' preferences, namely preferences now for what I experience now, and preferences later for what I experience later, and for the sympathetic forms of those preferences, but it does not work for what he calls 'ideal preferences', namely for what should occur whether I experience it or not, and whether I continue to desire it or not. About these sorts of preferences RMH says that he has not been able to integrate them into his theory.¹⁸ Here Singer is more thoroughgoing, at least in his contribution to *Hare and Critics*, denying the moral purchase of these ideal preferences.¹⁹ He may be changing in this respect back to a position more like that of RMH, in the sense that he is now, like RMH, uncertain what to say about them.²⁰ In any case, Butler's God is not in the same difficulty, because if there are desire-independent preferences of this kind, this God will know whether the satisfaction of them is good, and this will be included in his benevolence.

I myself have defended a Butlerian conception of God's benevolence in *God and Morality*, where I said:

God is a kind of consequentialist. Saying this will not endear me to some of my natural allies in the project of this book, but perhaps it will be less offensive after I explain what I mean. God has a route for each one of us towards the final good for each of us, which is a particular kind of union with God (a way of loving God unique to each person). This route will require loving a subset of the infinite number of good things that draw humans to God, and will also require rejecting a different subset. This is true both for the common route for humans (if there is one) and the particular route for each of us. Theism helps with the problem of seeing how the routes for each person could be coordinated in such a way that they reach to the final good of the whole of creation, or (in theological language) the Kingdom of God.²¹

¹⁷ I prepared this essay using RMH's copy of Broad, containing his notes.

¹⁸ See RMH's reply to Alan Gibbard in Douglas Seanor and N. Fotion (eds), *Hare and Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 233–4. Gibbard shows that archangels may not all have the same ideal preferences, and that RMH's proof of utilitarianism does not accommodate this part of moral thinking at all.

¹⁹ Peter Singer, 'Reasoning towards Utilitarianism', in *Hare and Critics*, 147–59.

²⁰ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xiii. 'I am now more ready to entertain – although not yet embrace – the idea that there are objective ethical truths that are independent of what anyone desires.'

²¹ John E. Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 273–4.

I want now to go back before RMH in the genealogy, but more briefly, to Henry Sidgwick, and then to J.S. Mill. Sidgwick is, I think, and Singer agrees, the greatest of the utilitarians.²² In his *Methods of Ethics*, he distinguished three methods, each of which claims to be self-evident: intuitionism (which is, roughly, the common-sense morality that some things, like deliberate ingratitude to a benefactor, are wrong in themselves independently of their consequences), egoistic hedonism (the view that an individual ought to aim at a maximum balance of happiness for herself, where this is understood as the greatest balance of pleasure over pain), and utilitarianism, or universalistic hedonism (the view that she ought to aim at the maximum balance of happiness for all sentient beings present and future, whatever the cost to herself). Of these three, he rejected the first, on the grounds that no concrete ethical principles are self-evident, and that when they conflict (as they do) we have to take consequences into account in order to decide what to do. But he found the relation between the other two methods more problematic. Each principle separately seemed to him self-evident, but taken together they seemed mutually inconsistent.

Sidgwick considered two solutions, one psychological and the other metaphysical. The psychological solution was to bring in the pleasures and pains of sympathy with others' pleasures and pains, so that if we do good to all we end up (because of these sympathetic pleasures) making ourselves happiest. Sidgwick rejected this on the basis that sympathy is inevitably limited in its range, and we feel it most towards those closest to us. The result is that even if we include sympathetic pleasures and pains under egoism, it will tend to increase the divergence between egoistic and utilitarian conduct, rather than bring them closer together. The metaphysical solution was to bring in a god who desires the greatest total good of all living things and will reward and punish in accordance with this desire. C.D. Broad, in the work from which I have already quoted, describes this being as 'a celestial Jeremy Bentham (if we may use the expression with becoming reverence)'.²³ Sidgwick recognized this as a return to the utilitarianism of William Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, in which Paley argues that God being just and benevolent must have so ordered the world that happiness will in the long run be distributed in proportion to virtue.²⁴ Sidgwick thought this solution was both necessary

²² Peter Singer and John Hare, 'Moral Mammals', in *A Place for Truth*, ed. Dallas Willard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 169–94, especially 186.

²³ Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, 160.

²⁴ Compare pages 121 and 504 of Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn (London: Macmillan, 1907).

and sufficient to remove the contradiction in ethics – but this was only a reason to accept it if, in general, it is reasonable to accept certain principles (such as the uniformity of nature) that are not self-evident and that cannot be proved but ‘we have a strong disposition to accept them, and . . . they are indispensable to the systematic coherence of our beliefs’.²⁵ Sidgwick did not commit himself on this one way or the other.

Finally it is worth going back to Mill on this point. Mill famously had a nervous collapse at the age of twenty, and a prolonged period of what he called ‘melancholy’. He subsequently came to see (during ‘a later period of the same malady’) that Coleridge had diagnosed his condition in these lines: ‘Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve / And hope without an object cannot live.’ Mill realized that his education had neglected the cultivation of feeling, of which *hope* is a crucial instance. He finally emerged from the gloom when he read Wordsworth, especially ‘Intimations of Immortality’. The famous passages (e.g. ‘But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home’) Mill calls ‘passages of grand imagery but bad philosophy’. But he rejoiced to find someone who had experienced the same disappearance of youthful enthusiasm and yet had found compensation in tranquil contemplation.²⁶ In his *Three Essays on Religion* (published posthumously in 1874) he returned to the idea of hope, saying that ‘the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible’. Without such hope, we are kept down by ‘the disastrous feeling of “not worth while”’.²⁷ Mill could not believe, however, that God was omnipotent, given all the evil in the world, and he insisted, like Kant (but I have resolved not to talk about Kant), that we must be God’s co-workers, not merely passive recipients of God’s assistance.

I could go on with this genealogy. It would be illuminating to look at Hume, for example, and Hutcheson. But I think what I have said is enough to make my point. There is a pattern of thought in these texts that I have been referring to. The first part of this pattern is to recognize that happiness and morality are separate, and independently rational. This is slightly disguised in the case of Mill, because of his notorious ‘moral mathematics’ in the fourth chapter of *Utilitarianism*.²⁸ But he too ascribes initial rationality to the consideration of self-interest. The second part is to concede that

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 509. ²⁶ J.S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), ch. 5.

²⁷ J.S. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (1874), Essay III (‘Theism’), Part V.

²⁸ See Crisp, ‘Teachers in an Age of Transition’, 88–91.

in this world the two can come apart. The third part is to appeal to a hope in a providential ordering to keep the two ultimately together.

Singer and I discussed the question of what happens when theism is discarded from this picture in a debate that was published in 2010, and I think it will be worth quoting his answer at some length. He said,

Let me say that I do accept that there are problems caused by the fact that I cannot believe in what John called the ‘governance of the universe.’ As I see it, we cannot appeal to God in order to produce the reconciliation of morality and happiness.

He goes on to mention Sidgwick’s suggestion of a theological postulate and emphasizes, as I agree, that Sidgwick does not endorse the postulate but merely says that it would, if endorsed, solve the problem. Then Singer goes on to the question I asked about justification, why, in difficult situations, we should accept the demand of morality as a demand upon *us*. He says,

I don’t think that there’s a single answer to that question. I think we can find partial answers in some of the things that were mentioned. We can find, as Sidgwick said, partial answers in the benevolent affections that we have for others. But they very rarely lead us to act completely impartially. We can find a kind of self-interested answer in terms of finding our lives fulfilling or rewarding, what the ancients called ‘the paradox of hedonism,’ which seems to me to go some way towards showing that it is in our interest, broadly conceived, to live ethically. If we live in a narrowly self-interested way, pursuing our own happiness, our own pleasures, we’re not actually likely to find the deeper satisfaction or fulfillment that makes us regard our lives as really good ones. Only if we aim for larger purposes, which may or may not be ethical purposes, are we likely to find that kind of fulfillment. So I think that there is something in that as well. But I also have to agree with John that, yes, the non-theist might say that ultimately there is no answer to this question. We make our choices. We may decide to live ethically because that’s what we want to do. We will feel better in ourselves. We will feel that we’ve lived up to our values, that there’s a kind of a harmony in our life. But I can’t give a more definite answer than that.²⁹

I interpret this passage to make an important concession, in three steps. First, that it would be nice to have a way to reconcile morality and happiness, and to justify the moral demand upon us even in difficult circumstances. Second, that the theist does have such ways. Third, that he, Singer, because he is not a theist, ultimately does not have such ways. At

²⁹ Singer and Hare, ‘Moral Mammals’, 186–7.

the conference to which the present essay was given, where Singer was present, he did not take this concession back.

I will end by returning to RMH's notion of a 'blik'. The attitude that the world in my circumstances is hospitable to my being both morally good and happy is not the usual kind of empirical belief. The analogy with the belief in the regularity of the causal order is a helpful one; this belief is already presupposed in anything that we could take as evidence, and therefore is not itself based on evidence. Singer puts a similar point about the *moral* life in terms of the paradox of hedonism. Once we have adopted the aspiration to a morally good life as our own life-policy, this changes what we take to be satisfying or fulfilling. This means that there is not a neutral set of satisfactions that remains constant, and is the basis for the policy. I want to end with a point about this very choice or adoption of policy. I believe it helps with the maintenance of this policy of trying to be a morally good person, especially in difficult circumstances, if it is *itself* a by-product of something else, in the same way that pleasure or satisfaction is a by-product of a morally good life, according to the paradox of hedonism, and is self-defeating if it is the direct end. I am repeating here the structure of Kierkegaard's three stages of life.³⁰ Morality is most stable if it is not itself the direct aim. This is because we do not have, in morality itself, either the resources to live adequately by the demand, or the resources to forgive ourselves and others when we fail, or the resources to hope that we are, so to speak, on the winning even side even when things look hopeless. RMH thought the best way to express his blik about morality and happiness was in theistic terms. My suggestion is that by thinking of ourselves as following a God who sustains the moral order of the world, we gain resources for actually living in a way that fits that order. By taking theism out of the picture, we lose those resources, and the attempt to live that way becomes unstable in a way it was not before.³¹ I know that theism also brings with it all sorts of dangers of fanaticism and superstition. But the question of how to believe in God while overcoming those dangers belongs in another essay.

³⁰ In *The Concept of Anxiety* by Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis, 'second ethics' is ethics 'repeated' in the religious stage, and it overcomes the failure of 'first ethics', as expressed in the life of Judge William in *Either/Or*. See Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 20–1.

³¹ See Frans de Waal: 'On the other hand, what would happen if we were able to excise religion from society? I doubt that science and the naturalistic worldview could fill the void and become an inspiration for the good', 'Opinionator', *New York Times* (17 October 2010). The term 'unstable' is taken from Kant's *Lectures on Natural Theology*.

*Moral reason, community belonging,
and global justice*

Lisa Sowle Cahill

I approach this engagement with Peter Singer from a particular standpoint and context – and the relevance of standpoint, context, and practices to moral knowing is part of the argument I want to make. I believe that moral insight arises not from abstract reason or reasoning alone, but from practical reason at work in the contingencies of life, where it is always progressive, interactive, interpersonal, and political. Practical reason, personal relationships, community belonging, experiences of good and evil, affective and cognitive responses, and the human capacity to imagine different possibilities, all go into the moral life along with moral reason. Hence they are also components of ethics, considered as the reflective, systematic, and normative interpretation of moral experience.

Yet Peter Singer's primary model of moral epistemology takes its lead from analytic philosophy, and treats moral discourse as a matter of abstract analysis of concepts, propositions, and logical chains of argument. Critics – Roman Catholic or otherwise – often cede to Singer the methodological playing ground, and so reply with similar analyses of complicated matters such as the meaning of 'personhood' and the relative moral status of persons and non-persons. It is surely true that clear thinking is necessary to a coherent ethic, and to the determination of good and evil in concrete circumstances. Nevertheless, moral knowledge and judgement also require empathy, imagination, vision, and the support of a community of moral practices. To allude to epistemological dimensions beyond pure reason does not equate to moral relativism or a social constructivist approach. Rather, it is to acknowledge that human perspectives on 'objective reality' are always situated and partial, and that access to moral truth follows a multidimensional route.

In this essay, I present moral reason as practical in character, and display how it operates in Singer's own work and that of the nineteenth-century utilitarians. Singer and Catholics disagree about how to define justice, quality, and personhood not only because they find different arguments

intellectually cogent and persuasive, but because they are situated in different communities and traditions of thought and practice. I propose further that the main ethical contribution of Christianity derives from the fact that it is not only a set of beliefs or teachings but more fundamentally a way of life in relation to God and neighbours. Its distinctive moral power is to disclose, emphasize, and sensitize human beings to the worth, suffering, and happiness of all people; and, in Christ and the Spirit, to manifest, inspire, enable, and support compassionate action that begins in the Church and expands beyond. In support of this thesis, I will compare Singer's utilitarian teleology to the teleological ethics of Thomas Aquinas, and show how a later branch of Catholic moral theology, called proportionalism, is similar to and different from both.

Singer's philosophical approach

The first sentence of Peter Singer's 'Intellectual Autobiography' remarks, 'It is strange to think how easily our lives could have followed entirely different paths. If my sister had fallen in love with a different man, or I had had a different adviser when I enrolled at Melbourne University, I might never have become a philosopher.'¹ Singer's preference for rationalistic philosophy is itself indebted to his particular schooling and early intellectual history. He recounts how during his undergraduate years at the University of Melbourne there was 'an ongoing campus debate about the existence of God', in which philosophy students were avid participants. Christians devised innovative intellectual versions of, for example, the ontological argument, while atheists 'delighted in refuting whatever the Christians could put up'. Joining the latter side, Singer became a member of the Rationalist Society, attacking fallacies in theistic argumentation, and dismissing any notion that only faith, not reason, is either necessary or sufficient for the recognition of God's existence.² (Singer also mentions that he was brought up in a non-religious Jewish home, a perhaps relevant contextual factor.)

At Oxford, Singer enjoyed the mentorship of R.M. Hare, who in *The Language of Morals* championed rational argumentation in ethics against emotivist theories.³ Hare supervised most of Singer's work at Oxford and is recalled by his student as 'a lofty and intimidating figure with a reputation for

¹ Peter Singer, 'An Intellectual Autobiography', in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffrey A. Schaler (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2009), 1–74.

² *Ibid.*, 6. ³ R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

dealing severely with those he considered muddled . . .⁴ It is not surprising that Singer came to base his own work primarily on the conviction, hardly in itself to be disputed, that ‘clarity and consistency in our moral thinking is likely, in the long run, to lead us to hold better views on ethical issues’.⁵

The end to which Singer’s philosophical reasoning leads him is the moral principle of utilitarianism: pursuing the greatest good for the greatest number. Classical utilitarianism, like Singer, appealed to reason in order to demolish common moral assumptions and attitudes. More deeply, and again like Singer, it was inspired by a passion for political and social reform. Nineteenth-century utilitarianism repudiated the inequities born of European class systems and, in the wake of the American and French revolutions, and during the age of the industrial revolution and of Karl Marx, sought to abolish the idea that the happiness of the ruling classes matters more than that of low-paid labourers. In 1820 James Mill, father of the foremost utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill, wrote,

The end to be obtained, through government as the means, is to make that distribution of the scanty materials of happiness which would insure the greatest sum of it in the members of the community taken altogether; and to prevent every individual, or combination of individuals, from interfering with that distribution, or making any man to have less than his share.⁶

The elder Mill’s agenda converges in interesting ways with that of the first modern Catholic social encyclical, written by Leo XIII later in the same century:

As regards the State, the interests of all, whether high or low, are equal. The members of the working classes are citizens by nature and by the same right as the rich; they are real parts, living the life which makes up, through the family, the body of the commonwealth; and it need hardly be said that they are in every city very largely in the majority. It would be irrational to neglect one portion of the citizens and favor another, and therefore the public administration must duly and solicitously provide for the welfare and the comfort of the working classes; otherwise, that law of justice will be violated which ordains that each man shall have his due.⁷

Yet pontifical social thought was not only more accepting than Mill and Marx of social hierarchies, it was more careful to define the common good in terms of the participation of every member of society. ‘The civil power must not serve the advantage of any one individual or of some few persons,

⁴ Singer, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, 14.

⁵ Peter Singer, ‘Interview: Peter Singer’, in *Heilpädagogik Online* 1:3 (2007): 53.

⁶ James Mill, *Essay on Government* (1820), §10. ⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §33.

inasmuch as it was established for the common good of all.⁸ Warrants within the evolving tradition included the creation of all humans in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), Jesus' care for 'the least of these' (Matthew 25:40), Aquinas's defence of the inviolability of innocent life,⁹ and a narrowing assessment of abortion as a violation of the same.¹⁰ The utilitarians resisted exploitation of the poor in more radical terms than did the Church, but did not build in a principle whereby the basic rights of all are protected, perhaps because they did not envision abrogating the rights of the weak, but rather correcting the depredations of the strong.

In his landmark essay, 'Utilitarianism', John Stuart Mill proposes that the basis of all moral action is happiness, and that actions are right or wrong in terms of their effect on the aggregate amount and extent of human happiness, not that of the privileged classes. Mill defines happiness as pleasure, but understands pleasure inclusively as the achievement of worthwhile human goals, and the satisfaction taken in virtuous living. In addition, according to Mill, nobility of character contributes to the happiness of others and to human welfare in general, and even to the happiness 'of the whole sentient creation'.¹¹ In Mill's view, utilitarian philosophy seeks to form moral character in accord with 'the feeling of unity with our fellow creatures'. This, he continues, is part of our nature and 'it cannot be doubted that Christ intended it to be' this way.¹²

The problem of justice as equality

For Mill, the principle of justice cannot be construed independently of the principle of utility. Justice *means* expediency in increasing the total good; justice is not a separate principle of fair distribution. Nor is it a principle of inviolable dignity or 'rights', such that every person is entitled to a share in the basic goods of life and to life itself. To quote Mill, 'All persons are deemed to have a right to equality of treatment, except when some recognized social expediency requires the reverse.' For Mill, 'justice' is the appropriate name for 'certain social utilities which are vastly more important, and therefore more absolute and imperative, than any others are as a class'.¹³

It is admittedly difficult to define and quantify what is or is not true human happiness; and what Mill defined as its opposite, pain, can also carry

⁸ Quoted in John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), §56. ⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q64.

¹⁰ Martin Rhonheimer, *Vital Conflicts in Medical Ethics: A Virtue Approach to Craniotomy and Tubal Pregnancies* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), ch. 2. ¹² *Ibid.*, ch. 3. ¹³ *Ibid.*

positive human significance and be a necessary price of the achievement of happiness. Yet the most common and seemingly decisive objection to utilitarianism is not lack of clarity in the happiness criterion, but the fact that for utilitarians the irreducible moral equality of persons does not eventuate in equal entitlement to basic human goods, especially the good of life.

The early utilitarians envisioned social reform in the direction of bringing the happiness of the rich into line with the happiness of the masses, but did not advocate actually putting rich people to death if the general welfare would thereby benefit. Modern utilitarians like Singer, however, take the aggregate happiness principle to its logical conclusion. They attract the ire of pro-lifers by specifically mentioning, not killing the rich, but the undeveloped or diminished members of the species. To deprive one person of life to maximize the happiness of a greater number is in the eyes of critics a clear affront to justice as fairness.

Yet we must credit Singer for retaining and reinforcing the priorities of his forebears, namely, to diminish the human suffering that results from unaccountable privilege, apathy, and greed; and to extend this agenda to 'all sentient creatures', or at least the higher-functioning ones. Singer does not limit moral concern to human beings. We should count the suffering of sentient beings equally, although capacities to remember the past and envision the future, to be self-conscious, to reason, and to love can affect the degree of suffering or happiness of which a being is capable.¹⁴ Singer has been an ardent advocate of the rights of animals, whose misery it is as easy for humans to ignore as it was for the robber barons to disregard debtors in prison or children in factories.

The equality problem is illustrated in the 'classic' case cited by Singer in his 'intellectual autobiography'. In this case a sheriff prevents a white mob from lynching six black men by untruthfully identifying one man as certainly guilty of the crime of which all have been accused. As a result, only one innocent man is killed, instead of six.¹⁵ According to Singer, from 'the ethical point of view', everyone should realize that 'I am just one person among the many', and 'my interests are no more important', or those 'of my society' more important, than those of other people and societies.¹⁶

¹⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 50, 247–48.

¹⁵ Singer, 'Intellectual Autobiography', 5. The case is provided by Singer's teacher at the University of Melbourne, H.J. McCloskey, who believed that 'the role of philosophers is to produce arguments that can resolve' substantive questions in ethics.

¹⁶ Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 93.

Like Mill, Singer believes in a principle of universalizability based on recognition of the interests of all as counting equally. For Singer, 'the principle of equal consideration of interests' is a variety of 'the principle that all humans are equal', even though it 'does not dictate equal treatment'.¹⁷ (Human beings who are not and never have been conscious are regarded as having no interests to consider.¹⁸ For Singer, life as such has no inherent value. Its value is instrumental in relation to the degree of happiness a sentient being can achieve.) The principle of equality interpreted as equal consideration of interests does not mean that one may never be sacrificed for the many, but the principle of equality in such cases is fully respected only when all agree that one must be sacrificed, and the victim is chosen by lots.¹⁹ All are then equal in their exposure to the risk of death for the general welfare.

This obviously is unacceptable to those who believe human equality entails the inviolability at least of innocent human life. Nevertheless, I venture that in the case of a practical life-versus-life dilemma with no good options, there are many advocates of the right to life who would forbear passing moral judgement on one who resolved the tragedy in favour of the lesser loss of life. And it must be admitted that not all who defend the sanctity of innocent life as absolute take with comparable moral seriousness the 'indirect' killing of millions by poverty, war, and preventable disease.

The problem of personhood

Singer's claim that not all humans are persons, but some animals are, is nearly as controversial as his claim that there is no such thing as 'sanctity of life'. Some people may be killed because the death of one serves a preponderance of happiness, redefined by Singer as the fulfilment of 'preferences'. And other humans may be killed because they are not persons. According to Singer, 'We should develop a view of the wrongness of killing that depends on some characteristics of particular beings, rather than their species membership.' It follows that 'the lives of some animals, with higher cognitive capacities, should be regarded more seriously than we do at present, while taking the lives of some human beings, lacking in such capacities, should be seen more permissively'.²⁰

¹⁷ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 13, 22. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁹ Peter Singer, response to conference papers, 'Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer', University of Oxford, 19–20 May 2011.

²⁰ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 34.

A special target of concern to many Catholics is the human embryo, fetus, and infant. Debating Patrick Lee's and Robert George's contention that any member of the human species, even an embryo, is 'a distinct individual with a rational nature', and therefore deserving of protection, Singer asks, 'Given that we all agree that the human embryo cannot reason, has never been able to reason, and will not be able to reason for a long time, is it not more accurate to say that the human embryo is "a distinct individual with the potential to become a rational being"?' An embryo does not have an actual rational nature, but rather the genetic code that may someday allow it to develop one, given the right conditions.²¹ It is not therefore equal to an actually rational individual or 'person'. Thus 'the life of a fetus (and even more plainly that of an embryo) is of no greater value than the life of a nonhuman animal at a similar level of rationality, self-awareness, capacity to feel and so on, and . . . because no fetus is a person, no fetus has the same claim to life as a person'. In addition, these arguments apply just as well to a newborn baby.²²

Singer is not wrong about the weakness of the argument that an embryo must be a rational person just because it is human, whatever its actual capacities. Many Roman Catholic moral theologians and teaching documents defend the personhood of the fetus without actually offering an argument that is philosophically convincing. A case in point is the 2008 statement on the status of the embryo, *Dignitas Personae*, which circularly offers as a premise of the argument the very conclusion to be defended.

Thus the fruit of human generation, from the first moment of its existence, that is to say, from the moment the zygote has formed, demands the unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his bodily and spiritual totality . . . and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life.²³

The disagreement between Singer and the Catholic *magisterium* about who is or is not a person takes us back to the importance of belonging to a community of values and practices which forms one's moral vision. For instance, *Dignitas Personae* backs its arguments about the embryo with references to creation and the Trinity. Singer's own evaluation of personhood is likewise indebted to a certain context and experiences, evident in his account of how he came to appreciate the status of animals. Singer arrived at

²¹ *Ibid.*, 144–5, citing Patrick Lee and Robert George, 'Human-Embryo Liberation: A Reply to Peter Singer', *National Review Online* (25 January 2006).

²² *Ibid.*, 151. ²³ *Dignitas Personae* (2008), §4, citing *Donum Vitae* (1987), §1.

his vegetarian convictions contextually and communally, not just by adopting a ‘moral point of view’. He encountered the example of people who renounced meat, beginning with a fellow graduate student at Oxford, who drew him into a whole community of vegetarians. Singer’s interest in vegetarianism began when his friend Keshan chose salad for lunch over spaghetti with meat.

Singer had more personal support for his vegetarian conversion in the form of his wife Renata, who, he reports, shot holes in his lame excuses and reinforced his determination to resist perceptions of vegetarians as ‘cranks’.²⁴ Together they adopted new rituals (‘Cooking and eating the new vegetarian dishes proved to be fun’), and enjoyed fellowship with ‘the remarkable “Oxford Group” of ethical vegetarians’.²⁵ Networking with a group called ‘Compassion in World Farming’, they set up papier-mâché animals in small wire cages on the Cornmarket, to expand the vegetarian mission and evangelize further converts.

Singer makes a good case for the ‘personhood’ of at least some animals.²⁶ This case does have an empirical as well as a logical or rational component. Some animals, like primates, elephants, and dolphins, have a level of sentience that, on a spectrum, is much closer to humans than to other mammals. Moreover, suffering is suffering and is evil, no matter whose it is. Yet equally important to Singer’s persuasiveness are narratives of animals like Koko the gorilla; chimpanzees Tahu, Julia, and Santino; or Alex the gray parrot.²⁷ These stories provide factual evidence about animal behaviour; they also attract the listener’s attention and affective response.

When we turn from animals as objects of moral concern to fetuses as possibly not, pure reason is similarly inadequate. Though Singer rationally defends the selective homicide of newborns, this is not something that his moral heroes have practised. It is not a practice he seems to have taken up himself. It is not one he enshrines in compelling anecdotes, and not one on which he seems to have a large cadre of followers, especially if one looks beyond rhetoric to implementation.

I am not convinced that there is a purely ‘rational’ argument that can demonstrate or refute the personhood of a fetus. One reason is that, generally speaking, ‘person’ is understood in terms of what is distinctive of or unique to persons, not in terms of minimum criteria for marginal cases. Human beings, angels, and – analogously – God are persons because they possess reason and free will. For example, ‘angels and men, as

²⁴ Singer, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, 17. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95–102.

intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love'.²⁸

Aquinas builds his definition of the natural moral law on what human beings share with other creatures and on what is distinctive. What humans share is experienced reflectively and morally by them because of their uniquely human capacities of intelligence and will. Specifically, humans share with other living creatures a drive towards survival; with animals a drive to mate and bear and raise young; and with other human beings only, a drive to live cooperatively in society (actually true of many animals also), and to 'seek to know the truth about God'.²⁹ But only humans talk about the sanctity of life or a right to life, and discuss morally justified and unjustified killing. Only humans devise systems of family and marriage that they invest with moral and political significance. Only humans live in political society and debate the requirements of just government. Only humans seek to know whether there is a God and what God is like, and desire to be in relationship with God as God may be known.

Aquinas is part of a tradition that understands God by postulating an 'analogy of being' between humans and their divine cause, making it possible to apply analogously to God concepts whose primary content we derive from our experience of human dignity and virtue, e.g. goodness, wisdom, and personhood.³⁰ What is central to the Christian theological tradition on personhood is not the minimum but the maximum of what persons are and are called to be. The discussion of personhood should then not be governed by a pre-existing interest in the status of human individuals whose possession of personal characteristics is at best potential.³¹

Seeking evidence of the value of unborn human life in inherent characteristics alone is a tactic employed by both Singer and pro-lifers. Surely species membership and potentiality are relevant to the way adults consider fetuses. This is why abortions are regretted, even by people who have or approve them. But explaining exactly why genetic humanity or potentiality is important is hard, since an acorn is not indeed an oak. Moreover, despite

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1st edition (1994), §311.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q94, a2.

³⁰ See E. Jennifer Ashworth, 'Medieval Theories of Analogy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 revision), www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/analogy-medieval.

³¹ Perhaps it might be said that, just as human characteristics are analogous to divine ones, as God is their cause, so embryonic characteristics are analogous to human persons who are their progenitors. The argument comparing embryos and human parents with human creatures and the Creator, however, would itself be at best analogous, since not all humans capable of procreating actually have the intelligence and free will that is distinctive of human personhood. God on the other hand possesses these characteristics perfectly.

their humanity and potentiality, most people do not view the natural loss of embryos or early fetuses as equally tragic to stillbirths. In any event, more creative work needs to be done on the ‘personhood’ of unborn human life and of all humans who never have and will not possess a level of intelligence and freedom that is arguably ‘personal’.

Perhaps a productive line of investigation would be to consider how these individuals are part of the human community by participating in its relationships, whatever their individual qualities. As many biblical scholars have argued, and as I agree, the ‘image of God’ in Genesis 1 should be understood in terms of relationships to other human persons and to God, not in terms of the isolated individual.³² Human communities place members in relation to other members, where the strong sometimes bear up the weak. This is a quality we admire and consider noble. Human beings are in relationships to other humans that are different from relationships to non-human species. The ‘covenant’ of our interdependent relationality is extended to individuals who do not exhibit all the species’ distinctive characteristics.

In the end, the moral status of embryos and fetuses is a question I cannot fully answer. Yet I do believe that pro-life philosophers and theologians need to get off the fruitless path of marking boundaries defined in reference to anomalous cases. This approach owes more to the Cartesian and modern scientific ideal of ‘clear and distinct ideas’ than to biblical narratives of compassion for those in danger and of care for the poor.³³

After an extensive and philosophically sophisticated discussion of alternative ways of grounding human rights, including rights for humans who are non-rational or post-rational, religious ethics scholar Grace Kao acknowledges the ‘inability to provide a full or conclusive proof’ of realist strategies of defending universal human rights. Rather, ‘we come to know about the existence of real values in the world the same way we come to know everything else – by reflection and experience’. Neither the idea of human rights, nor that of ‘persons’ in whom they inhere, can be ‘disassociated from the practical context of social life and human interactions’.³⁴ The defence of human rights is at some level dependent on a community of belief and practices. These attune participants to the facets of human

³² See Lisa Sowle Cahill, ‘Creation’, in *Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilander and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7–24.

³³ See Lawrence Nolan, ‘Descartes’ Ontological Argument’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 revision), www.plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/descartes-ontological.

³⁴ Grace Y. Kao, *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 164–5.

existence that are valued and articulated morally as inviolable human personhood and non-derogable human rights.

Practices and narratives form Singer's understanding, not only of who is a person, but of the ends to which humans ought to aspire. In Singer's later writings, he seems to adopt a different approach to happiness than the 'preference utilitarianism' for which he is best known. I think of the chapters in *Practical Ethics*, 'Rich and Poor' and 'Why Act Morally?', and of Singer's biography of his grandfather, *Pushing Time Away*. Here he seems to adopt a more holistic view of life, values, and morality; to use an inductive method (rather than 'impartiality'); to use a 'hortatory' rather than 'analytical' style; and to concentrate his attention on an admirable and satisfying human existence, one that exhibits integrity and brings happiness, despite external threats and suffering (similar to the ancient Greeks and Augustine).

At the conclusion of 'Why Act Morally?', Singer offers that happiness and meaning result only when life is lived with and for others, not just for our own narrow interests. He keeps calling this the morality of 'the moral point of view' as taken by 'an impartial spectator'. But he concedes that the opposite view would not be 'irrational'. He brings his case home not by more thoroughgoing logic, but by invoking the personal and concrete example of his friend and animal activist Henry Spira, who marched for civil rights and taught 'underprivileged kids' in New York city high schools. Dying of cancer, Spira answered the question about what sustained his dedication in these terms: 'I think that one likes to look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others . . . what greater motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering?' Singer grants that his friend's answer does not furnish 'overwhelming reasons' or rational proof that ethics requires of everyone efforts to make the world 'a better place'. However, those reflecting seriously on morality and meaning will be 'most likely to appreciate the reasons Spira offered'.³⁵

Another rich example of a worthy human life is found in Singer's biography of his grandfather, David Oppenheim, a victim of the Holocaust.³⁶ Oppenheim endorsed ten criteria of a worthwhile life taken from Solon, 'the lawgiver of Athens'. They centred on goods contingent on material conditions, luck, and social status, such as one's country's peaceful

³⁵ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 293–5.

³⁶ Peter Singer, *Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna* (New York: Ecco, 2005).

prosperity, a comfortable income, well-behaved children, a quick death before extreme old age, funeral honours, and commemoration by fellow citizens. But Singer revealingly adds two more to commemorate the life of his grandfather: close and loving personal relationships and ‘understanding, defending, and passing on to others the highest and most humane ideas of wisdom, goodness, and beauty that can be gathered from thousands of years of human literature, philosophy, and art’.³⁷

Singer’s standards over Solon’s grasp the moral dimensions of ‘a worthwhile human life’. The route thereto includes narrative, example, and participation in relationships and practices. The resulting practical ethics focuses on commitment to other people and to worthy ends, moral ends, states of character and relationship, and even transcendent goods and goals.

Theological resources

Theology does not provide abstract ‘premises’ for theological ethics; it provides communally grounded understanding of the relations to God and neighbours that constitute (for Christians) the ‘body of Christ’. Theological ethics is normative interpretation of morality from within a religious community, with its particular experiences of God and of humanity before God; and with specific practices (e.g. moral and liturgical) that enact the divine–human relationship and define the community of believers.

The best place for Christian ethics to interact and even join forces with Singer’s ethics is at the level of narratives, practices, and the witness of exemplary lives well lived. Singer’s wife, friends, grandfather, and the communities in which he has learned shared moral commitments that are essential to his moral vision. Some level or sphere of shared life-context is also essential to the persuasive power of his ideals, first to himself and then to his readers and interlocutors.

Likewise, Christian ethics is nourished by biblical narratives, a community of moral and liturgical practices, and the witness of its own exemplary saints. Through symbols and themes such as ‘image of God’, ‘children of God’, ‘Christ died for all’, and ‘preferential option for the poor’, Christians are formed to recognize and respect what modern, liberal thought calls equality and human rights; and what Catholic social teaching calls ‘human dignity’.

³⁷ Singer, *Pushing Time Away*, 242.

The content of Christian ethics is established by Jesus' ministry of the inclusive reign of God, his boundary-breaking table fellowship, and his healings and exorcisms. These relieved human suffering, restored social outcasts to community fellowship, and demonstrated that in Jesus' actions here and now God's kingdom is already arriving ('nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Luke 17:21)). Although Jesus was not a reformer of social institutions, his radical inclusion of sinners, enemies, and the poor did threaten standard hierarchies, threaten religious and political authorities, and undermine their structural control. This is precisely why he was put to death.

Yet Christ is not merely another human being caught up in the Roman imperial machine. This is why Christians later came to confess him as, in some mysterious way, both fully human and divine. Through union with the Spirit in the 'body of Christ', we believe that we partake in Christ's divine nature, are united with God in 'friendship' (Aquinas), and have a share in Christ's resurrection. Therefore we are 'sanctified' – enabled to live in a new way in the present, and to carry resurrection life into all the other communities in which we participate. Spiritual, liturgical, and moral practices enact the experienced reality of salvation from God in Jesus Christ as a reality of transformed relationships.

Today Jesus' ministry of the reign of God and our empowerment by his Spirit require a commitment to global justice that converges in many ways at the practical level with Singer's. In the phrase both of liberation theologians and recent popes, Christian ethics today must be social ethics and involve a 'preferential option for the poor'.³⁸ The preferential option for the poor, or solidarity with the poor, is based on the gospel conviction that all people, even the most socially marginal, have basic human dignity. All persons therefore deserve equal respect and access to the basic goods necessary to survival and a decent life. Catholic social teaching expresses this conviction of equality of persons in terms of 'human dignity', including within that expression the conviction that all human beings are 'persons' in the sense of deserving of equal respect and access to essential goods. In Catholic social thought 'human dignity' is always paired with 'the common good'. In other words, the focus is not the individual alone but the individual in society. Human beings are intrinsically social, and participate

³⁸ This idea occurs in the encyclicals of John Paul II, e.g. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §42; and *Centesimus Annus*, §11. The phrase was coined by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1967 and was later adopted as part of the social teaching of popes and other bishops' conferences. See Gerald S. Twomey, *The 'Preferential Option for the Poor' in Catholic Social Thought from John XXIII to John Paul II* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2005).

in the common good both by making contributions to the welfare of the whole and by sharing in its benefits.³⁹

Commitment to Jesus' inclusive table fellowship, enabled by our share in resurrection life, motivates the Catholic and Christian response to 'globalization', especially the worldwide realities of poverty, violent conflict, and environmental destruction. These have been focal concerns of encyclicals by popes from John XXIII to Benedict XVI, for example *Caritas in Veritate* (on the global economic meltdown), and numerous World Day of Peace messages. These concerns intersect in many ways with those of Peter Singer. What Christianity adds is an explicit narrative context; the overt connection of beliefs to traditions, liturgies, and moral commitments; and grounds on which to hope that change is really possible.

Despite the particular, contextual, communal vision of Christian ethics that I have just outlined, Christian moral and social commitments resonate with those of other communities whose narratives espouse and form similar values. In order to address the realities of poverty and violence, we must talk about basic human goods, the global common good, and the consequences for both of different actions, institutions, and policies. Although human beings come to know moral values and obligations practically and contextually, much of what we do come to know is widely shared or even universal. The reason is simply that human beings share a common human 'nature' in the sense of having a distinctive kind of embodiment, intelligence, and psychology that brings with it distinctive capacities, needs, vulnerabilities, and potentials.

Support from Aquinas

In order to negotiate the space between the particular Christian experience of God in Christ and the universal requirements of global justice, let me draw on the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas begins from within a specific, Western, Christian tradition of religious beliefs; cultural assumptions; liturgical, sacramental, and moral practices; and ecclesial, social, intellectual, and political institutions that mediate and shape all of the above. As Jean Porter has argued, he approaches the human and the ethical from within a tradition of medieval scholasticism that forms and defines his own thought and that of his interlocutors, and in fact establishes who those interlocutors will be.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he furnishes an interpretation of

³⁹ See John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, §55–66.

⁴⁰ Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

human nature, human goods, and moral obligation that still has, I believe, wide resonance and value. In addition, he surrounds and complements his ethics of the natural law with a vision of theological virtues, infused moral virtues, and the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. These indicate the importance of membership in Christian community as a support to the discernment and practical observance of the natural law and to the orientation of all human relationships to God as humanity's ultimate end.

For Aquinas, following Augustine, God is the highest good, the common good of all creatures and the eternal destiny of human beings, who are called by grace to 'friendship with God in God's essence'.⁴¹ Yet Aquinas also has an orderly, reasonable, and inductive approach to historical goods, displayed in his theories of the natural law and of moral reason as practical reason.⁴² His account, while subject to cultural biases such as subordination of women, has still in its essential dimensions stood well the test of time. For example, Aquinas observes quite rightly that people in all cultures are naturally inclined to seek the goods of self-preservation, of birthing and educating the next generation, of living cooperatively in society, and of knowing what is true about God.⁴³ This is not an exhaustive list of basic human goods, but it is a start. To it we might add or further specify items like education, a living wage, right of emigration or migration, political participation, and basic health care. Although ethics always begins from a grounded standpoint, it still does and must achieve what Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel calls 'an anti-dogmatic universalism' – not the same as 'the "old" Eurocentric universalism',⁴⁴ but built from the ground up. Despite historical and cultural variety, human beings – who exist in continuity with and not in separation from other species – all strive to protect and preserve life; mate and educate the young; live in peaceful and well-governed societies; seek to understand and be in relation with God.

I do not in fact think that the existence and knowability of certain basic human goods is controversial, despite the reality of global cultural differences, and inroads made on 'Enlightenment universalism' by postmodern and postcolonial thought. What is *more* controversial is the order of priority among goods, should they come into conflict; and what is *most* controversial is not goods as such, but the ideal of *equality* or *equal respect* as the standard

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q23, a1.

⁴² For more discussion of Aquinas, practical reason, and global justice, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Toward Global Ethics', *Theological Studies* 63:2 (2002): 324–44.

⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q94, a2.

⁴⁴ T. Gomez and E. Dussel, 'Ethics Is the Original Philosophy; or the Barbarian Words Coming from the Third World: An Interview with Enrique Dussel', *Boundary* 28:2 (2001): 19–73 (63).

deciding who will have *access* to goods that are generally sought. We all think that we ourselves should have continued life, a peaceful and stable environment, the opportunity to choose a spouse and raise children, necessary health care, education, and a job. But where people and cultures disagree radically is on which other people deserve to have those goods too. In fact the idea of basic human equality is a modern development, and is even now far from universally observed in practice, even when endorsed in theory or in law. Christians explain the situation with a doctrine of sin; others may simply agree that impulses to self-interested and xenophobic behaviour are evolved tendencies equally strong as impartiality and altruism.

As Grace Kao has argued, and as Peter Singer suggests via his memory of Henry Spira, there may be no ‘knock-down’ argument in favour of radical human equality. The best defence, not only of equality, but of special compassion for and solidarity with suffering persons (human or otherwise) may lie in the prophetic enactment of these virtues, under the conviction that they are of unsurpassed historical importance. This conviction is certainly enabled and strengthened when one sees equal respect, compassion, solidarity, and sacrificial neighbour-love as participation in the transforming love of God.

Aquinas says that the reason no innocent human being may be killed for the common good is that God, not the ‘body politic’, is the ultimate end of human beings.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Christian moral vision, ability to discern the right means to worthy ends, and the enduring commitment to seek those ends no matter what the obstacles are enabled by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. These virtues actually begin our participation in the divine nature. Faith is the apprehension of God by the intellect, while hope is the steadfast desire for union. Charity, the ‘mother and root’ of all the virtues,⁴⁶ accomplishes the ‘divinization’ of human nature (to borrow a term from Eastern Christianity) that is the necessary precondition of genuine friendship of creature and Creator.

Charity signifies not only the love of God, but also a certain friendship with Him; which implies besides love, a certain mutual return of love, together with mutual communion . . . friendship with God, which is charity, is impossible without faith, so as to believe in this fellowship and colloquy with God, and to hope to attain to this fellowship.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q21, a4. ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I-II, q62, a4. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, I-II, q65, a5.

In addition to the theological virtues, grace also provides new versions of the moral virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance). These ensure that the entirety of the moral life will be lived out of genuine love of God as the highest good.⁴⁸

Aquinas calls these virtues ‘infused’, with the aim of clarifying that they are results of God’s grace, not works of human effort or education. I believe it makes more experiential sense to think of the theological virtues in terms of the practical conversion of our capacities and dispositions, occurring as we become conformed to Christ in the Church as ‘body of Christ’. This process, no less a gift of God, engages us with scripturally based narratives, commitments, and practices. Though Aquinas regards the theological and the infused moral virtues as the special province of believing Christians in the Church (but see Thomas O’Meara on Aquinas’s view of ‘Tarzan’⁴⁹), many Christians today see God’s grace at work outside the community of explicit believers in Christ. At the very least, in Catholic teaching, Christ reaches members of other religions; and Vatican II even indicates that non-Christian faith, specifically that of Israel, participates in its own right in an everlasting covenant with God.

Utilitarianism and proportionalism

The similarities between Christian theological ethics and Singer’s utilitarianism can be clarified by consideration of a mid twentieth-century Roman Catholic debate about goods, evils, and moral norms that took as its point of departure the so-called ‘principle of double effect’ (a principle which Singer criticizes in his contribution to this volume).

This debate is relevant for at least four reasons. First, critics of the traditional version of this principle, who came to be known as ‘proportionalists’, were accused of being ‘consequentialists’ (utilitarians) because they focused on the good over evil that a moral act would produce. Second, a decisive difference between the proportionalists and most utilitarians was that the former’s teleology included God as the ultimate end of humanity. Third, the moral reasoning employed by both sides in the double effect debate was, like that of utilitarians, highly rationalistic. Fourth, in Catholic moral theology as in moral philosophy, there has been a gradual movement away from abstract reasoning and towards more contextual and social

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I-II, q65, a2–3.

⁴⁹ Thomas F. O’Meara, OP, ‘Tarzan, Las Casas, and Rahner: Aquinas’s Theology of Wider Grace’, *Theology Digest* 45 (1998): 319–28.

approaches, both to moral cognition, and to discernment of moral obligations.

The principle of double effect has roots in Aquinas (on self-defence⁵⁰), but became especially prominent in modern Catholic moral thought in the nineteenth century.⁵¹ In the 1960s and 1970s the interest of Catholic moral theologians in teleology and utilitarianism was stimulated by discussion of the justification and function of moral norms, and especially by debates about double effect. Those involved included Peter Knauer, Louis Janssens, Ernst Fuchs, and Bruno Schuller on the Continent; and Richard McCormick, Charles Curran, Germain Grisez, and John Finnis in the United States.⁵²

Modern double effect emulates the abstraction, impartiality, logic, and precision of modern scientific reason. It envisages dilemmas in which the best outcome concretely available can be achieved only by an act that also brings undesirable or 'evil' effects. Double effect is a strategy for taking account of good and bad effects or consequences, while still holding the line at utilitarianism. But, in the eyes of many critics, including Singer, it does not do this in a fully coherent way. The specific conditions of double effect are controversial and even confused. Why are they all necessary and what is their mutual relation?

The conditions may be formulated in slightly different ways, but a standard version would include the following four.

1. The act in question cannot be one of a class of 'intrinsically evil acts', which cannot be performed under any circumstances, no matter what the consequences. As examples, one author lists 'blasphemy, perjury, masturbation, and murder',⁵³ and to these would certainly be added contraception, abortion, adultery, homosexual acts, and euthanasia.
2. The evil effect must not be wanted for its own sake, but rather foreseen and tolerated as an unavoidable side effect of the good ('indirectly intended').
3. The evil effect must not be directly caused, even as the means to the good. (This provision is missing in Aquinas's permission of killing in

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q64, a7.

⁵¹ See Jean Pierre Gury, *Compendium Theologiae Moralis* (1866); Joseph T. Mangan, 'An Historical Analysis of the Principle of Double Effect', *Theological Studies* 10 (1949): 41–61.

⁵² See Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Teleology, Utilitarianism, and Christian Ethics', *Theological Studies* 42 (1981): 601–29; and Bernard Hoose, *Proportionalism: The American Debate and Its European Roots* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987).

⁵³ Gerald Kelly, *Medico-Moral Problems* (St Louis: Catholic Hospital Association, 1958), 13.

self-defence, where the death of the assailant is the means to saving one's own life.)

4. The good effect must outweigh or at least be equal to the bad effect. To this, critics raised the following objections. The decisive criterion should be 'proportion', or balance of good over evil. If the good outweighs the evil, then the requirement that the evil is indirectly intended becomes superfluous; and it is irrelevant whether the evil is the means to the good or not. Moreover, the designation 'intrinsically evil acts' is incoherent because the category contains dissimilar terms: Terms like 'murder' and 'adultery' are different from terms like 'contraception' or 'masturbation', and not only in magnitude of seriousness. The former indicate a physical act in an implied set of wrong-making circumstances: homicide and sexual intercourse respectively. The latter pair (contraception, masturbation) take a simple physical action and attribute a moral quality – indeed an absolutely wrong quality – without alluding to any of the circumstances. But, according to the proportionalists, these acts can be justified circumstantially, for example, if a greater good is at stake, like health or the economic viability of a family; or obtaining semen for a medical test or infertility therapy.

This leads to two further points. For the proportionalists, against those accusing them of crass consequentialism, there are such things as absolute goods; and there are such things as absolute or exceptionless norms. However, the only absolute or inviolable goods are goods of character or virtue, such as prudence, justice, temperance, honesty, compassion, faith, hope, and charity. These virtues are must be protected no matter what the circumstances, but they demand different concrete embodiments in different contexts. Exceptionless moral norms either must concern virtues of moral character ('Be faithful'; 'Be charitable'; 'Don't be dishonest'), or they must specify the non-absolute values at stake in a given context (such as procreation, property, or even life) and stipulate which values take precedence over others in that context or a class of similar contexts. For example, 'Don't use contraception to cover up adultery'; 'Don't take property unless in dire need'; 'Don't take a life unless to save one'; 'Never take an innocent life.'

A related point is that the proportionalists, like the defenders of traditional double effect, and unlike most utilitarians, envisioned a teleology with a transcendent or 'supernatural' dimension, the *summum bonum* of Augustine and Aquinas. For the proportionalists, only the violation of goods of character violates ultimate union with God. Physical or material acts violate virtue and this union, not 'in themselves', but only when they enact a disproportionate and hence vicious choice between concrete goods;

that is, a choice in which a good is violated unnecessarily, or in which a lower good is chosen over a higher. Such an act betrays human moral virtue and obstructs human union with God.

For defenders of traditional double effect, in contrast, certain physical acts have an inherent moral value, no matter what other goods are at stake. Such acts impede the *telos* of union with God no matter what their practical consequences. Contraception is vicious even when a family cannot feed its children; abortion is wrong even when a woman might die; euthanasia is forbidden even when life ends in excruciating pain. The positive, prophetic function of such norms is to hold up the values of procreative sex in marriage, unborn life, and the inherent worth of every life no matter its state. What the proportionalists held up on the other side was the contextual nature of practical reason, the contingency of prudent judgements, and the insight that moral faithfulness must be nuanced to goods at stake in particular situations.

At the end of the day, the proportionalists were a loosely related group of critics (not a school of thought) who raised what I believe were legitimate questions about double effect, but never achieved a coherent theoretical alternative. One reason is that they operated in essentially the same mode of neo-scholastic moral reasoning that produced double effect. The proportionalist debate was not concluded, but it has perhaps been bypassed. The debate was the child of a scientific, logical, ostensibly abstract and rational approach to ethics whose stated premises were akin to those of analytic philosophy, even though, in reality, the conclusions derived therefrom owed much to Catholic teaching on gender, sex, procreation, abortion, and justified killing in general. Perhaps one lesson is that intransigent moral conflicts cannot be untangled by analytical reason alone. Though the debate between double effect and proportionalism was not resolved theoretically, it lost momentum when the concern of the proportionalists with moral context grew into a much larger concern in Christian ethics with the way individual moral acts are part of ongoing histories, practices, and structures.

I discern a similar evolution in Singer's thought. Utilitarianism and Catholic moral theology alike require expanded notions and practices of moral discourse in order even to begin to address new global problems with any practical effectiveness. In 2002, an American author, Aline Kalbian, wrote an article with the clever title, 'Where Have All the Proportionalists Gone?'⁵⁴ In a nutshell, the answer is, 'Into social ethics'. As the feminist

⁵⁴ Aline H. Kalbian, 'Where Have All the Proportionalists Gone?' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30:1 (2002): 3–22.

slogan has it, 'The personal is political.' This means that individual moral circumstances and judgement are interdependent with larger social realities that affect personal identity, vision, and options. It also means that concern with our own moral activity is insufficient if it ignores our responsibility to others we affect in our networked global space.

The Christian can agree with Singer that global justice requires advocacy and action on behalf of all the world's 'poor', including animals and the rest of our increasingly degraded natural environment. Yet the Christian story and its attendant way of life make us even more committed to seek ways of realizing the common good that do not endanger the dignity of the few, however marginal their 'personal' status. I hope Singer can agree with Christians that just as our stories, saints, and social practices have formed our visions and commitments, so the way to convert others to the importance of cross-cultural justice is by sharing our respective stories as well as their explanatory theories; and by inviting others to action in solidarity, rather than by the endless intellectual combat so beloved of analytic philosophers and some Catholic moral theologians.

CHAPTER 6

Acts or rules? The fine-tuning of utilitarianism

Brad Hooker

Peter Singer's contributions to moral philosophy are difficult to exaggerate. In particular, his discussions of moral duties concerning poverty, animals, abortion, and euthanasia are immensely influential. The books he has authored are among the best sellers of contemporary philosophy, and even the list of those he has edited is strikingly impressive. I believe that both contemporary moral practice and contemporary moral theory are very much better than they would be without him.

What are the qualities that have made his published work so successful? Singer's writing is wonderfully direct, engaging, and clear. He addresses the relevant complexities but avoids any inessential tangents. And he puts forward extremely powerful arguments. Even where people cannot bring themselves to accept Singer's conclusions, Singer's arguments *must* be addressed.

Singer's own moral theory is a form of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is an approach to morality and social policy that grounds justification in the promotion of utility. Some self-described utilitarians have used the term 'utility' to mean value. Most utilitarians, however, mean something narrower than value. Specifically, utility is meant as aggregate benefit-minus-harm, which is often referred to as *net benefit*, or *welfare*, *well-being*, or *aggregate personal good*.

One of the main attractions of utilitarianism has always been its impartiality. In the calculation of aggregate welfare, each individual's welfare counts equally. Such impartiality, according to utilitarians, involves counting benefits or harms to any individual the same as benefits or harms, of the same size, to anyone else. Singer often calls this kind of impartiality 'equal consideration of interests'.

Although not everyone assumes moral assessment and justification must be fundamentally impartial, the assumption is widespread. It is also understandable. After all, when we try to justify our behaviour to one another, we often try to show that our behaviour complies with moral principles and

considerations. But how could our appeal to moral principles and considerations provide justification to others for our behaviour unless morality has only impartial principles at the foundational level?

Since utilitarianism grounds justification in aggregate welfare, we need to consider the nature of welfare. There are different views about this – hedonistic views, desire-fulfilment or preference-satisfaction views, and perfectionist, eudaimonistic, or objective list views.¹ I will not wade into the debate between these rival views here. But let me remark in passing that I think the debates between advocates of the main different theories of welfare, though fascinating theoretically, are often irrelevant practically, at least in cases where only *human* welfare is at stake. For very often a person's happiness, desire-fulfilment, and eudaimonistic flourishing will be served by the same events.

The distinction between different theories of welfare is less important than the distinction between different utilitarian theories about how moral requirements are related to welfare. The two most important kinds of utilitarian theories about how moral requirements are related to welfare are act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Actually, there are many versions of each of these kinds. But I shall focus on the most prominent ones. The most prominent version of act-utilitarianism requires one to do acts that produce at least as much utility as any other acts one could have done instead. The most prominent version of rule-utilitarianism favours the rules whose widespread internalization would maximize utility and then takes acts to be morally permissible, morally required, or morally wrong depending on whether they are permitted, required, or forbidden by these rules.

Both act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism can be formulated in terms of actual utility or in terms of expected utility. Different possible consequences are more or less probable, and more or less beneficial or harmful. To calculate the expected utility of an act or rule, multiply the net benefit or harm of each possible consequence of that act or rule by the probability of that consequence occurring. The numbers produced by these multiplications are then summed in order to generate the expected utility of the act or rule.

As an example, consider the act of Jill's explaining expected utility to Jack. There are many possible consequences of this act. But let us pretend there are only two, Jack's being enlightened or Jack's being befuddled.

¹ The best discussion of the differences among these theories of welfare remains Appendix I of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Suppose the benefit of Jack's being enlightened is +5 and the harm of Jack's being befuddled is -3 and the probability of Jack's being enlightened by Jill's explanation is 60 per cent and the probability of Jack's instead being befuddled by Jill's explanation is 40 per cent. Then the expected utility of Jill's explaining expected utility to Jack is $(+5 \times 0.6) + (-3 \times 0.4)$, which equals $3 + (-1.2)$, which equals 1.8. That was an example concerning acts, but the same sort of calculations can be done to determine the expected utility of this or that possible moral rule.

The calculation of expected utility I have just used as an illustration presumed not only precise quantifications of possible benefits and harms but also precise probability percentages. Such precision, however, is utterly unrealistic. Normally, even the very best available calculation of expected utility is fairly rough, quite speculative, and somewhat impressionistic. To pretend otherwise is ridiculous.

Having explained expected utility, I now state act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism as theories that determine moral wrongness in terms of expected utility. Act-utilitarianism holds that an act is morally required if and because the individual act's expected utility is greater than the expected utility of any alternative individual act. Rule-utilitarianism holds that an act is morally required if and because the act is required by a code of rules whose internalization has greater expected utility than the internalization of any alternative code.

When people first hear about act-utilitarianism, they often assume that act-utilitarianism holds both that

- (a) what makes an act morally required is that the act would *maximize* net expected aggregate utility
- and that
- (b) everyone should normally and routinely *decide how to behave* by calculating the utilities of alternative actions and then choosing the one with the greatest net expected aggregate utility.

Indeed, act-utilitarians do hold that what makes an act morally required is that it would *maximize* net expected aggregate utility. But they do not hold that everyone should normally and routinely *decide how to behave* by calculating the utilities of alternative actions and then choosing the one with the greatest net expected aggregate utility. For utility would *not* be maximized by our regularly deciding how to behave by calculating the utilities of alternative actions.

There are at least five reasons why utility would *not* be maximized by our regularly deciding how to behave by calculating the utilities of alternative actions:

1. Often we don't know and can't easily find out what benefits or harms would result from an act, or what the probabilities are.
2. Even if we can find out, the costs of finding out or of then calculating the utility might well outweigh the extra benefits resulting from the superior act.
3. Furthermore, there is the serious risk of making mistakes in the calculation.
4. And people's expecting other people routinely to *decide how to behave* by trying to calculate the utilities of alternative actions would cause widespread insecurity and distrust, since people would expect that others would miscalculate because of incompetence or deep-seated bias. For example, if you thought I made my every decision by calculating the utilities, you might worry that I might become convinced that killing you, or stealing from you, or breaking my promises to you, or lying to you would maximize utility.
5. In order for people to become reliably disposed to maximize impartial utility in their every decision, they would have to be stripped of all traces of natural partiality towards friends, lovers, and family. But this would effectively eliminate human friendship and make humans 'lousy lovers' (to use C.L. Ten's phrase). If all became lousy lovers and friendless, human happiness would greatly diminish. In Ronald Dworkin's words, 'If we felt nothing more for friends or lovers or colleagues than the most intense concern we could possibly feel for all fellow citizens, this would mean the extinction not the universality of love.'² In other words, humans are capable of very strong concern for some or equal concern for all, but not strong concern for all. So the price of equal concern for all is, to use Sidgwick's quotation from Aristotle, 'but a watery kindness'.³

For these reasons, what would actually maximize expected utility would not be people's being regularly disposed to decide how to behave by calculating the utilities of alternative actions. While act-utilitarianism does indeed hold that what makes required acts required is that they maximize net expected aggregate utility, act-utilitarianism also holds that the required procedure for making everyday moral decisions (especially ones in the heat of the moment, when information might be short and reasoning hasty and biased) is to resort to tried and tested moral rules, such as 'don't hurt others', 'don't

² Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 215.

³ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th edn (London: Macmillan, 1907), 434.

steal', 'don't break promises', 'don't lie', 'do attend to the needs of your near and dear', etc.

Turn for a moment from the question 'how should individual agents make everyday decisions?' to the question 'what moral rules should people accept?' I mean this to be the question 'what guidelines to decision-making should people accept, given that these guidelines are going to be reflected in (and reinforced by) dispositions to feel guilt when one breaks these rules and to feel resentment or indignation towards others who break them?' Well, here act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism agree that the best rules are those whose internalization would produce the best consequences.

Admittedly, act-utilitarians and rule-utilitarians do not agree entirely about the criteria by which rules should be evaluated. Strictly speaking, act-utilitarianism favours the decision procedure, or rules, the internalization of which by the *individual* agent would maximize expected utility. So, according to act-utilitarianism, since Jack's and Jill's capacities and situations may be very different, the best rules and decision procedures for Jack to accept may be different from the best rules and decision procedures for Jill to accept. Act-utilitarianism tailors rules and decision procedures to different people. That provision goes against the spirit of rule-utilitarianism, a theory committed to the idea that a rule cannot be appropriate unless the rule's being accepted widely (if not universally) would maximize expected utility.

When act-utilitarians endorse the above optimistic decision procedure, they acknowledge that following this decision procedure does not guarantee that we will do the act with the best consequences. Sometimes, for example, our following a decision procedure that rules out harming an innocent person will prevent us from doing the act that would produce the best consequences. Similarly, there will be some circumstances in which stealing, breaking our promises, etc., would produce the best consequences. Still, our following a decision procedure that generally rules out such acts will – in the long run and on the whole – produce better consequences than our making act-utilitarian calculations on a case-by-case basis.

But now act-utilitarianism is in a seemingly paradoxical position. On the one hand, the theory holds that an act is morally permissible if and only if there is no alternative act whose consequences have greater expected utility. In its account of moral permissibility, act-utilitarianism makes no reference to rules about killing, promise breaking, attending to welfare of others to whom one has special connections, etc. On the other hand, act-utilitarianism tells agents to make their day-to-day moral decisions by following such rules. To illustrate the paradox, we should imagine an agent who follows such rules by,

for example, keeping a promise or refusing to steal. This agent might well feel confused when told that his act was nevertheless impermissible because, in the particular circumstances he faced, breaking the promise or stealing *would* have produced a bit more utility. Our agent might reasonably ask, 'Am I supposed to follow the optimific decision procedure and then do the act thus selected, or am I supposed to abandon the decision procedure you told me to follow and instead do an act selected by a different decision procedure, one which you told me *not* to follow?'

There is a mushrooming literature on what an act-utilitarian can say about the assessment of an agent who follows the prescribed decision procedure but does not select the expected-utility-maximizing act.⁴ I will not investigate that matter more here. I merely note that act-utilitarianism has some explaining to do, since the instructions it gives to the agent seem to be contradictory.

Where act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism most closely agree is in their approach to which laws and social policies there should be. I think most act-utilitarians and rule-utilitarians would agree that the law should allow euthanasia, that there should be a default presumption that people agree to have their organs donated once their brain dies, and that tax policies should incentivize recycling, travel by land rather than air, and investment in renewable energy. On many social issues, various utilitarians might disagree with one another about what conclusion to draw, because they disagree on the probabilities of different benefits and harms. But their way of assessing social issues is the same. At the level of assessing actual or possible policies, laws, and rules, there is no significant difference between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism.

As I indicated, act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism disagree about what makes acts morally required or wrong. For act-utilitarianism, what makes acts morally required is a fact about how their consequences compare with the consequences of alternative acts. For rule-utilitarianism, what makes acts morally required is a fact about how the consequences of rules that require them compare with the consequences of alternative rules.

⁴ The literature started mushrooming in response to Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, 31–40. See (for example) Bart Streumer, 'Can Consequentialism Cover Everything?' *Utilitas* 15 (2003): 247–57 and Gerald Lang, 'A Dilemma for Objective Act-Utilitarianism', *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 3 (2004): 221–39. A recent addition to this literature by one of the most sophisticated and eloquent writers on the subject is Philip Pettit, 'The Inescapability of Consequentialism', in Ulrika Heuer and Gerald Lang (eds), *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41–70.

As against rule-utilitarianism, act-utilitarians point out that, in order for rule-utilitarianism to avoid extensional equivalence with act-utilitarianism, rule-utilitarianism must hold at least some possible acts to be either wrong or merely optional that act-utilitarianism holds to be morally required. And, if rule-utilitarianism holds at least some possible acts to be wrong or merely optional that act-utilitarianism holds to be morally required, rule-utilitarianism cannot accept that all expected-utility-maximizing acts are morally required. Of course, to act-utilitarians, rule-utilitarianism is mistaken to accept that the set of *expected-utility-maximizing* acts and the set of *morally required* acts might diverge.

However, in denying that all expected-utility-maximizing acts are morally required, rule-utilitarianism is on the side of common-sense morality. For, in some cases, maximizing expected utility seems either morally wrong or merely optional. What such cases illustrate is that we intuitively think that there are various moral constraints, moral duties of loyalty, and moral prerogatives that can conflict with act-utilitarianism's requirement that one always maximize expected utility.

The moral constraints are prohibitions on killing or physically harming the innocent, stealing or destroying others' property, breaking promises, telling lies, and threatening to do any of these things. These prohibitions apply even where doing one of these acts would produce somewhat greater utility. Intuitively, it certainly seems that killing an innocent person when this would increase expected aggregate welfare a little would be morally wrong. Likewise, for stealing or destroying others' property, breaking promises, etc.

In cases where doing one of these acts would prevent *enormous* aggregate harm, we might have much less confidence that on balance the best thing to do would be to comply with the prohibition. But let's steer away from the less certain cases and back to the more certain ones. And the more certain cases are ones in which violating the prohibition would produce only *a little* more expected aggregate utility. These cases definitely are a problem for act-utilitarianism.

The moral duties of loyalty are special obligations you have to those with whom you have certain special connections, such as you do to your lover, friends, and family (at least normally). To be more specific, when deciding how to allocate of your own time, energy, and other resources, you should give some (but not infinite) priority to the welfare of your family and friends. There are also special obligations of gratitude to your benefactors and obligations of apology and compensation to those whom you wrongly harmed.

These duties of loyalty and special obligations of gratitude, apology, and compensation can conflict in individual cases with the requirement to maximize expected aggregate utility impartially calculated. Imagine that you could give your kidney to your forty-year-old sister or instead to a twenty-year-old stranger. There are many reasons you might think that expected aggregate utility would in fact be maximized if your kidney went to the twenty-year-old stranger rather than to your sister. Sometimes the difference in what is at stake for various parties will suggest that you should indeed override your duty of loyalty to your sister (suppose that saving the twenty-year-old stranger would somehow prevent a world war). Nevertheless, you have a strong duty of loyalty to your sister that, unless the case is extreme, outweighs your duty to do good for others in general.

Another element of common-sense morality is the idea that, even where no duties of loyalty, gratitude, apology, or compensation to others come into play, you are not morally required to be strictly impartial in deciding what to do with your own time, energy, and other resources. Admittedly, sometimes morality requires you to decide what to do with complete impartiality as between your own good and the equal good of any other person. For example, you might be the fire chief and have to decide to which side of the burning town to dispatch the fire trucks. And, sometimes, total disregard of your own good is mandatory. For example, when you are deciding what grade to assign to a student's work, you should be completely insensitive to possible benefits or harms to you. Nevertheless, sometimes you are deciding what to do with your own resources and you have the prerogative not to be impartial. For example, the world would be a bit better place if you devote your Sunday afternoons to visiting lonely people in the local rest home than if you spend your Sunday afternoons refining your amateur-level artistic or athletic skills. But, as Samuel Scheffler's *The Rejection of Consequentialism* stressed, you have a moral prerogative to choose benefits for yourself even when you could instead have chosen somewhat larger benefits for others.⁵

The qualifier 'somewhat' is definitely necessary. The prerogative to be partial towards yourself has limits. In other words, the gap between the size of the benefit to yourself and the size of the aggregate benefit to others can be big enough to require you to sacrifice your own good for the sake of benefiting others. It isn't morally permissible to choose a trivial benefit for yourself over an equally probable massive benefit for others.

⁵ Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), chs. 2–3.

Where is the line between permissible use of the prerogative and excessive self-interest? Perhaps the answer is indeterminate. Definitely there is no consensus on where the line is. Despite these important difficulties, I do think Scheffler was correct that there is a widely shared sense both that there is some degree of prerogative and that there is some limit to it.

Equally important is Michael Slote's observation that common-sense morality takes the prerogative to allow you not only to give your own good somewhat *greater* weight than the good of others when you are deciding what to do with your own time, energy, or other resources, but also to give your own good somewhat *less* weight.⁶ Imagine that you deliberately impose a loss on yourself for the sake of preventing a smaller loss to someone else. In deliberately not maximizing aggregate welfare here, you haven't done anything morally wrong. Indeed, most of us think that this other person should be very grateful and that everyone who hears of your act should commend your altruism.

In addition to the moral constraints, duties of loyalty, and moral prerogatives just outlined, common-sense morality also contains a general moral requirement to do good for others. Act-utilitarianism gets into conflict with the moral constraints, duties of loyalty, and moral prerogatives far more often than it does with the general moral requirement to do good for others. Indeed, the only time when the general duty to do good for others clearly conflicts with act-utilitarianism is when doing good for others would impose a loss on yourself that is larger than the combined benefits for others.

Singer's work mentions most of the moral duties and prerogatives I've listed. That is wise. For if he completely ignored these constraints, duties of loyalty, and moral prerogatives, his discussions would immediately provoke such questions as 'what about the moral constraint on killing the innocent?' or 'what about the moral duty to attend first to the effects on one's own children?' or 'what about the moral prerogative to give somewhat more weight to one's own welfare?'

However, in very many moral contexts, the constraints just do not come into play, or duties of loyalty do not come into play, or the prerogative to give one's own good more or less weight than the equal good of others does not come into play. For example, the constraints mentioned above are not much relevant to questions of population policy. Duties of loyalty are not prominent in questions about the environment. And the prerogative to give

⁶ Michael Slote, *Common-Sense Morality and Consequentialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), ch. 1, and *From Morality to Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13–16.

one's own good greater or lesser weight in one's thinking does not come into play in any context in which one's own good would not be affected by the decision.

On the other hand, many of the contexts in which Singer has made significant contributions are ones where moral constraints might well be relevant. The constraint on killing the innocent is potentially relevant to killing animals, human fetuses, and those who request death. Moreover, the prerogative to give one's own good greater weight than the equal good of others will very often come into play, and will be especially salient in the two areas where the demandingness of morality is most prominent – see chapters 8 and 9 of Singer's *Practical Ethics*. Still, as I have said, there are other contexts in which no constraints, duties of loyalty, or prerogatives come into play, and yet we feel that the context is one in which moral issues are definitely at stake.

As indicated earlier, act-utilitarians typically think that there is an impartial, utilitarian rationale for people's internalizing some moral constraints, duties of loyalty, and moral prerogatives (though act-utilitarians are typically reformers and thus advocate internalization of *improved* moral constraints, duties of loyalty, and moral prerogatives). If people have internalized some moral constraints, if they feel especially responsible for the welfare of their family and friends, and if they feel free in many contexts to focus on their own welfare or alternatively to ignore their own welfare, more overall welfare will result than if people feel they must calculate expected aggregate utility all the time and then rigorously comply with the conclusions mandated by their calculations. And some especially engaging parts of Singer's work directly address the question of which constraints, duties of loyalty, and prerogatives are the ones whose internalization would maximize expected utility. He also directly addresses the question of which rules are the ones whose public endorsement would maximize expected utility.

The question of which constraints, duties of loyalty, and prerogatives are the ones whose internalization would maximize expected utility is irresistible when we turn to practical policies, and especially irresistible when we turn to some new moral problem created by the development of some new technology. Notice the rule-utilitarian aspects of this question. First, the evaluation is of different possible codes of moral rules (which typically will contain constraints, duties of loyalty, and prerogatives). Second, these different possible codes are evaluated in terms of the consequences of the codes' being taught to and then collectively accepted by whole generations of moral agents (not merely in terms of internalization by some individual agent or only by some elite group). Third, this evaluation is from a

manifestly impartial point of view, a point of view that accords equal importance to the welfare of each individual.

Because this approach conceives of morality as a collective endeavour with an attractive impartial purpose, i.e. promotion of aggregate welfare, this approach seems to me intuitively attractive *in itself*; that is, intuitively attractive even before we consider the plausibility of the rules it ends up endorsing. I also think, albeit more tentatively, that this approach ends up endorsing intuitively plausible rules. The *overall* intuitive plausibility of the approach is made up of the intuitive plausibility of its starting assumptions and the intuitive plausibility of its implications. In other words, the philosophical argument for rule-utilitarianism seems to me best understood as what John Rawls called a reflective equilibrium argument.⁷

I did not employ a utilitarian premise in my argument for rule-utilitarianism. To employ a utilitarian premise in an argument for rule-utilitarianism is to beg the question whether utilitarianism is a good starting place. And I am not arguing for rule-utilitarianism via religious premises. I cannot do that, since I am not religious.

Nevertheless, I do think rule-utilitarianism is the natural position for many religious believers and especially for Christians to hold. A familiar doctrine is that God chooses the rules whose internalization by human beings would produce the greatest good and human beings' job is to follow these rules. Bishop Berkeley wrote, 'In framing the general laws of nature, it is granted we must be entirely guided by the public good of mankind, but not in the ordinary moral actions of our lives . . . The rule is framed with respect to the good of mankind; but our practice must be always shaped immediately by the rule.'⁸

In some ways, rule-utilitarianism seems easier to defend on theist rather than atheist grounds. One of the problems rule-utilitarianism faces is the problem of predicting the consequences of internalization of various possible rules.⁹ Of course there is no difficulty in predicting that the consequences of any code of rules that allows wife-beating would be terrible. But would internalization of a rule that allows human genetic engineering have better consequences than internalization of a rule that forbids human genetic engineering? Reasonable people can disagree about this. Indeed, a

⁷ John Rawls, 'Outline for a Decision Procedure in Ethics', *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): 177–97; *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 19–21, 46–51.

⁸ George Berkeley, *Passive Obedience, or, the Christian Doctrine of Not Resisting the Supreme Power, Proved and Vindicated upon the Principles of the Law of Nature* (1712), section 31.

⁹ I discuss this matter at length in my *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-consequentialist Theory of Morality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 5.

general objection to rule-utilitarianism is that often people cannot know which rules are the ones whose internalization would have the very best consequences, and don't even have the information about possible consequences and their probabilities needed to calculate expected utility. However, if an *all-knowing* and perfectly good God chooses certain rules for us to follow, then presumably the lack of knowledge problem is solved.

But does God really offer us a way out of rule-utilitarianism's epistemological struggles? Will thinking about the rules reported to have come from God help us ascertain which rules are the ones rule-utilitarianism endorses? Difficulties in interpreting the rules reported to have come from God have been apparent since the rules were first reported. Furthermore, even if we could be certain exactly what God meant for humans to do 2,000 years ago, why think the best rules for today would be the same as the best rules for 2,000 years ago?

Most religious believers make every effort to attribute to God commands that correspond to rules that are morally sensible for human beings. What distinguishes rules that are morally sensible for human beings from rules that are not morally sensible for human beings? Well, one criterion that jumps to mind is the rule-utilitarian one: morally sensible rules for human beings are the ones whose internalization by human beings would produce the best consequences, impartially considered.

There is no denying, however, that some of the commands reported long ago to have come from God seem very unlikely to mirror rules that meet the rule-utilitarian criterion. This fact seems to me to leave us with the following possible alternative responses:

Alternative 1. These reports from long ago about God's commands were mistaken.

Alternative 2. Even if these reports from long ago weren't mistaken, the commands in question were *not* meant to apply outside of a long-gone context.

Alternative 3. Even if these reports from long ago weren't mistaken, and even if all God's commands *were* meant to apply in all (even modern) contexts, and even if some of God's commands *appear* to enjoin rules that do not meet the rule-utilitarian criterion, this appearance is an illusion: all God's commands do in fact enjoin rules that meet the rule-utilitarian criterion.

Alternative 4. These reports from long ago weren't mistaken. Furthermore, all God's commands were meant to apply in all contexts. Moreover, some of God's commands *really do* enjoin rules that do not meet the rule-utilitarian criterion. So God is not a rule-utilitarian.

Which of these alternatives is most plausible? Of course, atheists insist on alternative 1. They deny the existence of God and thus deny the existence of God's commands. Many religious believers will also accept alternative 1. Indeed, I cannot see how someone who believes in a perfectly good God could believe that God ever made some of the commands reported long ago.

Turn now to religious believers who think that authoritative religious texts supply credible evidence that God did indeed make those commands. These religious believers reject alternative 1. So which of alternatives 2, 3, and 4 do these religious believers accept? The least plausible of these alternatives is alternative 3. Some of the commands reported to have been made by God cannot plausibly be thought really to correspond to rules that meet the rule-utilitarian criterion. Hence I think those religious believers who do not disbelieve the reports from long ago about God's commands face a choice between alternatives 2 and 4.

Therefore, which is the more plausible of the following two alternatives: that even if the reports from long ago about God's commands weren't mistaken, the commands that seem incompatible with a rule-utilitarian criterion of correct moral rules were not meant to apply outside of a long-gone context, or that God was not a rule-utilitarian? When we think about how silly or severe some of these reported commands were, the most plausible explanation is that these reports from long ago about God's commands were mistaken. The second most plausible explanation is that the commands were not meant to apply outside of a long-gone context. Much less plausible than those two explanations are the two explanations that the commands in question are somehow compatible with rule-utilitarianism and that God was not a rule-utilitarian.

I have been discussing the idea that, if there is an all-knowing God, rule-utilitarianism is easier to defend against the objection that we cannot know which rules are the ones whose internalization would produce the best consequences than it is if there is no such God. Let me now turn to the idea that rule-utilitarianism is easier to defend than act-utilitarianism is if an atheistic world-view is accepted than if a traditional Christian world-view is accepted.

Act-utilitarianism is regularly attacked for being excessively demanding. The normal form of this objection is that the theory requires a level of self-sacrifice from individuals for the sake of aiding others that is unreasonable to require. If we accept an atheistic world-view, individuals are compensated for whatever sacrifices they make for the sake of others *only* either by the pleasure or sense of achievement that the individual gets from these acts, or by admiration and gratitude from other people. The rewards that come

from within the individual or from other people are unlikely to compensate for the sacrifices that act-utilitarianism requires of the individual. Indeed, most atheists think act-utilitarianism requires so much sacrifice that its demands are seriously unreasonable.

If there is an all-powerful and perfectly good God, on the other hand, then perhaps the sacrifices that act-utilitarianism calls for are fully compensated by God. The impact of divine rewards for the kind and divine punishments for the unkind extinguishes the demandingness objection to act-utilitarianism.¹⁰ In this respect, act-utilitarianism is far easier to defend if there is an all-powerful and perfectly good God than if there is not.

To those atheists who find act-utilitarianism excessively demanding, rule-utilitarianism can look more attractive than act-utilitarianism. Rule-utilitarianism's strictures about benefiting others are normally less demanding than act-utilitarianism's. Rule-utilitarianism starts with the question 'which rule about aid is the one whose internalization by us as a group has the greatest expected utility?', rather than the question 'which act can I as an individual do now to maximize expected utility?'

Whether the duty to aid that rule-utilitarianism specifies is, though not excessively demanding, intuitively plausible is a further matter.¹¹ Most problematic for rule-utilitarianism are cases where one knows that, because others are not doing what is required of them to help, one could produce much more aggregate utility by doing more, indeed far more, than one's own fair share. The classic examples of this are the cases where others in a position to help are not contributing to some rescue effort and one could save more lives by contributing more than one's fair share. In such cases, Singer quickly moves in an act-utilitarian direction, despite the extreme demands on him that this entails. Here he sets an example no one could fail to admire and only a few manage to match.

In conclusion, the philosophical threads out of which Singer's morality is woven are a rule-utilitarian approach to questions about which laws and policies and rules we should have and an act-utilitarian willingness to undertake additional sacrifices to make up for others' failing to do their fair share. On reflection, we might think that this act-utilitarian element renders the morality fit for saints rather than for ordinary human beings. We can hardly deny, however, its appeal as an ideal.

¹⁰ Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 503–6.

¹¹ See my *Ideal Code, Real World*, ch. 8 and 'Rule-consequentialism and Internal Consistency: A Reply to Card', *Utilitas* 19 (2007): 514–19.

PART III

Practical issues

*What is good for the distant future?
The challenge of climate change for utilitarianism*

Tim Mulgan

When I was first invited to present at the Oxford conference, I was not sure why. If you are either a Christian ethicist or Peter Singer, then your role at a conference titled *Christian Ethics Engages Peter Singer* is clear. But what if you are neither a Christian ethicist nor Peter Singer? Aside from offering some observations on the debate between Singer and his Christian critics, I decided that my role was to represent other strands of the utilitarian tradition in moral philosophy; and perhaps to suggest some places (both theoretical and practical) where Christian ethicists may have more in common with other utilitarians than with Singer himself. I tried to embody this role in my talk. In this expanded version of my paper, I make it more explicit – addressing some broader questions about utilitarianism raised at the conference.¹

My training is in analytic moral philosophy. Most of my research has been in consequentialist normative ethics, focusing on the demands of morality and our obligations to future people.² While my work is in secular ethics, one of my current projects argues that the most plausible form of consequentialism both requires and supports an unconventional form of theism. Another strand of my current research asks how moral and political philosophy should respond to the threat of climate change.³ Climate change has obvious practical implications. It will kill millions of people, wipe out thousands of species, and so on. My concerns in this essay are much narrower and more theoretical. I use climate change to illustrate some theoretical issues relevant to debates

¹ I am grateful to John Perry, Nigel Biggar, and the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics & Public Life for their generous invitation to speak at the Oxford conference, and to Virginia Dunn for arranging my travel and accommodation so efficiently. For conversations on the themes of this essay, I am grateful to the conference participants, especially Peter Singer.

² Tim Mulgan, *The Demands of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2001 and *Future People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ Tim Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World* (Durham: Acumen, 2011).

between Christian ethics and utilitarianism – especially in relation to well-being.

My starting point is Peter Singer's own recent move away from preference utilitarianism in the third edition of *Practical Ethics*.⁴ Singer acknowledges that, if we equate well-being with preference satisfaction, we cannot make moral sense of choices that impact on future people. Our obligations to those people must be grounded on something more objective than what they will desire. We cannot avoid our obligations to future people by manipulating their psychology – or their environment – so that they never want the good things that are lost.

This amendment to Singer's theory is a significant one. For what it's worth, I think it is a step in the right direction. I wonder what impact it might have elsewhere in Singer's practical ethics.⁵ But that is not my concern here. My present question is whether Singer moves far enough away from preferences. This essay briefly addresses four topics: the utilitarian tradition, the illusion of neutrality, the ethics of belief, and obligations to the distant future.

The utilitarian tradition

A utilitarian ethic is sometimes presented as an alternative to historically situated religious traditions such as Christianity.⁶ If we compare an entire tradition with one philosopher considered in isolation (Christian ethics vs Peter Singer), this contrast may seem plausible. But once we note the variety of divergent views held by philosophers who self-identify as utilitarian, the stark contrast becomes less compelling.

Textbook discussions of utilitarianism fall into two camps. Some discuss the classical utilitarians from a purely *historical* perspective, without reference to subsequent developments in moral philosophy. At the other extreme, problem-based ethics courses are often entirely *ahistorical*, so that utilitarianism is presented as an abstract moral principle miraculously emerging from the philosophical ether. I find it more fruitful to think of

⁴ See also Singer's recent review of Parfit's *On What Matters* ('The Most Significant Work in Ethics Since 1873', *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 2011) and Charles Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 6.

⁵ In particular, changes in one's view of what makes life worth living might impact on one's view of when a morally worthwhile life either *begins* or *ends*.

⁶ This section was influenced by several discussions at the Oxford conference, especially Nigel Biggar's closing remarks.

utilitarianism as a living tradition, as opposed to either an outdated view of merely historical interest or an ahistorical set of abstract principles.⁷

The denial of tradition is a perennial philosophical trope. Each generation seeks to sweep aside the errors and prejudices of the past, and re-found philosophy on pure reason. Often some comparatively recent event – the Reformation, the advent of ‘modernity’, the rise of science, the discovery of evolution, the death of God, the invention of Twitter – is said to have ushered in a brave new world where previous thought has no place or relevance. Within contemporary analytic philosophy, this perennial tendency is reinforced by a sense of inferiority that drives academics in the humanities to ape the methods of the natural sciences. If philosophy really delivers knowledge – just as physics does – then a philosophy graduate student has no more need to read dead philosophers than a physics graduate student has to read Newton. In either case, the *truths* discovered by earlier thinkers will be found – distilled and digestible – in the opening pages of some textbook. This can lead to presentism where undergraduates are given nothing to read that was written before they themselves were born.

However, many moral philosophers reject this extreme presentism. Like many other founders of distinct philosophical movements, the classical utilitarians did present their philosophy as a clean break with the past. But presentism is not essential to utilitarianism. Quite the reverse – to identify *as a utilitarian* is explicitly to lay claim to one particular philosophical legacy.

Utilitarianism is not an isolated tradition. Many utilitarians also identify with other historical streams. We think of ourselves as analytic moral philosophers, as analytic philosophers, as Western philosophers, or simply as philosophers. We look for inspiration to Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, or Frege as well as earlier utilitarians. Institutionally, some utilitarians think of themselves more as political theorists, or political scientists, than as philosophers.

Utilitarians thus engage in many of the same debates as Christian ethicists. We too must decide which historical figures belong to our tradition. Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill, and Henry Sidgwick are clearly in – as are some later figures such as R.M. Hare, Derek Parfit, and Singer himself. Aristotle, Kant, and Elizabeth Anscombe are clearly out.⁸ But some figures

⁷ I develop this presentation of utilitarianism in my *Understanding Utilitarianism* (Durham: Acumen, 2006).

⁸ Actually, even with these canonical non-utilitarians, the classification is not entirely uncontroversial. Some conference participants highlighted parallels between Aristotelian teleology and consequentialism, while

are less clear. Were David Hume, Adam Smith, or G.E. Moore utilitarians? Is John Rawls's justice as fairness a *rival* to utilitarianism or merely a new *variant* of it? Similar disputes arise for contemporary figures, and for specific philosophical positions. To focus only on other utilitarian speakers at the conference, do Toby Ord's global consequentialism, Brad Hooker's rule-consequentialism, or my own 'messy' consequentialism all count as utilitarian moral theories?⁹

Every attempt to define the essence of utilitarianism either leaves out some clear exemplars or includes some paradigm non-utilitarians. Utilitarians disagree among themselves about, inter alia, the meaning of life, the aggregation of value, the existence of other values besides happiness, the metaphysical foundations of morality, the existence of God, the connection between utilitarianism and religion, the demands of morality, and the primary focus of moral theorizing. Utilitarians have been hedonists, preference theorists, or objective list theorists; total utilitarians, average utilitarians, or lexical theorists; defenders of justice, fairness, beauty, or environmental value; moral realists, error theorists, cognitivists, non-cognitivists, emotivists, expressivists, fictionalists, ethical naturalists, ethical non-naturalists, or ethical supernaturalists; theists, atheists, or agnostics; extreme ascetics or complacent bourgeois liberals. And utilitarians have prioritized acts, rules, institutions, character traits, motives, possible worlds, possible futures, possible histories, or none of these. On the question most pertinent to this volume, utilitarians have thought that Christianity implies, contradicts, supports, opposes, or is irrelevant to utilitarianism.

For this reason, the discovery that Peter Singer may be moving away from preference utilitarianism and prescriptivism, and towards more objective accounts of both well-being and the nature of morality, is perhaps more significant to Christian ethicists than to his fellow utilitarians. For us, this merely represents a shift from one standard utilitarian package to another. (To put it very crudely: it is the shift from R.M. Hare to Derek Parfit.¹⁰)

As in Christian ethics, the utilitarian tradition also contains distinct *vocations*. Some of us are *theorists* who aim to understand morality, while others are *polemicists* who strive to improve the world. In the standard tale, Bentham is the arch-polemicist, Sidgwick the esoteric theorist, and Mill

one striking claim of Derek Parfit's *On What Matters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011) is that Kant is most charitably interpreted as a rule-consequentialist. (Though one worries that both readings are akin to those 'charitable' attempts to argue that Plato or Aristotle were 'really' a Christian.)

⁹ 'Messy' was the description applied to my view by Eric Gregory at the Oxford conference.

¹⁰ Contrast R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), with Parfit, *On What Matters*.

some unhappy (in every sense) mix of the two. Today, Peter Singer is our leading polemicist, and Derek Parfit our leading theorist.¹¹

Another relevant vocational difference is between *philosophers* and *bio-ethicists*. Bioethics is a new tradition with its own exemplars, preoccupations, and fashions. Some of these are common ground with other utilitarians, but many are not. Utilitarian moral philosophers are more likely to focus on the demands of morality, the rights of animals, or our obligations to the future, than on medical ethics. More generally, each utilitarian philosopher – like any academic – focuses on some questions to the virtual exclusion of others. Those who focus on applied ethics often gloss over imaginary or unlikely scenarios where the different versions of utilitarianism come apart. Those who concentrate on future people are typically more attuned to the limitations of simple accounts of well-being or aggregation – and to the fact that all moral theory is built on the shifting sands of intuition. And so on.

Given this diversity, it would be unwise to single out any individual as ‘representative’ of the utilitarian tradition. And Peter Singer is, in many ways, very unrepresentative of contemporary utilitarianism. This is often to his credit. At a time when most academics write only for one another, Singer makes a significant contribution to public debate. But, partly because of this difference in focus, Singer often defends philosophical positions that are now minority views within utilitarian moral philosophy.

Of course, Christian ethicists have a different relation to their tradition than utilitarians. My list of utilitarian forebears does not include a person we identify as God. And, however often we pore over the works of Mill or Sidgwick, we don’t actually think they were divinely inspired. But it is important not to overestimate the differences – to fall into the cartoon picture where the Christian slavishly and literally interprets his sacred text, while the utilitarian applies her impartial reason unfettered by prejudice or historical contingency. In reality, the two approaches, while distinct, are not *that far* apart.

The illusion of neutrality

Preference utilitarianism is sometimes presented as a neutral framework for practical ethics in a pluralist society. Some of Singer’s comments suggest this reading.¹² Everyone agrees that preferences matter, he says, while other

¹¹ I hasten to add that, for the utilitarian, ‘polemicist’ is not a term of disapprobation – any more than ‘preacher’ is for the Christian.

¹² See, especially, the introductory chapters in Singer, *Practical Ethics*.

foundational moral claims are controversial. Preferences thus provide a neutral basis for ethical debate. Another advantage is that, because the value of giving people what they want is *obvious*, we can avoid controversial questions about the foundations or justifications of our value claims.

To see why this argument fails, I first distinguish a range of neutrality claims. We can claim neutrality either for a certain *vocabulary* or for a set of *substantive* claims. And we can defend neutrality either on the basis of *common ground* or by appeal to the *neutrality of reason*. The least ambitious position offers a neutral vocabulary as common ground. We all *understand* talk of preferences or the natural world, while many preference theorists and atheists find themselves unable to comprehend talk of objective goods or supernatural entities. Therefore, preference utilitarians speak a neutral *language*, formulating their claims and arguments in terms that all rational people can understand, whereas objectivists and Christian ethicists speak a private language.

The search for a neutral language of public reason has been fraught with disappointment. Many proposals simply represent a refusal to understand one's opponent's substantive claims. Why should those with the least imagination set the terms of debate? Furthermore, a neutral *vocabulary* actually presupposes *substantive* neutrality, as we need a set of uncontroversial common claims to fix the meaning of our neutral terms. Unfortunately, as we will now see, there is no substantive common ground.¹³

In contemporary moral theory – even among utilitarians – not everyone agrees that preferences matter *at all*. To borrow Derek Parfit's terminology: *objectivists* agree that your life goes well if you desire a good thing and get it.¹⁴ But the source of value here is nothing to do with your *preferences*; it lies in the nature of the thing you prefer. Satisfying a worthless desire does nothing to improve someone's life. Even when objectivists do agree that preferences matter, they don't agree that moral *significance* tracks *strength* of

¹³ Sometimes science is presented as a source of either neutral vocabulary or neutral claims. Consider, for instance, the following remarks of Philip Kitcher: 'for people who view the standards of scientific inquiry as the standards for our beliefs, the inquiries towards which I've gestured have made the acceptance of supernaturalist religion unsustainable. How should the results of these inquiries shape the policies and practices of a democratic society in which a majority of people center their lives on religious doctrines and values that derive from those doctrines?' ('Science, Religion, and Democracy', *Episteme* 5:1 (2008): 11). This view faces obvious problems. First, it simply isn't true that everyone agrees that scientific criteria yield atheism. Second, the claim that scientific reasoning exhausts rationality is increasingly controversial. Consider a moral nihilist analogue of Kitcher's argument: People who defer to science are agreed that moral claims have no rational basis. Therefore, moral claims have no place in public discourse.

¹⁴ See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Appendix I; Parfit, *On What Matters*; James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

preference. Finally, preference utilitarianism is clearly not neutral if it presents preferences as the *exclusive* objects of moral concern.

If there is no neutral common ground, can preference utilitarians appeal to the neutrality of reason? This appeal too can be presented in terms of either vocabulary or substance. The vocabulary claim is that one's opponent's terms are unintelligible, while the substantive claim is that one's opponent's claims are merely false. I focus here on the substantive position, as it is the less extreme. (Also, rejection of the substantive claim entails rejection of the vocabulary claim. If one's opponent's claims are true, then her vocabulary cannot be meaningless.)

Many utilitarians have offered 'proofs' of the utility principle. Most famous here, of course, is Mill's proof in [chapter 3](#) of *Utilitarianism*. The example that was most influential for Singer himself is R.M. Hare's attempt to derive a utilitarian ethic from the analysis of moral language.¹⁵ Hare's first step is to defend a *prescriptivist* analysis of moral terms. Moral terms are like commands or prescriptions. If I say 'People ought not to murder', I am not expressing my emotions. Rather, I am issuing a command. It is as if I said, 'Don't murder!' What distinguishes moral terms from other prescriptions is their universal character. While an ordinary command implies nothing about what others should or shouldn't do, a moral term implies a *universal prescription*. If I am using the word in a moral sense, I cannot say that you ought not to murder without committing myself to the claim that, in the same circumstances, no one else should murder either. A moral statement, by definition, must be *universalizable*. On Hare's view, moral terms have a unique grammatical role, as they alone express universal prescriptions.

Hare then derives utilitarianism from universal prescriptivism. The key step is the move from universalizability to *impartiality* – the idea that the logic of morals must take equal account of everyone's preferences. In his *Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick famously noted the logical gap between universalizability and impartiality. A rational egoist might easily prescribe her own attitude universally: 'Everyone should pursue (only) his or her own self-interest.' Hare tries to bridge this gap as follows. If I issue an ordinary command, then I do so on the basis of my own preferences. Of course, I *could* make a universal prescription based on my own preferences ('Everyone should do x because that is what I want'). But no one would take any notice, because no one would regard such a prescription as *moral*. If I want you to take my universal prescription seriously, then I must base it,

¹⁵ My summary of Hare's argument draws on Mulgan, *Understanding Utilitarianism*, 51–5. For fuller discussion, see Hare, *Moral Thinking*.

not only on my own current preferences, but also on the preferences I would have if I were you. I must *fully represent* to myself what it would be like to be in each person's situation. To make a moral claim, I must seek to reflect everyone's preferences impartially. And, Hare argues, the best way to do this is to ask myself what I would prefer if I (somehow) took on everyone else's preferences in addition to my own. I can only say 'Everyone should do x' if x is what I would want if I had internalized all the preferences of everyone involved. What ought to be done is whatever maximizes total preferences. Impartiality thus leads directly to a form of utilitarianism based on a preference theory of well-being.

Hare's proof, like Mill's, aims to remove reasonable philosophical disagreement; to reach a point where, if your opponent fails to concede, he can be dismissed as irrational. Hare's ambitious argument unites a general approach to philosophy (linguistic analysis), a specific meta-ethic (prescriptivism), a specific form of utilitarianism (Hare's two-level view), and a specific account of well-being (preference utilitarianism). The problem, of course, is that at every point many seemingly rational philosophers disagree. Indeed, as we have seen, such disagreement is rife even *within* utilitarianism. All the disagreements listed above involve people familiar with Hare's arguments. If the test is to actually get all rational people to agree, then no one passes it. And induction from the history of philosophy suggests that, at least in this world as it is, no one ever will.

To illustrate these disagreements, I now examine one concrete example of how utilitarian philosophers actually settle their disputes among themselves: the problem of evil or sadistic preferences.¹⁶

A common objection is that, in the stock example where Christians are fed to lions, utilitarianism weighs the pleasure of the spectators against the pain of the victims. (Singer, of course, would add the pleasure of the lions into the mix.) Or consider the specific example discussed at the conference. According to the preference utilitarian, the Holocaust was wrong because it frustrated the preferences of those who were slaughtered. But the Holocaust wasn't *all* bad – at least the Nazis enjoyed it. (Their satisfaction is massively outweighed by the suffering of their victims. But it still counts for something.)

This strikes many people as absurd. A person's satisfaction in gassing innocent people has no value at all. The fact that some Nazis enjoyed the

¹⁶ This particular example arose several times at the Oxford conference and continued afterwards in a debate between Peter Singer and Nigel Biggar ('Putting a Value on Human and Animal Life', *Standpoint*, www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/3990/full).

Holocaust makes the world worse, and it makes *their own lives* go worse. Even many self-described preference utilitarians would agree that not *all* preferences make your life go better.

How do utilitarians settle a dispute like this? Some begin by setting up one answer as the default. A preference utilitarian might argue that the natural default is that all preferences count equally. But why is *that* the default? Why give equal weight to preferences rather than pleasures, or objective goods, or persons? Why *only* preferences? And why *all* preferences? Finally, even if there is a presumption in favour of counting all preferences equally, we can surely ask whether that presumption is rebutted. If preference utilitarianism obliges us to say that the Holocaust would have been worse if no one had enjoyed it, then isn't that a sufficient reason to reject it? If not, then what *would* be sufficient?

As there is no agreed default, actual utilitarian practice always comes down to conflicting appeals to intuition. At some point, reason gives way to revelation. Singer himself concedes this when he speaks of basic intuitions telling us that pain is bad, or that preference-satisfaction is good.¹⁷ But there are no interesting universally accepted intuitions; and many widely accepted intuitions are abstract or vague. Perhaps we agree that it is usually good to satisfy preferences. But how compelling is the intuition that it is *always intrinsically* good to satisfy someone's preferences?

Utilitarian moral philosophers lack a convincing story about when and why these appeals to intuition are rational. This is linked to a deeper meta-ethical unease. Utilitarians cannot decide whether we are stipulating, legislating, persuading, prescribing, constructing, working out the implication of our own preconceptions, or exploring a realm of independently existing moral truths.

These are familiar theoretical disputes that often seem to lack practical application. This is where climate change enters the picture. Climate change brings to the fore places where controversial objective elements become crucial. This is because it focuses attention on our obligations to future people, on their relative weight compared to other obligations, and on the deeper question of why (and under what conditions) human life is valuable. I return to the impact of climate change in my final section, following a brief digression about the connection between morality and religion.

¹⁷ See, especially, his remarks collected in Charles Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ch. 6.

Neutrality about religion

I would suggest that an analogous appeal to neutrality underlies the sidelining of religion found in much practical ethics, including Singer's. Singer does include brief discussions of the Euthyphro dilemma, of Old Testament morality, and of the epistemic troubles of theism. While these discussions gesture towards the difficulty of basing ethics on religion, I take it that another driving thought is something like this: 'We can't agree whether or not there is a God. But we all agree there is a natural world. So let's proceed as if there were only a natural world and no God.'¹⁸

But do theists and atheists actually agree about the natural world? Do they really agree that natural properties have a *moral* significance that is independent of whether the world or the creatures within it (a) just happen to exist for no reason; or (b) were created by a perfect being for some very specific purpose?

Consider a case that brings together well-being and religion. Objectivists, both religious and non-religious, often accord intrinsic value to (in ascending order of 'religiousness') knowledge, understanding of the world and one's place in it, religion, or an appropriate relationship with the divine. By contrast, for the preference utilitarian, if you don't care about these things, then that's fine. What matters is how people's beliefs feed into their preferences and not whether those beliefs are true. What would it mean to be neutral between these two views or the metaphysical positions that lie behind them? Once they allow some objective element, utilitarians must examine the *truth* of competing metaphysical claims, and not merely their subjective role in people's lives.

Over the centuries, many theist philosophers have turned to reason to find a neutral view about God by beginning their discussions of other philosophical problems (from the existence of the external world to the nature of justice) with proofs of the existence of God designed to convince any rational person.¹⁹ Even among theists, such confidence in reason is uncommon today. But the opposite view is quite widespread. It is often

¹⁸ A similar thought presumably lay behind Julian Savelescu's provocative suggestion, at the end of the first day of the Oxford conference, that Singer offers something that Christian ethics cannot, by its nature, possibly offer. Singer offers arguments that can appeal to every rational person. By contrast, because some rational persons do not believe in God, and because Christian ethics must make non-trivial reference to God, Christian ethics cannot hope to appeal to every rational person. In his closing remarks the next day, Nigel Biggar responded to this challenge on behalf of Christian ethics.

¹⁹ As one example, consider Jeremy Waldron's recent discussion of the role, in Locke's political philosophy, of the claim that the existence of God is available to human reason: Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

presumed that the *non-existence* of God can be demonstrated to (and is therefore accepted by) all rational people; that atheism is thus 'neutral' ground among rational people; and that anyone who believes in God is simply irrational.

If Singer believes this, then he is certainly in good (or, at least, clever and successful) philosophical company. Atheism was the default position in late twentieth-century analytic philosophy. I argue elsewhere that the presumption of atheism is much more common than it might appear.²⁰ Many ostensibly agnostic philosophical arguments only work if one presumes the non-existence of God. This tendency is especially pronounced in meta-ethics, where contemporary discussions of anti-realism and ethical naturalism (in particular) only make sense if one has already excluded the possibility that there might be a God. (And not because that possibility has been considered, discussed, and then set aside; but rather because it has never been mentioned.²¹)

If the utilitarian claim to neutrality takes this form, then the conversation begun at the Oxford conference is over before it begins. If every rational person accepts the non-existence of God, then Christian ethicists must be irrational and the 'engagement' between utilitarians and Christian ethicists reduces to a debate over the existence of God.

On the other hand, if we find the dismissal of Christians as irrational no more compelling than the parallel dismissal of atheists, then we must seek a different account of neutrality: one where a 'rationally compelling proof' convinces both believers and unbelievers alike *without* first transforming them into (as the case may be) unbelievers or believers. This difficult philosophical task remains in its infancy. For centuries, Western philosophy has been governed by either theist *or* atheist presumptions. The search for genuinely neutral modes of philosophical argument, and even for a genuinely neutral philosophical vocabulary, is only beginning.²²

²⁰ Tim Mulgan, *Purpose in the Universe: The Moral and Metaphysical Case for Ananthropocentric Purposivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²¹ For instance, when ethical naturalists identify moral truth with what would emerge at the limit of rational enquiry, they do not take seriously the possibility that such an enquiry might end (or be ended by) a decisive proof of the existence of God. See, for example, Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²² This philosophical task mirrors the political task of taking seriously the possibility that religious beliefs might be *true*, rather than merely 'respecting' people's beliefs while proceeding on the assumption that they are false. I address this political dimension in Mulgan, 'The Place of the Dead in Liberal Political Philosophy', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7 (1999): 52–70; Mulgan, 'Neutrality, Rebirth and Inter-generational Justice', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19 (2002): 3–15.

A utilitarian ethic of belief

The diversity within utilitarianism highlights a problem for Christian ethics that was raised several times at the Oxford conference. What is distinctively *Christian* about Christian ethics? If Christian ethicists want to make a distinctive or novel criticism of Singer's utilitarianism, then they must do more than simply object to his exclusive focus on preferences, his demanding act-utilitarianism, or his anti-realist meta-ethic. To offer an alternative, they cannot merely offer an objective account of well-being or a realist view of morality – because both of those are already available within utilitarianism.

The diversity of the utilitarian tradition also raises a question for utilitarians. What is distinctive about utilitarianism? Any account will be controversial, especially in light of my earlier remarks. However, over the next two sections, I explore the distinctive elements of utilitarianism in the course of developing a utilitarian account of our response to climate change. I will then use that account to illustrate the themes of earlier sections. For our purposes, three distinctive features of any utilitarian ethic of belief are especially significant.

The first is a commitment to impartiality, and especially *temporal impartiality*. As Bentham said: 'Each is to count for one, and none for more than one.'²³ Human well-being is equally valuable, no matter whose it is *or when they live*. Utilitarians place intergenerational justice centre-stage.

Second, utilitarians follow Bentham's instruction to *avoid caprice*. We must guard against our natural tendency to give undue weight to our interests, views, values, traditions, or perspectives. This admonition is cognitive, as well as practical. We must be wary of our natural human tendency to *believe* what suits our interests, aligns our duties with our inclinations, confirms our prejudices, or otherwise enables us to think well of ourselves.

Finally, utilitarianism tells us not only what to do, but also how to think and what to think about. Our cognitive powers and our time are limited. We cannot explore all moral or empirical questions. Impartiality, especially temporal impartiality, directs our *attention* to issues where most is at stake, and away from parochial affluent obsessions.²⁴

These features are all exemplified by the work of Peter Singer in relation to animals, the distant starving, and (more recently) the distant future. (It

²³ There is some historical debate whether Bentham actually said this, but the phrase has stuck ever since it was attributed to him by J.S. Mill.

²⁴ For instance, given the urgency of global poverty and climate change, could any utilitarian justify the attention that we *moral philosophers* devote to the ethical niceties of expensive medical care, any more than she could justify the disproportionate amount of money that we *citizens* spend on such care?

would be interesting to ask to what extent Christian ethics shares these three features.²⁵) But these features may push utilitarianism in a very un-Singer direction.

Given the utilitarian commitment to temporal impartiality, climate change is the most important moral issue we face (*if* what most climate scientists say is true). The utilitarian's primary epistemic goal, therefore, is to decide what to think about climate change. On the empirical side, she will begin with the consensus of expert opinion, and then ask whether dissenting voices cast doubt on that consensus, taking special note of the human tendency to wish-fulfilment and self-interest in herself and others.

The conscientious utilitarian will largely follow Singer's own discussion of climate change in *Practical Ethics*. I won't retrace Singer's steps here. Instead I note that the commitment to impartiality and the admonition to avoid caprice both extend to moral theory. Our utilitarian citizen will be suspicious of both moral *theories* and accounts of *well-being* that favour her own interests or those of other present people. Notoriously, many moral theories – especially those that base morality or justice on bargains, contracts, or agreements – have great difficulty making any sense of obligations to future people.²⁶ When they do accommodate such obligations, these theories typically treat them as an ad hoc afterthought. Every moral theory copes better with some questions than others. If a theory offers a compelling account of relations between contemporaries, then it is tempting to conclude that its intergenerational incoherence doesn't matter. If there were no conflict between present and future people, then this failing would not matter in practice. But, thanks to climate change, it does.

Climate change (1) creates conflict between present and future people, (2) introduces the possibility that future people will be worse off than present people, and (3) threatens the possible loss of natural background conditions that we take for granted, including the very existence of a future human civilization continuous with our own. Given utilitarian temporal impartiality, the failure to make good sense of intergenerational justice is no longer a minor flaw; it is an indication that one's moral theory fails to respond to what really matters. This failure of impartiality is also a case of caprice, because the flaw in these theories is that they privilege the interests of present people: ourselves.

²⁵ For instance, the conference session on charity nicely illustrated all three features of utilitarianism.

²⁶ For more on the difficulties faced by social contract theories here, see Mulgan, *Future People*, ch. 2; Mulgan, *Ethics for a Broken World*.

Faced with the urgent threat of climate change, the utilitarian judges moral theories by their ability to make sense of our relations with future people. The utilitarian should also be wary of caprice when thinking about well-being. She knows that, if she privileges preferences, it will be much easier to justify focusing on herself. She knows her own preferences, she doesn't know what other people want, preference-based theories often discount the future, it's not clear how the preferences of future people enter the equation, the task of discovering what really matters is so hard, life is so much easier if we can bypass controversial foundational questions, and so on. A utilitarian atheist might also worry that preference theory attracts her in part *because* it avoids the long slide through objective goods to theism. A utilitarian who realizes all this should suspect her own attraction to preference theory.

Obligations to the distant future

To explore what we owe to distant future people, I focus on a single abstract thought experiment. Like every other human endeavour, our current civilization will eventually collapse, disintegrate, or fade away. Suppose there will be people living in this place long after we are gone. What do we owe to them?

This question is a useful corrective to our tendency to think of our own society as exceptional or eternal (a tendency political philosophers reinforce when they talk of society as a scheme of social cooperation extending forward in perpetuity). My question presupposes no timescale, and no particular causation. It does not attribute the collapse to climate change. My tale mirrors, not the paranoid hypochondriac, but rather the sober person who realizes that, as a matter of fact, at some point in the future, he will die.

The distant future people living here may be our distant descendants. Or they may be entirely unrelated to us. Their identity may depend on us, but then again it may not. My question thus sidesteps theoretical puzzles such as Parfit's non-identity problem.²⁷

An intuitive way into my question is to ask: What are we *grateful* that the people who were here, in this place, a thousand years ago left behind for us? And what else do we *wish* they had left us in addition?²⁸

²⁷ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, part 4.

²⁸ These questions have a very different flavour in different places. I grew up in New Zealand, which a thousand years ago was a human-free ecological paradise; I wrote this paper in New Jersey, where the

As with any thought experiment, this one tests our moral intuitions, considered moral judgements, call them what you will. A thought experiment is not itself an argument; nor are our reactions any kind of evidence or data. (As we saw in the section ‘The illusion of neutrality’, utilitarians disagree about their own thought experiments.) Its purpose is illustrative, suggestive, and pedagogical. But a good thought experiment can serve that purpose well. There’s a reason why many of us start our lectures on the demands of morality with Singer’s example of the child drowning in a shallow pond.

To save time, I will simply answer my own question, and then seek to explain that answer. We do owe *something* to distant future people, despite our lack of other connections to them. Utilitarianism easily accommodates this answer. It isn’t the only moral theory that does so. (Christian ethics presumably says the same.) But nor is this an empty victory. Our obligations to distant future people cannot be based on reciprocity, genetic relatedness, common projects, national ties, and so on. They are simply pure duties of common humanity.

Many people are drawn to utilitarianism precisely because it offers a much more satisfying account of our obligations to future people and distant strangers than other approaches in contemporary secular ethics. If you come to moral philosophy with a commitment to these obligations, then the idea that morality is some kind of contract or bargain simply makes no sense.

Duties to distant future people are central to utilitarian thinking about climate change. But even some utilitarians have difficulty truly understanding those duties. And we might wonder whether Singer’s own partial move to objectivism is enough to enable *him* to make sense of them. Can we make do with only ungrounded objective values, or do we need to explore their ontological foundations?

My goal in what follows is focused chiefly on the difficulties faced by preference utilitarianism. Yet it also includes two other features of Singer’s position: his subjectivist meta-ethic and his aspiration towards neutrality. Singer himself raises some of the same worries in the latest edition of *Practical Ethics*. My aim is to push him and other preference utilitarians further in the same direction. I focus on three questions: What should we care about? How should we balance the interests of distant future people against our own? Why should we care at all?

people of a thousand years ago were wiped out by disease, conveniently leaving a pristine landscape for later inhabitants; and I delivered my talk in Oxford, where little has changed in the last thousand years.

Suppose we agree that we *should* care for distant future people. *How* should we care for them? Preference utilitarianism says we should give distant future people what they want, or at least we should not deprive them of things they want. But we have no idea what they will want. Distant future people may be very different from us. They might want anything. (Think of all the crazy things people have wanted in the past.)

You may think this is an exaggeration. Surely, whatever else they want, distant future people will want clean air, stable climate, drinkable water, a beautiful natural environment. Well, they might. Then again, they might not. Not everyone wants all those things, especially the last. Consider an example from Singer's *Practical Ethics*: What if future people prefer virtual reality to encounters with the real natural world?²⁹ What if they *don't* thank us for preserving virgin rainforest rather than pouring all our energies into developing ever-more-intricate computer games? If distant future people have no experience of diverse ecosystems or a stable climate – if they cannot even imagine such things – how can they prefer them?

Objectivists offer a very different account. We ought to ensure that distant future people have access to desirable things like drinkable water, breathable air, stable climate, and ecological diversity. If the natural world is intrinsically valuable, then human lives go better (and perhaps can only go well) when they are appropriately related to that value. This is not a value that the preference utilitarian can easily acknowledge.

The further we look into the future, and the more different that future might be, the harder it is to believe that predications about what people will (or might or could) want are doing any real work. If intergenerational justice were a side issue, this might not matter. But, for the temporally impartial utilitarian, climate change shows that intergenerational justice is the main moral issue we face.

Because climate change gives rise to conflicts between generations, it is not sufficient to know that we should care for future people. We must weigh their interests against our own. Consider a principle Singer himself presents in several places: If we can prevent harm to someone, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do so.³⁰

To interpret Singer's principle, we must cash out the notion of 'comparable moral significance'. The preference utilitarian faces two difficulties. First, this test is virtually impossible to apply to the distant future. Even if I

²⁹ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 244.

³⁰ As with Shallow Pond, this principle was introduced in Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43.

know what future people will want, how do I know how strongly they will want it? Of course, we can easily *stipulate* that their desires are as important as ours, but this is an independent value commitment, not a response to the value of preferences. (Temporal impartiality alone doesn't tell us how to balance preferences located at different times.)

Second, preferences clearly give us the wrong answer. Suppose, to oversimplify greatly, that I ask what I must sacrifice to protect the interests of distant future people. Should I donate money: perhaps to promote awareness of climate change, to develop policies to combat it, to fund research into new technologies, or to support those who will suffer from climate change? If so, how much money? At what point do the projects I must sacrifice count as morally significant? Or perhaps I should also make lifestyle changes. Should I give up meat-eating, or long-distance flights, or the pleasure of owning a large car?

For the preference utilitarian, the answer turns on the strength of my preferences. The objectivist replies that surely what matters is whether the object of my preference is sufficiently valuable to justify the possible harm to distant future people. Contrast the person who flies long-distance simply to sit in the sun and drink cheap alcohol, with someone travelling to see ailing family members, or to visit their young grandchildren. When we ask whether these are things we should be prepared to give up, we do not consider the strength of the preferences. We look instead at the objects of preference and ask 'are these essential (or at least valuable) components of a flourishing human life?'

The issue of weighing is crucial. Practical ethics seeks to shape how people live their lives. Practical ethicists – and here Peter Singer is an exemplar – have influenced behaviour in relation to animal welfare and (to a lesser extent) global poverty. I don't mean to belittle those achievements; they are especially remarkable for an academic philosopher. But it is one thing to get people to give up meat, or to make small donations to charity, and quite another to get them to make life-changing sacrifices to keep the world safe for future people. I don't know whether anything can make enough people do that. But I doubt that a focus on the preferences of future people is the place to start.

We might also wonder whether *any* ethic based only on prescriptions – and not on objective moral *facts* – could have sufficient authority to provide the motivation necessary to grapple with climate change. Climate change thus challenges Singer's subjectivist meta-ethic as much as his preference utilitarianism. This is hardly surprising. Although the two topics are logically distinct, there is obviously a connection between subjectivist accounts

of *well-being* and subjectivist accounts of *morality*. Once our story of what makes human lives worth living includes independent objective values, it is much harder to reduce morality to imperatives. It is no accident that Hare's argument took him from prescriptivism to preference utilitarianism, nor that his opponents often reject both positions together.

To bring our discussion full circle, I will now argue that, by focusing our attention on future people, climate change further undermines the preference utilitarian's claim to be offering a rationally compelling *neutral* position. Consider the following puzzle made famous by Derek Parfit.

The Repugnant Conclusion: For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.³¹

In cases where different possible futures contain different *numbers* of people, traditional utilitarian accounts of aggregation yield this conclusion or some close analogue. Yet, as Parfit notes, many people find this conclusion 'intrinsically repugnant'.

Parfit's repugnant conclusion has been the organizing problem of recent philosophical discussion of our obligations to future people. Most philosophers begin their discussion by stating their response to it. And those responses vary enormously. Here, more than perhaps anywhere else in contemporary utilitarianism, intuitions conflict – and the neutrality of any one position becomes even less plausible. Why should we *add* preferences rather than (say) averaging them? And why treat preferences alone as the measure of well-being? Parfit himself argues that – to avoid the repugnant conclusion and to preserve the intuition that flourishing human lives cannot be swamped by lives that are barely worth living – we must posit a lexical threshold; that is, a point on the scale of well-being such that lives above the threshold are incomparably more valuable than lives below. But such a threshold makes no sense within preference utilitarianism and strongly suggests an objective basis to both well-being and morality.³²

Preference utilitarianism cannot answer the most fundamental questions raised by my thought experiment. I have concentrated on *what* we owe to distant future people. But two prior questions are why we would owe them anything at all and what could motivate us to care for them. In the absence of reciprocity or personal ties, we must fall back on some feature of their

³¹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 388. For a taste of the ensuing debate, see Jesper Ryberg and Torbjörn Tännsjö (eds), *The Repugnant Conclusion: Essays on Population Ethics* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2005).

³² This paragraph abbreviates a much longer discussion in Mulgan, *Future People*, ch. 3.

nature as sentient or rational creatures. The fact that they have preferences seems a pretty weak basis either for moral status or for motivation. The fact that they are creatures who can respond appropriately to independent values does not.

We saw earlier that preference theory promises neutrality by avoiding the need to examine the foundations of value. We have now seen that we cannot understand our obligations to distant future people without embracing objective values. But can we understand those values without digging deeper, by asking *why* these things are valuable and what grounds their value? Can we appreciate why, and how much, we should care for future people without asking what the human story is *for* – and what our place in the cosmos is? If not, can we find a religiously neutral answer to those questions? Or should we seek instead, in John Rawls's phrase, an overlapping consensus where different foundational stories – some atheist, some religious – both converge on the same values and imbue them with the same urgency?³³

³³ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1993.

CHAPTER 8

How to respect other animals: Lessons for theology from Peter Singer and vice versa

David Clough

Once upon a time, O my best beloved, there was a man. For a long time he had eaten fruits and shoots, but one day he began to eat the other animals. He ate wild pigs and earwigs, shellfish and sailfish, rabbits and egrets, hedgehogs and bullfrogs, blackbirds and bluebirds, cats and bats and snails and rails and quails and whales. Only one animal was safe from being eaten by him, and that was the other human beings: those he never ate. One day the daughter of the man was hungry and she asked the man to find her something to eat. And so he looked around for wild pigs and earwigs, shellfish and sailfish, rabbits and egrets, hedgehogs and bullfrogs, blackbirds and bluebirds, cats and bats, and snails and rails and quails and whales, but he could not find a single one. So he went back to his daughter and told her that he could not find anything to eat. The daughter cried that she was hungry and she pointed to a small boy playing nearby.

‘Let me eat him’, she said to the man. ‘He looks quite piggy.’

And the man looked at the small boy and saw that he looked quite like a small pig. But he knew that daughters did not eat boys, so he told the daughter that she could not eat him.

‘But I am so hungry, and he is so piggy’, she said. ‘Why can’t I eat him?’

‘Well . . .’ said the man, and then he did not know what to say next.

‘Yes?’ said the daughter.

‘Well . . .’ said the man again.

‘Yes?’ said the daughter again.

‘Well . . .’ said the man a third time, and then knew he must say something more.

‘Boys are different from pigs. Pigs are food and boys are not. That’s the way it is.’

‘I see’ said the daughter, but she didn’t, and she was still hungry, and she still wanted to eat the piggy boy. So the man told her a story about how a long time ago all the other animals had been made from tasty things, but boys had been made from ear wax. And the daughter didn’t want to eat boys ever again.

Chickens, eggs, and Just So stories

With apologies to Kipling, my reason for recounting this newly coined Just So story is that, like all the best fictions, it contains a truth, albeit an obvious one. It is not the case that a group of vegan human beings met at some point in prehistory to decide that their metaphysical frameworks contained a clear rationale for a human/non-human distinction that permitted the killing of other animals for food, and that some subsequent assembly added that domesticating other animals was also justifiable. Instead, it seems likely that while some early ancestors of humans may have been vegetarian, at some point in evolutionary history long before we had the capacity for moral reflection at any level of sophistication, our ancestors found that they could prey on other animals in order to survive and thrive, and because they could, they did.¹ Ever since then, almost all humans have been born into societies that kill other animals for their food. When they reached the stage of reflecting on what it was that made it justifiable to kill other animals but not human beings for food, philosophers and religious thinkers developed a range of arguments and interpretations of sacred texts to explain the difference between humans and all other creatures that made such different treatment appropriate. In other words, while it may be difficult to say whether the chicken or the egg came first, it is not at all difficult to decide that the human appropriation of both chicken and egg must have preceded any philosophical or religious rationale for the practice. Human beings used other animals for their own purposes because they had the power to do so, just as human groups with power subjugated other groups of humans to their own ends in enslaving them. Those philosophers and theologians like myself who wish to challenge current human practices in relation to other animals must therefore show that while it has been customary and expedient for humans to use other animals for their own ends, there are reasons that we should cease to do so.

The reason that I have laboured the point that philosophical and religious reflection concerning humans and other animals was subsequent to the human exploitation of other animals is that Peter Singer's writing often seems to assume the opposite. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer states that practices such as research on non-human animals, the factory farming of other animals, the slaughter of wild animals for sport or for fur 'should not

¹ See, for example, C.L. Broadhurst *et al.*, 'Brain-Specific Lipids from Marine, Lacustrine, or Terrestrial Food Resources: Potential Impact on Early African Homo Sapiens', *Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology – B: Biochemistry and Molecular Biology* 131:4 (2002): 653–73.

be seen as isolated aberrations' but 'can be properly understood only as the manifestations of the ideology of our species – that is, the attitudes that we, as the dominant animal, have toward the other animals'.² This ideology has Greek and Jewish roots, according to Singer, but was brought together most problematically in Christianity, with its belief in human uniqueness and the immortality of the human soul. It is Christianity, according to Singer, that 'spread the idea that every human life – and only human life – is sacred'.³ In the second edition of *Animal Liberation* (1995), Singer acknowledges elements in the biblical texts that are more friendly towards other animals, such as the idea that humans were vegetarian before the fall, Isaiah's visions of peace between creatures, together with the development of stewardship rather than dominion as the best image of human relationships with other creatures, but nothing can challenge the overall view of humanity as the pinnacle of creation.⁴ While the Old Testament asserted dominion over other species, Singer comments, it 'at least shows flickers of concern for their sufferings', whereas the New Testament 'is completely lacking in any injunction against cruelty to animals, or any recommendation to consider their interests'.⁵

In evaluating Singer's critique of Christianity here, it is important to take care about details. Singer is clearly right that the texts of Genesis 1:26 and Psalm 8:5–8, in which God grants human beings dominion over other creatures, have been interpreted to justify human exploitation of other creatures and that Paul's words 'Is it for oxen that God is concerned?' in 1 Corinthians 9:9 suggest a negative answer. We can agree, then, that there are texts in the Bible that could be deployed to support humans exploiting other animals and that these texts have in fact been used to support such exploitation.

Others of Singer's claims, however, seem to be over-simplistic or false. Take the claim that only Christianity teaches that only human life is sacred, for example. One could make a plausible case that the identification of rationality with divinity in Stoic traditions of thought, together with the attribution of rationality uniquely to human beings among earthly creatures, was an important influence on developing Christian ideas of the status of humanity with respect to other creatures.⁶ If this is true, then it shows that Christianity would not be unique in declaring the key

² Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd edn (London: Pimlico, 1995), 185. ³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 188. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶ Gary Steiner argues, for example, that Stoicism elevates the dividing line between human beings and other animals 'to the status of a cosmic principle'. Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents*:

significance of human life. We could also consider other secular and religious traditions in this context: even Lynn White's provocative 1967 article on the responsibility of Christianity for ecological crisis, which has been widely criticized for its simplistic errors, recognized that Zoroastrianism might espouse a dualism between humanity and nature similar to that which White diagnosed in Christianity.⁷ It therefore looks difficult to sustain the claim that *only* Christianity declares humans to be uniquely sacred. It is also difficult, however, to sustain the claim *that* Christianity declares humans to be uniquely sacred. Here, there are two problems. First, there is a difficulty with the claim that humans are sacred, since even Jesus declares that God alone is good (Luke 18:19) and Christians recognize that human beings are fallen, sinful, and distant from God's holiness. Second, if we reword the claim to say that human beings are valued by God, it is clear that they are not unique in this regard. Even when Jesus is emphasizing the particular concern God has for human well-being, he observes that God cares even for a single sparrow (Matthew 10:31; Luke 12:6–7). Singer's claim here, therefore, is doubly mistaken.

A second example of Singer's misrepresentation of Christianity in *Animal Liberation* is his statement that the New Testament 'is completely lacking in any injunction against cruelty to animals, or any recommendation to consider their interests'.⁸ In the key collection of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, he invites his listeners to 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them' (Matthew 6.26). This is not a moral injunction to be kind to birds, but it is precisely a recommendation to consider their interests in seeking food, and those who see that birds are fellow creatures that God also sustains through providing them with food will not look at them in the same way again. Jesus goes on to note God's care in clothing the lilies of the field as an example of the life free of anxiety he is commending to his followers (Matthew 6:28–30).⁹

The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 77. See my discussion of the influence of Stoicism on Origen and other theologians in David Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology* (London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2012), 10–13.

⁷ Lynn White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155:3767 (1967): 1203–7 (1205). For a summary of the critique of White's thesis, see Peter Harrison, 'Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature', *Journal of Religion* 79:1 (1999): 86–109.

⁸ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 191.

⁹ Richard Bauckham notes that this passage echoes major Old Testament themes of God's provision for all creatures that would have been familiar to his audience, and that the rhetoric of these comparisons only functions insofar as Jesus' hearers are able to recognize their fellow-creatureliness with birds and lilies (Richard Bauckham, 'Reading the Sermon on the Mount in an Age of Ecological Catastrophe', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22:1 (2009): 76–88 (81–4)).

Paul's vision of the liberation of creation similarly functions only insofar as the recipients of his letter are able to understand their common situation with all of creation, in bondage to decay and groaning in labour pains for the freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:18–23). Again, this is not a law against cruelty to non-human animals, but it does set out their plight in common with human fellow creatures and makes clear that God wills their liberation from this situation in a way that has the potential to transform Christian attitudes towards other creatures. In response to Paul's question whether God is concerned for oxen, it is instructive to note John Wesley's response: 'Without doubt, he does. We cannot deny it without flatly contradicting his word.'¹⁰ Paul's comment cannot be interpreted as a contradiction of the biblical creation theology common to the Old and New Testaments. The story of the exorcism of the demon 'Legion' and the subsequent death of the pigs similarly cannot be read literalistically: 'Legion' would have been a clear reference to the Roman occupying forces and the unhappy ending of the Legion in animals they raised in Palestine despite their uncleanness to the Jews would have been recognized as an obvious symbol by Mark's audience.¹¹ Clearly, we do not find a New Testament manifesto for the equal rights of human and non-human animals. Equally clearly, the texts I have cited have often not been interpreted in a way that is positive for the consideration of the interests of other animals. These truths do not, however, necessitate closing down the hermeneutical task by accepting at face value biblical texts that seem problematic and ignoring passages that point to more positive readings of animals. Singer's position here suggests an unholy alliance between those Christians who interpret the Bible to justify excluding non-human animals from moral concern and external critics such as Singer who accept their arguments and use them against Christianity itself.

Singer's rehearsal of complaints against traditions of thinking about non-human animals among philosophers and theologians have frequently been repeated since 1975 when *Animal Liberation* was first published. In an edited book chapter in 1979, Singer repeats his critique of Aristotle, St Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Kant, though in each case there are

¹⁰ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (New York: Ezekiel Cooper and John Wilson, 1806), 117. For discussion of this sermon and other writings of Wesley referring to the welfare of non-human animals, see Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology*, 133–7.

¹¹ See, for example, Teresa Calpino, 'The Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1–20): The Pre-Markan Function of the Pericope', *Biblical Research* 53 (2008): 15–23; J. Garroway, 'The Invasion of a Mustard Seed: A Reading of Mark 5:1–20', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32:1 (2009): 57–75.

complexities of interpretation that point beyond the headlines Singer uses to condemn them.¹² Thirty years on, Singer gives a very similar summary of theological and philosophical thought on animals before the eighteenth century in a journal edition foreword.¹³ A chapter on the environment in the most recent edition of *Practical Ethics* goes through the list again, though notably Singer here identifies ‘gentler spirits’ in the tradition, but states that they had no significant impact.¹⁴ In an interview, Singer defends his selection of voices from the Christian tradition on the basis that those with negative views were the most influential. He also states his belief that many of the most ardent advocates for animals were sceptical about religion and that communities of faith have not been prominent in the modern animal movement.¹⁵ This again ignores significant data: Arnold Maehle shows that theological argument was influential in changes in attitudes towards non-human animals in the eighteenth century and the first national animal welfare society, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (later RSPCA), was founded on explicitly Christian principles by Arthur

¹² For example, Catherine Osborne provides several lines of interpretation suggesting Aristotle did not believe in a simple hierarchy between humans and other animals (Catherine Osborne, *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers: Humanity and the Humane in Ancient Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 98–132). I have already cited other texts in the Pauline corpus that suggest a broader appreciation of creation; Augustine defends the goodness of animals against the Manichees (Augustine, *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, ed. John E. Rotelle, in *The Works of Saint Augustine I/13* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 25–6. He considers the possibility of language in non-human animals (Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, ed. Rotelle, in *The Works of Saint Augustine I/11* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), bk 2, ch. 3) and argues against Basil of Caesarea that fish have memory (Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ed. Rotelle, in *The Works of Saint Augustine I/13* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002)); see discussion in Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology*, 55–6). There are elements in Aquinas’s thought decidedly more positive about the place of non-human animals before God than the texts cited by Singer. On this, see Judith Barad, *Aquinas on the Nature and Treatment of Animals* (San Francisco; London: International Scholars, 1995); John Berkman, ‘Towards a Thomistic Theology of Animality’, in *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM Press, 2009), 21–40. Calvin’s writings demonstrate a complex appreciation of the life of other animals. See Peter Huff, ‘Calvin and the Beasts: Animals in John Calvin’s Theological Discourse’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 42:1 (1999): 67–75. Kant himself seems to have been consistent in refusing to see other animals as ends in themselves (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 212–13), but those working in Kantian philosophical traditions have seen potential in extending his moral scheme to include them. See, for example, Julian Franklin, *Animal Rights and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹³ Peter Singer, ‘Foreword’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33:4 (2010): 427–30.

¹⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 239–41.

¹⁵ Peter Singer, ‘Animal Protection and the Problem of Religion: An Interview’, in *A Communion of Subjects*, ed. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 616–18.

Broome, an Anglican priest, together with Lewis Gompertz, who was Jewish.¹⁶

Singer's view seems to be that if only the Christian underpinnings of the ideology of our species can be removed, there will no longer be an obstacle to the full and unprejudiced recognition of other animals as moral subjects in their own right. We seem here close to a Singerian Just So story that depicts Christianity as the origin and sustainer of all that is wrong between humans and other animals. What separates my view as a Christian theologian and Singer's as a utilitarian atheist at this point seems to me a question of faith: Singer manifests an earnest belief in the goodness and rationality of human moral decision-making based on basic premises about which I confess myself to be a sceptic. A theological way of discussing this would be to refer to the doctrine of the fall: human beings have turned radically from the God who created and will redeem them so that they find it difficult to recognize the good through their use of reason and struggle even more to pursue it when this is contrary to their perceived interests.¹⁷

Since human beings are fallen creatures in this way, it is no surprise to the theologian that human beings have exploited other creatures for their own selfish ends, nor that the fallible traditions of the Church, in common with other traditions of thought, have often preferred interpretations of texts and doctrines that rationalize this exploitation. The human exploitation of other animals was and is not primarily ideologically motivated, however. It needs no ideological motivation: the motivation driving it is a basic human desire to survive and gain economic success, at the cost of human and non-human others if necessary. This is not to say that it is not important to challenge religious and philosophical rationales for such exploitation: it is to say that challenging such rationales is only the first step in changing practice. Once the rationales for exploitation have been deconstructed, it is also necessary to provide persuasive reasons that humans should not exploit other animals in order to encourage people to forgo the advantages they gain from so doing.

¹⁶ Arnold Maehle, 'The Ethical Discourse on Animal Experimentation, 1650–1900', in *Doctors and Ethics: The Earlier Historical Setting of Professional Ethics*, ed. Andrew Wear, Johanna Geyer-Kordesch, and Roger French (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 203–51; Andrew Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology, and Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 109, 187 n. 64.

¹⁷ Given Singer's preference for literalistic interpretations of biblical texts, I should make clear at this point that I differ from him here, too. In common with virtually all theologians, I do not base my understanding of the fall on a literal belief in a historical apple consumed by a historical Adam and Eve; rather, I situate myself in a long Christian tradition dating from at least the second century which recognizes the complex and demanding hermeneutical issues in reading biblical texts rightly.

In emphasizing the point that the primary reason for human exploitation of non-human animals is not ideological, I am not motivated primarily by a concern to defend Christianity against the critique that Singer makes of it. I share with him a sadness and anger that Christian texts and doctrines have been interpreted influentially to support this exploitation: in the main, Christian theology and ethics, in common with wider Western traditions of thinking, have culpably failed to recognize the moral significance of other creatures. My own current theological work seeks to make a small contribution to correcting this failure within Christian traditions, just as Singer's work seeks to correct the failure of secular philosophical thinking. Rather than deflect criticism from Christianity, my concern is twofold. First, it is important that we see the problem of inadequate respect for non-human animals rightly, and therefore identify strategies in response with the potential to address it. To do so, we must recognize that Christianity, unfortunately, is far from unique in rationalizing human exploitation of other animals and challenging this rationale is a task in very many traditions of thought. Second, it is important not to dismiss the positive resources for changing attitudes towards other animals that are present in Christian texts and traditions, most particularly for the large numbers who still give allegiance to Christianity. To keep retelling the false story that no one paid any attention to animals until utilitarians came along is to disconnect and detach moral thinking about animals from the major religious and philosophical traditions that remain the primary influences on the way we think morally about other animals and all else. In order to win adherents to utilitarianism, such tactics might be useful, but the consequences may be severe for the animals whose interests are neglected as a result of persuading Christians that their faith has no relation to animal welfare.

In the context of analytic philosophy, promoting a utilitarian understanding of ethics may represent a promising strategy for advancing the cause of non-human animals: certainly Singer's work has been successful in broadening support for the view that the suffering of non-human animals is morally significant. Other contrasting philosophical approaches may also have a role, notably the animal rights work of Tom Regan¹⁸ and more recently, in the context of Continental philosophy, the work of Jacques Derrida challenging the vast diversity made singular in the term 'the

¹⁸ See, for example, Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Tom Regan and Peter Singer (eds), *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, 2nd edn (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989); Tom Regan, *Defending Animal Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

animal'.¹⁹ In the field of Christian theology, authors such as Stephen R.L. Clark, Andrew Linzey, and Stephen Webb have similarly challenged assumptions about the relative moral standing of humans and other animals.²⁰ Analogous efforts have begun in other disciplines, such as geography, sociology, anthropology, literature, history, and classics.²¹ The common task within each disciplinary sphere is to engage with traditions of thought that have frequently contributed to the rationalization of human exploitation of other animals in order to bring to light what has been assumed about the relationship between humans and other animals and subject it to critical scrutiny with a view to changing attitudes and practices. This is clearly a broad and complex task, requiring an accurate analysis as its foundation: it will not be remedied with a simple Just So story that identifies Christianity as the reason humans use other animals for their own ends and the corresponding conclusion that refuting Christianity is a necessary and sufficient step in abolishing this practice. Those who are concerned about the welfare of non-human animals in these different traditions of thought might give consideration to how they can draw on resources available in each tradition in order to make the broadest possible case that improving the welfare of other animals is a pressing moral imperative.

Especially in contexts where Christianity is influential, to characterize the situation in this way seems poor strategy for defending non-human animals, in addition to poor analysis. To tell Christians that they must not only give up their current views about other animals, but also their sacred texts, traditions, and their God is unlikely to ease the transition towards new modes of thinking about non-human animals. There even seems a danger here that non-human animals have absurdly become ammunition in a

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida and David Wills, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', *Critical Inquiry* 28:2 (2002): 369–418 (399–402).

²⁰ See, for example, Stephen R. L. Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Stephen R.L. Clark, *Animals and Their Moral Standing* (London: Routledge, 1997); Stephen R.L. Clark, *Biology and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Andrew Linzey, *Animal Rights: A Christian Assessment of Man's Treatment of Animals* (London: SCM Press, 1976); Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994); Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1997); Andrew Linzey, *Why Animal Suffering Matters*; Stephen H. Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001).

²¹ See Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (London: Routledge, 2000); Arnold Arluke, *Regarding Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Tim Ingold, *Perception of the Environment: Essays on Liveliness, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2005); Randy Malamud, *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

conflict between Christians and atheists, reminiscent of the scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* where following a series of insults from a French John Cleese, the English are bombarded from castle walls first with a cow and then a variety of other domestic animals. While the animals in theoretical debates are merely abstractions, the real animals subjected to cruelty while moral debates go unresolved are not, and this mode of argument should obviously be something to avoid for all on both sides who care about the well-being of other animals. I therefore propose a truce during which utilitarians – atheistic and otherwise – and Christian theologians concerned about the welfare of non-human animals make common cause based on their respective insights about the relationships between humans and other animals. The following section explores some potential common ground and points of contention in coming to such an understanding.

Christians, utilitarians, and other animals

In their respective positions on non-human animals, I suggest that Christianity and utilitarianism have a common concern in relation to the welfare of other animals, but each tradition of thought has distinctive advantages and disadvantages that might point towards desirable ways in which their positions could be developed. To begin with utilitarianism, I have already noted that the key advantage of a utilitarian framework is that, beyond the recognition that the welfare of non-human animals is significant, utilitarianism can legitimately claim to be able to weigh up welfare considerations fairly across the human/non-human boundary. Singer's preference utilitarianism, for example, which includes a commitment to the 'equality principle' that like interests are given equal weight,²² argues that this principle means that whether or not beings are members of our species is irrelevant to the weighing of their interests.²³ It is important to note, however, that this does not mean that the interests of all animals are treated equally, for two focal reasons. First, Singer considers only sentient beings to be morally considerable: 'If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness, there is nothing to be taken into account.'²⁴ Second, Singer's choice of preference utilitarianism rather than the hedonistic utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill – which aims to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain – means that certain animals weigh more heavily than others. In particular, the preferences of persons, which Singer defines as rational and self-aware beings,²⁵

²² Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 20. ²³ *Ibid.*, 49. ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

are often more significant than those of sentient non-persons. In relation to questions of killing, for example, he argues that 'For preference utilitarians, taking the life of a person will normally be worse than taking the life of some other being, because persons are highly future-orientated in their preferences.'²⁶ The preferences of some beings, therefore, are more equal than others, which makes Singer's utilitarianism potentially more conservative in weighing the interests of persons against non-persons than unqualified hedonistic utilitarianism. The point remains, however, that what Singer considers to be like preferences of beings are treated equally, irrespective of their species membership.

Singer is correct in recognizing that theological accounts of the relative moral significance of human and non-human creatures are unsympathetic to an impartial weighing of needs across species in a similar way. The unique ascription to humanity of the image of God and the granting to them of dominion over other creatures in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 have been influential in Christian arguments for prioritizing human welfare over that of other species. In the New Testament, while Jesus notes God's attentive and providential care for sparrows and the need to rescue sheep even on the Sabbath, he uses both cases rhetorically to point to greater concern for humans and states that humans are of more value than sheep or many sparrows (Matthew 10:31; 12:11–12; Luke 12:6–7). This suggests that Singer's species-neutral proposal is a clear challenge to Christian accounts, though we should note two points in qualification.

First, as we have just noted Singer's argument for the greater significance of the preferences of persons, we should note that this may not be as distant from the biblical texts just cited as he himself believes. One traditional theological interpretation of what is distinctive about human beings that enables them to be images of God is their rationality, which Singer identifies as definitive of personhood, alongside self-consciousness. We could therefore venture to say that personhood is what images God in the world and offer personhood as the explanation of why humans are of more value than sheep or many sparrows. The Genesis text does not consider the possibility of non-human persons, but once we have realized that other animals can be rational and self-conscious like us, we could interpret the image of God in this broader context to include non-human persons. Singer and the Bible would seem then to have a similar way of evaluating the relative value of human and non-human animals: all animals matter, but animals who are persons matter more. In fact, I am unsympathetic to this interpretation of

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

the biblical texts, as I think it mistaken to judge that rationality is what most clearly images God.²⁷ Since I have similar concerns about Singer's privileging of rational creatures, however, my argument here would be against a position that traditional Christian interpretations and Singer might have in common.

The second point to be made in qualification of a simplistic contrast of Singer's preference utilitarianism and Christian interpretations of the relative priority of human and non-human interests arises from an alternative theological interpretation of image of God and dominion.²⁸ The close proximity of the identification of the image of God with humanity and the granting of dominion to them suggests that the two concepts may be closely related. On this basis, we might suggest that by attributing the image of God to human beings, Genesis identifies human beings as those creatures most able to take a God's eye view of creation and make judgements about how it should appropriately be ordered. If this is the implication of understanding the image of God in the context of dominion, there are also reciprocal implications for understanding dominion in the context of the image of God. The kind of dominion that would image God in the world would be the gracious and attentive concern for the well-being of even the humblest creatures frequently referenced in the Bible, in the New Testament passages we have noted but also in the closing chapters of Job and the Psalms in the Old Testament (Job 38–41; Psalms 104; 145). In the vision of Genesis 1, this dominion is peaceful and does not include the use of other animals as food for human beings: God gives seeds and fruit to humankind for food and green plants to the other land animals and birds (Genesis 1:29–30). Some have suggested that the scene in Genesis 2 when God brings the other animals before Adam to be given names (Genesis 2:19) is another indication of a problematic account of dominion, but this is by no means the only way of understanding it. To me it speaks of Adam's task of attending to the particularity of each of God's creatures, like a proto-Linnaeus.²⁹ Christians have reason to supplement this account of what it might be to image God in the world with the example of Jesus Christ, who interpreted his lordship as servanthood. Andrew Linzey has proposed that this means humans are understood in a theological context to be unique by being servants of the other animals, seeking to promote their welfare.³⁰ This

²⁷ See Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology*, 69–70.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 64–7 and 100–2 for a more detailed discussion of this theme.

²⁹ Linnaeus was known as a 'Second Adam'. See Peter Harrison, 'Linnaeus as a Second Adam? Taxonomy and the Religious Vocation', *Zygon* 44:4 (2009): 879–93.

³⁰ Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 57.

original vision of peaceful coexistence between creatures is lost when humanity turns from God and loses its dominion over other animals, and it is clear that humankind has fallen far short of the Godlike care for other creatures envisioned in Genesis. If we consider how humans might rethink their responsibility to other creatures in relation to the first two chapters of Genesis, however, it does not seem fanciful to me to suggest that Singer's project might be one model for carefully attending to the competing claims of the astonishing diversity of other animals with fairness. Perhaps, then, it is not too fanciful to think of Singer as an Adam figure, seeking to deal responsibly with the God-given task of managing relations between creatures. Interpreting the image of God and dominion as task and responsibility, therefore, suggests that Singer's work might be understood as the kind of wise and gracious dominion that Christian theology should be pointing towards.

There seems to me, however, one respect in which a theological account of the respect that should be accorded to non-human animals has a clear advantage over a utilitarian account. Where preference utilitarianism is narrowly focused on the satisfaction of current preferences, theology can appreciate and respond to a number of other dimensions of the lives of non-human animals.³¹ One way to understand this is to consider the meaning of the word 'creature'. Creatures are beings that have been created by God and therefore share a basic commonality as the root of their identity. Beyond all considerations of difference, therefore, a theological account recognizes other animals as the same as humans in this most fundamental respect. When we encounter other animals, we encounter fellow creatures of one God, and therefore should recognize our solidarity and kinship with them. Creatureliness is more than merely a statement of origins, however: Christians believe that the universe is the good creation of a gracious God who continues to sustain it in being and who will bring about its redemption. Creatures, therefore, cannot be understood properly by taking a snapshot of their existence at a particular moment. Instead, a theological understanding is teleological in orientation, seeing the creature of God as on its way from creation to a place in the new creation.³² This teleological vision means that the questions theologians bring to the lives of other

³¹ During the conference in which this paper was first presented, Singer indicated that he was considering moving beyond a utilitarianism governed solely by preference satisfaction. Were he to do so, the common ground between his position and that of Christian theology at this point would be broadened.

³² While there is common ground among theologians that all creatures are created and sustained by God, this consensus breaks down in relation to the question of which creatures will have a place in the

animals concern the place of this creature in God's good purposes and how it may be enabled to thrive and attain the goal God intends for it.

Here we have a strong contrast with utilitarian accounts. Last week I found a young bird dead at our doorstep. My response was of sadness, not because the bird at the moment of its death had a preference for its life to continue, nor because its parents would currently be grieving its loss, neither of which may be true, but because I had a sense of the life ahead of this poor creature, its growth to maturity and the particular contribution it should have made to the universe of creaturely life. The medieval theologian John Duns Scotus called the unsubstitutable particularity of each creature its 'haecceity' or 'thisness', rendered by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins as 'inshape', as in these lines from 'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame':

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself;
myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.³³

On Singer's preference utilitarian account, there is no place for the teleological dimension of a being, attending to what the animal we encounter may become, except insofar as a creature can do this work for itself in possessing future preferences. Nor is there any possibility of recognizing the particularity of every creature: for Singer, sentient non-personal beings are 'replaceable' because their 'conscious states are not internally linked over time'.³⁴

From a theological perspective, this judgement is close to incomprehensible, as well as heartless. The integral being of a creature does not depend on its own ability to comprehend its life and future, but rests in God, which is good news for those of us who only have a shaky appreciation of what constitutes our future good. The death of that young bird is sad not because preferences went unmet, or the sum of happiness was infinitesimally diminished, but because this one life did not reach the end to which it was ordered. In Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, you may remember, the earth is destroyed by the Vogons in order to make way

new creation, with many thinkers arguing that not all humans will find a home there, and many seeming to envisage a mono-species, human-only redemption. I make the case for a broader construal of redemption in Clough, *On Animals: I. Systematic Theology*, 133–53.

³³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 129.

³⁴ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 112.

for a hyperspatial bypass.³⁵ If the Vogons had been prepared to take the precaution of teleporting off the personal beings before the destruction and giving them more pleasant lives elsewhere, the Vagon demolition beams had been quick and painless, and they had bred sufficient sentient non-persons elsewhere in the universe to replace those destroyed, there seems no objection Singer would have wanted to lodge with them at the local planning department on Alpha Centauri. The theologian, in contrast, should protest the lives destroyed, because each of those billions of creatures had an irreplaceable and particular life of its own to live before its creator and redeemer God. The application of this argument to raising sentient non-personal animals for food takes it out of the realms of science fiction to the everyday: utilitarianism provides no argument against killing lambs at nine months old for consumption by humans, provided the conditions they are raised in are adequate, their death is painless, the suffering of their mothers is brief, and they are replaced by the next hapless generation.³⁶ The theologian, in contrast, can and should protest at animal lives cut short before their time, a concept that is literally nonsense in a utilitarian framework.

Making common cause

I argued in the first section of this essay that utilitarians and Christians interested in the welfare of non-human animals should recognize that the motivations for human exploitation of other animals are primarily economic rather than ideological and make common cause in showing why this is not morally justifiable. In the second section I indicated the advantage utilitarianism has in its discussion of non-human animals in suggesting the possibility of equal consideration of interests across the human/non-human boundary, but the advantage theology has in being able to give a broader account of the value of animal life well beyond the case of animals with future preferences. In this final section I wish briefly to make two concluding points.

First, it seems to me that the conversation between utilitarianism and Christianity is underdeveloped and potentially fruitful. The case of animals I have considered illustrates this point, I believe, but my own view is that

³⁵ Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980).

³⁶ Singer's difficulties with identifying what is wrong with killing from a utilitarian perspective are evident in Singer, 'Killing Humans and Killing Animals', *Inquiry* 22 (1979): 145–56. He also devotes chapter 4 of *Practical Ethics* to the question.

this is only one issue of many. The dialogue is challenging for both sides, because it forces reconsideration of presuppositions and response to demands that have not previously been acknowledged. It seems to me that at a minimum this will clarify differences and the rationale for them, but it may also lead to the development of positions and potential alliances in relation to practical issues of shared concern.

My second point in conclusion is to highlight one area in relation to human practices concerning other animals that seems clearly to be of shared concern and is conspicuous in requiring little further conceptual clarification or debate. The novel practice of raising non-human animals for food in industrial factory farming contexts far outweighs numerically any other area of human practice in relation to other animals: each year 56 billion animals are slaughtered for human consumption, most of which are raised intensively with little regard for their welfare.³⁷ Utilitarians such as Singer define the problem as when the lives of the animals are 'more of a burden than a benefit to them';³⁸ Christians might prefer an account that focused on the inability of the animals to live out the kind of life appropriate to their kind of creatureliness. I propose that we can state a provisional conclusion as boldly as this: no Christian and no utilitarian should consume meat from animals raised in factory farming conditions. Both Christians and utilitarians will differ, even among themselves, as to whether non-human animals that have been well treated can legitimately be killed for food, but there should be no controversy about the ethics of raising animals in poor conditions and then killing them. If we are convinced of the merits of this position, perhaps we can commit in common to the practical action of making the case for abstention from the products of factory farming and for the abolition of the practice wherever we can within our own constituencies and in relation to the wider public.

It is appropriate that the conclusion to this essay is a practical one: Christians and utilitarians will continue to disagree on a range of significant meta-ethical issues, though informed dialogue will no doubt reveal some common ground even here. They will also continue to disagree on a range of significant ethical questions, particularly, I suggest, in relation to the ethics of life and death. On other ethical issues, however, different methodological starting points lead to conclusions concerning practical action that demarcate common ground between utilitarianism and Christianity: provision for

³⁷ Cited in Matthew C. Halteman, *Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation* (Washington, DC: The Humane Society of the United States, 2008), 25.

³⁸ Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 112.

the poor is one obvious area addressed by other essays in this volume, but in the context of the animal questions I have discussed, improving farm animal welfare is clearly the key priority. Christians and utilitarians are both practical people at heart, and I look forward to the possibility of making common cause on this issue in order to work for real improvements in the lives of farmed animals.

*Global poverty and the demands of morality**Toby Ord***The facts about global poverty**

Many of the world's people live in conditions of extreme poverty. They face material conditions that are almost unknown in the rich countries, such as the United States, Australia, or Western Europe. While there is poverty in these rich countries, it is of a very different sort. We are familiar with *relative poverty*, where some people have comparatively less than others, which leads to social exclusion, crime, and other problems. This is a serious concern for these countries, but it is important to distinguish it from the topic of this chapter, which is *absolute poverty*. Absolute poverty is not defined in terms of how much worse off one person is compared to another, but by how little they have compared to a standard for being able to afford the basic necessities of life. This chapter is concerned with absolute poverty on a global scale.

To put things into perspective, consider that of the 7,000 million people in the world today:

- 2,500 million live on less than \$2 per day;
- 1,300 million live on less than \$1.25 per day;
- 1,000 million lack clean drinking water;
- 800 million go to bed hungry each day;
- 100 million children don't get even a basic education;
- 800 million adults cannot read or write;
- 6 million children will die each year from preventable diseases.¹

It is difficult really to grasp these numbers. For example, how could someone live on just \$1.25 per day? How could they even arrange accommodation for

¹ The first two figures are from World Bank, PovcalNet, 2012, <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/>; the others are from UN Millennium Project, 'Fast Facts: The Faces of Poverty', 2006, www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/UNMP-FastFacts-E.pdf.

less than \$9 per week, let alone food, clothing, medicines, and other essentials?

First, it must be pointed out that it is not because a dollar buys a lot more in poor countries. Each dollar does go much further in poor countries, with a dollar in India buying about four times as much as if spent in the US, but this has already been taken into account in the above figures. The actual number of dollars that someone at this threshold has access to is, in fact, much less than \$1.25 per day, but it has the same buying power as \$1.25.

This is not enough money to afford even the lowest standard of accommodation in most towns or cities in rich countries, but in the poorest countries, there is a tier of accommodation below anything available here, and a tier below that. The same is true for many of the other things that they can buy: they are of a standard below anything that the market offers us in rich countries. It is not that *everything* in these people's lives is of an inferior standard, but much of the material basis is.

In addition to this material poverty, the world's poorest people often receive a very low quality of education – much lower than in rich countries – with hundreds of millions of people left unable to read or write. Needless to say, this makes it much more difficult to improve their lot in life.

On top of this, there is a heart-breaking amount of untreated disease. This is an area in which aid has led to tremendous improvements, saving literally millions of lives each year. However, there are still 6 million children dying of preventable diseases each year, to say nothing of the effects of disabling disease or injury.

It is very difficult to really understand such a figure and the ongoing emergency it represents. Six million children dying per year is the equivalent of more than 16,000 deaths each day. This is equivalent to forty fully laden Boeing 747s crashing every day. If a single 747 crashed, it would be on the nightly news. Scenes of rescuers looking through the wreckage and doctors treating any survivors would fill our living rooms and it would – rightly – be seen as a moral emergency. Yet the much larger moral emergency of forty 747s worth of children dying each day from easily preventable diseases is left unreported – even though tomorrow's deaths are not predetermined, even though it is part of a much more interesting and challenging story about who is responsible and how they should be brought to account. It is old news. It is an everyday emergency.

While the numbers presented above show the scale of global poverty, we should take care not to treat it as monolithic. The shape of global

poverty is complex. The world can no longer be cleanly separated into a group of rich countries and a group of very poor countries. Over the past fifty years, many of the poor countries have begun slowly to catch up with the rich ones. We now have a spectrum of countries from the wealthiest to the most impoverished, each with their own challenges and needs. This change should give us hope, as it shows that countries really can be pulled out of poverty through a combination of external aid and internal progress.

There are also many countries that have enjoyed significant growth in income, but very unequally distributed. For example, India's average income is now high enough that it officially counts as a middle income country. However, it still has approximately 380 million people living below the \$1.25 poverty line – more than the entire populations of the US and Canada combined.² Thus, almost a third of the world's poorest people live in a country that is not itself classed as poor.

However, we should not let ourselves be blinded by the complexities. What is important for the present discussion is just that there are a great many people living in extreme poverty and significant opportunities to help alleviate some of their suffering or to lift some of them out of poverty entirely.

Let us conclude this sketch of global poverty, by considering the world income distribution. Suppose we lined up everyone in the world in order of income. As before, we would want to adjust this for purchasing power parity to get a true picture of income. There is also a challenge concerning how to account for children, who often have no income. Therefore, we shall divide a household's income evenly between its members. If you lined everyone up in order of income in this manner, you would see the distribution of income as in the Figure.³

A perfectly even distribution would result in a horizontal line on the chart. The actual distribution though, is nothing like this; it is all piled up at the right end of the chart, in the hands of the richest people. Where are you on this chart? Most people in rich countries do not think of themselves as truly rich. They compare themselves to the people their social circles and find that they are a little richer or a little poorer. However, on a world scale, they are often very rich.

² World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2011* (Washington, DC: World Bank).

³ The numbers for this chart are from Branko Milanovic (personal correspondence), based on the year 2002, adjusted for inflation up to 2011 and using the new purchasing power parity (PPP) ratings. These are not yet published, but it builds upon his data from his article, 'True World Income Distribution, 1988 and 1993', *Economic Journal* 112:75 (2002): 51–92.

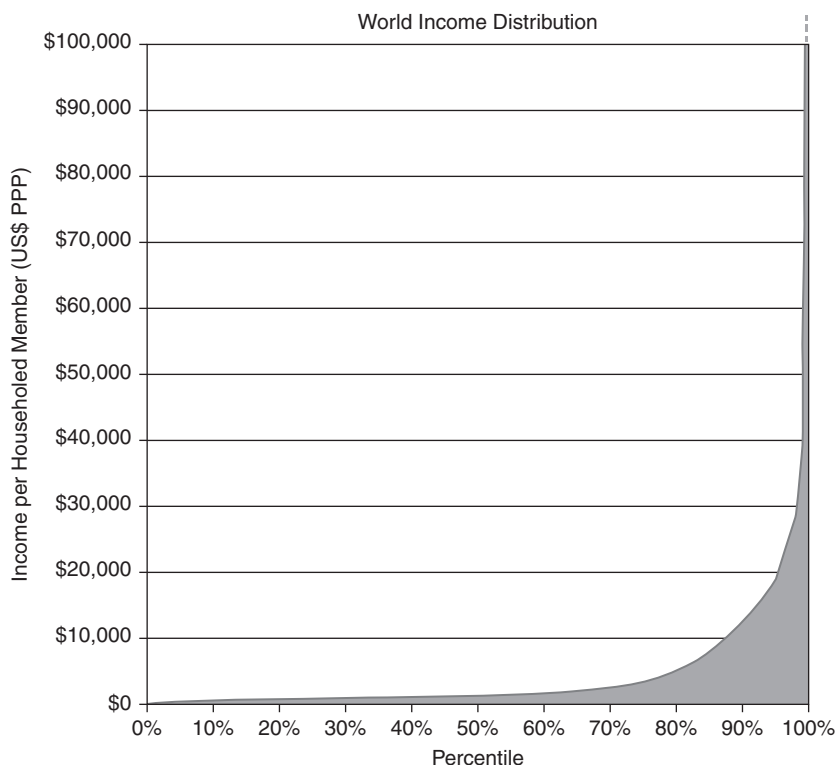


Figure: The world income distribution.

For example, a single person in the United States who earned \$30,000 per year would be in the richest 2 per cent of the world's population, and would earn twenty-five times as much as the typical person in the world. Even the US federal minimum wage of \$7.25 (\$14,500 per year) would be enough to leave a single person in the richest 10 per cent of the world's population. Moreover, even if you are not among the world's richest right now, because you have dependent children, you are likely to become so when they leave home.

This chart is one of the most important summaries of the world today. It shows just how unequal the world is, it explains to us our own positions in this mess, and it shows just how little we need each extra dollar compared to the world's poorest people.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a moral theory in which the ultimate thing that matters is increasing the balance of happiness over suffering. Though it has earlier roots, it rose to prominence in the work of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

At its heart, utilitarianism is a very simple theory. Its proponents see this simplicity as a great strength, for it stresses an obvious and important truth: that happiness is a great good and suffering a great ill. It can be arrived at via the idea of impartial benevolence: first, considering what makes life good for an individual (increasing the balance of happiness over suffering) and then attempting to achieve this goal for all by maximizing the sum of all happiness minus the sum of all suffering. It can also be arrived at via a veil of ignorance: imagining that you didn't know which person in society you were and then choosing how to structure society such that it would be best for you if you had an equal chance of being each person.⁴

The simplicity of utilitarianism has also meant that there is very little room for the details of the theory to encode the prejudices of our own time or place. Indeed, this has allowed utilitarianism to have considerable power for social reform, revealing to its creators how they could improve their own societies and often convincing them of the need to reform. For example, it led Bentham to advocate legal reform to protect the welfare of animals and for Mill to advocate equal legal rights for women.

Opponents of utilitarianism see its simplicity as a fundamental limitation. They claim that morality is more complex than the theory can accommodate. For example, we intuitively believe that morality has some agent-relative aspects in the form of constraints and options, neither of which is recognized by utilitarianism. This normally takes the form of *side constraints*, where an agent is prohibited from increasing the impartial good, for example by not being allowed to kill one person to save the lives of two others. *Options* are where an agent is allowed to fulfil her own projects to some degree, even when she would increase the impartial good by spending her resources on others. While side constraints will not be very relevant to this chapter, the question of whether we have moral options is central.

Applied to acts, utilitarianism states: An act is right *if and only if* it leads to more net happiness than any alternative. Now consider how this would apply to making a donation to an effective charity that helps some of the

⁴ John Harsanyi, 'Cardinal Welfare, Individualistic Ethics, and Interpersonal Comparisons of Utility', *Journal of Political Economy* 63 (1955): 309–21.

world's poorest people. For concreteness, consider a charity that provides essential medicines to help save lives from preventable diseases. It is very likely that the expected benefits in terms of happiness and suffering for the recipients will more than outweigh the gains of spending the money on oneself. Since this is all that matters according to utilitarianism, it will judge that it is right to donate to such a charity and wrong to spend that money on oneself. Indeed, since we are so much richer, we would likely increase the overall balance of happiness over suffering even more if we gave away a great deal of our wealth – perhaps half or more – so this level of sacrifice would also be required of us.

This is in contrast to common sense. Many people find this too demanding an account of morality. Instead, we typically think that donating to such a charity is commendable and good (or *supererogatory*), but not *required*. It would not be *wrong* to decline to donate, just non-ideal. Common sense thus has three moral categories of acts: impermissible, (merely) permissible, and supererogatory.

Giving to charity is typically thought to be in the third of these categories. Utilitarianism, however, does not have such a category. It holds that the act with the morally best consequences is permissible (right) and that all other acts are impermissible (wrong). Thus, some acts that are intuitively supererogatory, such as donating 10 per cent of one's income, could turn out to be impermissible according to utilitarianism if more good would be achieved by donating a higher proportion.

Singer's Principle of Sacrifice

In 1972, in the first-ever issue of the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, there was an article by a relatively unknown Australian philosopher. Peter Singer's 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' ignited interest in the ethics of global poverty among moral philosophers and played a large role in shaping the emerging field of practical ethics. At that time, moral philosophers were largely concerned with theoretical ethics, particularly with abstract questions about what moral terms mean. An article in moral philosophy engaging with a major global event and using philosophical methods to stir people to action was a strikingly different kind of ethics.

The article was written in response to the famines in Bengal and considered the moral case for international aid. Of course, it was (relatively) uncontroversial that helping people living in poverty was a good thing, but Singer's argument went beyond this in two ways. He argued that giving aid was not merely supererogatory, but obligatory, and he did not rely upon

a controversial ethical theory like utilitarianism, instead arguing directly from the following intuition:

The Principle of Sacrifice: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

He illustrates the effects of this principle with an example:

The Shallow Pond: If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing.⁵

If a person were to abandon the drowning child in such a situation, most people would judge that they acted wrongly. It would not be sufficient excuse that they would get their clothes muddy, even if this meant destroying their new suit. Moreover, our thinking in this case does seem to fit the style of the Principle of Sacrifice: we judge it wrong to leave the child to drown because it is failing to prevent something very bad from happening for the sake of avoiding a comparatively insignificant loss.

However, the situation with respect to charitable donations is similar. By donating to the most effective aid organizations, we can avoid great suffering for others, or even save lives, for comparatively insignificant costs to ourselves. If the Principle of Sacrifice is valid, then failing to donate is also morally wrong.

The case of global poverty goes further than this, for once we have made one donation we could make another. Again, we would face a rather insignificant loss in order to prevent something very bad from happening, so we must do it. As Singer points out, this would continue until we donate so much that the loss to us starts to become very significant compared to the benefit it could produce. This could be because we are made so poor that giving the money is a truly great sacrifice, or because we need a reasonable amount of money in order to be able to function and dress appropriately to be able to continue to get well-paid jobs to earn more money to donate. In any event, the Principle of Sacrifice is both very compelling and yet very demanding. Given the facts about poverty, it requires serious changes in how we think about our lives.

Of course, there are several disanalogies between the case of the Shallow Pond and donating to effective aid organizations. For instance, in latter case

⁵ Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43 (231).

we have physical distance, cultural distance, multiple potential saviours, a continuing disaster, and causal messiness. However, it is unclear why any of these features should make a decisive moral difference. Indeed, Peter Unger has investigated each of these differences in his book *Living High and Letting Die*,⁶ which was inspired by Singer's article. By analysing these features one at a time, he shows how each can be portrayed in a version of the Shallow Pond, and that the moral requirement persists. It should also be stressed that the very plausible Principle of Sacrifice does not refer to any of these features, so if we accept it, we must admit that it is wrong not to donate, regardless of putative disanalogies between the cases.

Singer's paper is remarkable for supporting such a strong claim – at odds with many intuitions and with widespread social practices – via a very short and simple argument from common-sense intuitions. While Singer is an advocate of utilitarianism, and his argument may have been inspired by considerations of impartial benevolence, his argument certainly doesn't require one to share this theory. His Principle of Sacrifice is a significantly weaker principle and is compatible with many moral theories besides utilitarianism.

There are two important ways in which it is weaker. First, it does not require us to provide positively good things for others, merely to prevent bad things from happening. Providing good things for people (say, music and the arts) might still be considered supererogatory. Second, it only applies when the bad thing that can be prevented is much worse than the sacrifice needed to avoid it. It does not require you to sacrifice a lot in order to give someone else slightly more.

There are also two key ways in which Singer's argument is similar to the utilitarian one. First, it does not (much) distinguish between acts and omissions: it requires us to act to avoid a harm in much the same way that many principles (such as 'Thou shall not kill') restrict us from harming. Second, it takes outcomes for others very seriously. It is bad for people in poor countries when they suffer, this badness can be at least roughly compared with the badness of us having less money, and we find the former to be much worse. We must therefore help these people for their sake.

Perhaps most importantly, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' highlights the scale and immediacy of global poverty as a moral issue. Global poverty is one of the largest moral problems in the world. Perhaps only avoiding major global catastrophes, such as extreme climate change, is of a similar scale. For

⁶ Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

example, consider war. The entire death toll from all acts of war and genocide in the twentieth century, including non-combatants, comes to about 230 million deaths, or 2.3 million per year.⁷

By comparison, immunization programmes have reduced the death toll from vaccine preventable illnesses from about 5 million per year to about 1.4 million per year, thus saving 3.6 million lives per year, more than would be saved by world peace. Moreover, the smallpox eradication campaign has reduced its death toll from 3 million per year to zero, oral rehydration therapy has reduced the death toll of diarrhoeal illness from 4.6 million per year to 1.6 million, and malaria control has reduced the death toll from 3.8 million per year to 1 million.⁸ Each of these four has saved more lives than world peace would have.

Of course, poverty and illness have not ended. With 6 million children dying from preventable illnesses each year, there is still room for more gains on this massive scale, and a moral urgency to pursue them. Every day we delay is another forty 747s, and this just the deaths, to which we must add all the non-lethal illnesses and many other forms of suffering and disadvantage.

As well as being such a large-scale problem, it is one of the most immediate and omnipresent moral issues. While much has been written on the ethics of new biomedical technologies such as cloning, these often have very little impact on the moral choices in our lives. Even a very important issue such as abortion directly confronts us only a few times in our lives, if at all. In contrast, every day we earn money that could be used to prevent great suffering and every day we could choose to donate part of these earnings, or part of our savings or capital. As Singer shows, global poverty confronts us with life-or-death situations and does so on a daily basis, making it a central moral issue of our times, and quite possibly *the* central issue.

Christian ethics

In response to the extremely demanding nature of Singer's views on the ethics of global poverty, many people might be inclined to think that these

⁷ Estimates vary from about 160 million to 240 million, and differ in exactly which deaths they include. This estimate is from Milton Leitenberg, 'Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century', 3rd edn, Cornell University Peace Studies Program, Occasional Paper 29 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2003), 1.

⁸ Global IDEA Scientific Advisory Committee, 'Health and Economic Benefits of an Accelerated Program of Research to Combat Global Infectious Diseases', *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 171 (2004): 1203–8 (1204).

views are simply too far out of line with ordinary thought to be taken seriously. While Singer argues that common sense leads to his conclusion, if this conclusion is so unintuitive then perhaps something has gone wrong in the argument.

Singer anticipates this reaction and defends his view by pointing to a strong historic parallel between his view and the writings of Thomas Aquinas:

Whatever a man has in superabundance is owed, of natural right, to the poor for their sustenance. So Ambrosius says, and it is also to be found in the *Decretum Gratiani*: ‘The bread that you withhold belongs to the hungry; the clothing you shut away, to the naked; and the money you bury in the earth is the redemption and freedom of the penniless.’⁹

These remarks by Aquinas appeal to a strand of Christian thought that dates back much earlier than the middle ages. Indeed, the ideas are put very clearly by two of the church fathers in the fourth century. Basil of Caesarea writes:

Is he not called a thief who strips a man of his clothes? And he who will not clothe the naked when he can – is he deserving of a different appellation? The bread that you keep in your possession belongs to the hungry; the cloak in your closet, to the naked; the shoes that you allow to rot, to the barefooted, and your hoarded silver, to the indigent. Hence you have done injustice to as many as you have failed to help.¹⁰

In a very similar vein, according to Ambrose:

You are not giving to the poor man anything that is yours, but are rather restoring something that is his. For you have appropriated to yourself goods that were intended for the common use of all. The earth is for all, not merely for the rich; yet the number of those who possess merely their own is smaller than the number of those who enjoy more than their proper share. You are but paying a debt, not giving alms.¹¹

Radical though they sound, these ideas are still current within Christian ethics. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council declared that:

men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take from the riches of others what he himself needs. Since there are so

⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q66, a7.

¹⁰ Basil of Caesarea, *Homily on Luke 12:18* in Walter Shewring (trans. and ed.), *Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1947), 51.

¹¹ Ambrose, *De Nabuthe Jezraelita* in Shewring, *Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition*, 69.

many people in this world afflicted with hunger, this sacred Council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the saying of the Fathers: 'Feed the man dying of hunger, for if you have not fed him you have killed him.'¹²

Two years later, Pope Paul VI explicitly applied this to the situation of global poverty:

We must repeat once more that the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. The rule which up to now held good for the benefit of those nearest to us, must today be applied to all the needy of this world.¹³

These passages detail a Christian view of property that is markedly different from the modern legal conception. Roughly speaking, it is that the institution of private property is good insofar as it has good effects, such as leading people to take good care of their possessions. However, this right of custodianship is not an unlimited right – it does not entitle a person to do whatever they like with their property. It is wrong to keep wealth from others who need it desperately. Indeed, a person who desperately needs a resource that you legally own is considered to have a greater claim of ownership to it than you do, so that if she were to take it, this would not count as theft. In contrast, if you were to prevent her from taking it, *you* would be the thief.

This aspect of Christian thought shares the same two features as utilitarianism and the Principle of Sacrifice. It (very dramatically) refuses to make a distinction between acts and omissions, and it takes the outcomes for other people very seriously.

However, there are also significant differences between the views. Both utilitarianism and the Principle of Sacrifice direct you to donate *because* it helps relieve the suffering of the poor. Since you can do this at relatively little cost to yourself, it improves the overall balance of happiness over suffering. This is of course exactly what utilitarianism is about, and it is also the core motivation for the Principle of Sacrifice. The principle does not always require one to act so as to improve this balance – it is much weaker than that – but when you can improve this balance by making a relatively trivial sacrifice, it is the fact that your act helps another more than it costs you that makes it obligatory.

In contrast, there are at least two other elements at work in Christian ethics. First, there is an element of justice. Recall Ambrose's words above,

¹² Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), §69. ¹³ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, §49.

'You are not giving to the poor man anything that is yours, but are rather restoring something that is his. For you have appropriated to yourself goods that were intended for the common use of all.' Second, there is the idea that donating your wealth may improve your life in other ways, even while it makes you materially poorer – for example, that living simply improves one's own character and that ridding yourself of your worldly possessions is a way to achieve this. On these lines, Ambrose continues, 'Sell your gold and buy salvation; sell your jewel and buy the kingdom of God; sell your land and buy eternal life!'¹⁴ Paul VI makes similar remarks, though stressing the risks to you of not donating: 'Besides, the rich will be the first to benefit as a result. Otherwise their continued greed will surely call down upon them the judgment of God.'¹⁵

Demandingness

Let us conclude by returning to the central objection to the idea that donating a large proportion of your income is obligatory: that it is too demanding. While this objection is frequently made against the argument from utilitarianism and from the Principle of Sacrifice,¹⁶ I have never heard it made against Christian ethics. It is often seen as *very* demanding, but not as *overly* demanding, not as so extremely demanding that we have reason to doubt it is true, which is how many people react to utilitarianism and to the Principle of Sacrifice.

Perhaps this is mostly due to ignorance among moral philosophers regarding how demanding the central views of Christian ethics really are. That is certainly a possibility, but there may be other reasons too. For example, it might be due to the nature of the demand: people might think that if God demands something, it is not *too* demanding. This does leave open the question about whether God really demands this, but it might be thought reasonable for God to demand this, or that the evidence that God demands it is very strong.

In any event, the fact that people do not typically regard the highly demanding Christian account of charity as overly demanding does appear to provide some evidence that such accounts should not be so quickly rejected on grounds of overdemandingness. This is especially true considering that

¹⁴ Ambrose, *De Nabuthe Jezraelita*. ¹⁵ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, §49.

¹⁶ See, for example, Liam Murphy, 'The Demands of Beneficence', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 267–92; Richard Miller, 'Beneficence, Duty, and Distance', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32 (2004): 357–83.

one might accept utilitarianism on Christian grounds as a clarification of Jesus' teaching (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; Love your neighbour as yourself).

For the purposes of this chapter, we can distinguish three kinds of overdemandingness objection: (1) that it is psychologically impossible to meet the demands; (2) that it is counterproductive to demand so much; and (3) that the demands are simply implausibly high.

The first of these is a psychological variant of the putative constraint on morality that 'ought implies can': that we can't be obliged to do something if we can't do it, or in the present case if we could physically perform the actions, but can't bring ourselves to do so. We can set aside the question of whether this philosophical principle is justified by pointing out that in any event it is empirically misguided. For example, some people certainly do donate very large proportions of their income. Moreover, it need not be that psychologically difficult to do so. One simply needs to read about the preventable suffering until one reaches a moment of moral clarity, and in that moment, to sign a standing order with your bank to take out part of your income. At that point, the status quo changes and it would become quite psychologically difficult to tell the bank to cancel your ongoing donations. Even better would be also to make a public declaration of your giving to further tie yourself to the mast.

The second objection considers the demand so unrealistic that asserting it will backfire and result in people giving even less. This may well be empirically true, but as Singer has argued, it does not affect the truth of his claim. He argues that we have a moral duty to donate much of our income, but we do not necessarily have a moral duty to tell people this is the best way of raising money for charity. We have a choice of what guidance to offer and some forms of guidance will lead to more good for the poor than others. Perhaps the best public standard in terms of generating action is a more achievable one, such as donating 10 per cent of one's income. This is perfectly compatible with there being a duty to give even more.

The third variant of the objection is that the claim is false because it violates our intuition that morality cannot demand so much of us. However, many widely accepted moral principles demand more than this. For example, it is wrong to kill the innocent. Suppose you are framed for murder and are likely to be executed if brought to trial. The only way to escape is to kill the arresting officer, but since he is innocent, it is wrong to do so. Morality thus requires that you allow yourself to be executed in order to meet its demands. This is a *much* higher demand than that of donating some of your income, yet we rightly accept it. Similarly, it is wrong to keep

slaves, and morality demanded that slave owners free their slaves even if it meant financial ruin. There are many similar cases in which morality demands a very high sacrifice and yet we find it acceptable. Most of these are extreme life-or-death cases, but so is global poverty.

My own analysis of the intuition behind the overdemandingness objection is that an obligation to donate much of one's income is *factually unintuitive*, but not *morally unintuitive*. By this, I mean that the claim 'we ought to donate much of our income' relies upon both a general moral principle such as the Principle of Sacrifice and also some factual claims about the suffering that could be alleviated through a given donation. When the principle is combined with the facts about our situation, it produces a practical moral demand upon us.

This demand is surprising, but that could just be because the facts are surprising. It is surprising that we live in a world which is so interconnected and so unfair that we could very easily prevent a lot of suffering at a small cost. On this understanding, once we examine the facts, we could then explain why the intuition arose and why it was ultimately misguided.

Suppose we did take the overdemandingness objection at face value and thereby reject the Principle of Sacrifice. Where would this leave us? I believe that this would actually produce an even more unintuitive position. Our theory would then be open to an *underdemandingness objection*. Someone who rejects the Principle of Sacrifice is asserting a

Principle of Extreme Liberty: It is at least sometimes permissible to let others suffer great harms in order to secure incomparably small benefits for yourself.

To avoid the conclusion that we must donate much of our income, one would also have to accept a

Principle of Luxury: It is at least sometimes permissible to let others die in order to secure additional luxuries for yourself.

These strike me as supremely implausible moral principles. They are far too underdemanding, and yet they follow from the rejection of the Principle of Sacrifice when applied to global poverty.

Conclusion

More than a billion people live in extreme poverty. They have insufficient education, die from easily preventable diseases, and suffer from lack of food and clean water. Their plight constitutes an ongoing moral emergency – quite possibly the biggest of our time. By donating money to the best

organizations fighting the causes or effects of poverty, we can each do a great deal to help, at comparatively little sacrifice.

In ages to come, when global poverty is no more, people will look back at our time and be dumbfounded by the moral paralysis of those who had the resources to help. Even more shocking will be the fact that so many theories failed to accord global poverty a central place – indeed, that they found it advantageous not to demand much sacrifice from their adherents. For a moral theory to demand that we make large sacrifices in righting these wrongs is not too demanding, but just demanding enough.

*Remember the poor:
Duties, dilemmas, and vocation*

Eric Gregory

This volume hopes to renew a conversation that has a long history in the academy, the Church, and the wider world. In addition to various precursors in English and Scottish moral philosophy, theistic engagement with the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill had a profound impact on Anglo-American theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the 1960s and 1970s, Christian ethics focused explicitly on various theories of act- and rule-utilitarianism.¹ Ongoing debates about proportionalism in Roman Catholic moral theology trade upon the extent to which proponents of this view adopt a form of consequentialism inconsistent with church doctrine.²

Today, however, sustained engagement with utilitarianism by theologians typically occurs more indirectly through proxy debates in economics, public policy, political theory, and psychology. Deontological and utilitarian ethics still frame many discussions in normative and applied ethics. Peter Singer's own writings have done much to fund this interest, often provoking polemical charges of immorality and irrationality by philosophers and theologians alike. At the same time, the growing appeal of virtue language in theological circles tends to focus on character and goodness rather than right action. In contrast to previous generations, contemporary Christian ethics has been shaped more by alliances with Kantian contractualism and Aristotelian virtue ethics than utilitarianism. Indeed, despite the appeal of proportionalism or the soft consequentialism of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism, it is difficult to think of a prominent Christian consequentialist or even explicit treatment of contemporary utilitarian philosophers in recent Christian ethics. It is therefore a welcome

¹ See, for example, Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1966), and Richard A. McCormick, SJ and Paul Ramsey (eds), *Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1978).

² See Bernard Hoose, *Proportionalism: The American Debate and Its European Roots* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987); Aline H. Kalbian, 'Where Have All The Proportionalists Gone?' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30:1 (2002): 3–22.

development for theological ethics to engage directly one of the most influential and recent philosophical expressions of utilitarian thinking.

It takes a lot of work to avoid trivial generalization and get to the point of achieving disagreement through such engagement. Apparent similarities exist alongside obvious differences. For example, Christians and utilitarians like Peter Singer often stress the demandingness of the moral life and the value of practical reasoning in addressing situations of conflicting goods. They defend an egalitarianism that seeks to promote the universal good rather than only avoid harm. They reject moral relativism and highlight the dangers of self-deception and rationalization in the quest for reflective equilibrium. At the end of this essay, I raise another possible agreement: denying genuine moral dilemmas where moral transgression is unavoidable. But the primary focus of this essay is another shared concern characteristic of the cosmopolitan and other-regarding thrust of Christian and utilitarian traditions: practical efforts to realize and motivate stringent duties of beneficence to the global poor.

Christian and utilitarian traditions are perfectionist in the sense that they are interested in practices that promote human flourishing and discouraging those practices that diminish it. These commitments often track familiar distinctions between beneficence and justice, but they also trouble any strict separation of the two. Indeed, some defend utilitarianism as a philosophical extension of Christian *agape*, transforming the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) into a thesis of moral universalizability. They also sometimes invoke a Christian rejection of supererogatory action in the face of moral laxity and covetousness. In so doing, and by way of contrast to some modern moral traditions, both Peter Singer and Christian ethics offer moral evaluations of individuals and not simply the justice of their social groups or institutions. Both Christianity and Singer's philosophy hope to generate new moral cultures in response to affluence and severe poverty.

Critics of both Christian ethics and Singer's utilitarianism argue that they foster untenable moralism. Contemporary Christian ethics, however, tends to reject utilitarianism as well. Many claim utilitarians focus on the overall good in the world in ways that distort rather than extend morality by making morality itself an object of ultimate devotion. Utilitarians are thought to be tempted to 'play God' by assuming it is their responsibility to make history turn out right.³ Christian ethics, on this view, begins with

³ I here borrow a formulation from John Howard Yoder for a slightly different context. Yoder makes a case for Christian pacifism in terms of obedience rather than effectiveness by arguing that following Jesus excludes 'any normative concern for any capacity to make sure that things would turn out right'. See John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 240.

persons and their relationships rather than abstract norms or reasons for action. It should not be governed by maximizing states of affairs, satisfying preferences, or pursuing decision procedures that only a perfect God might know without perplexity. Moreover, the fictional examples told by philosophers in motivating a utilitarian calculus are thought to bully us into having intuitions we should not entertain. Such cases impoverish our understanding of the moral life. Many Christian ethicists seek refuge in claiming that there are principles we cannot argue towards, but only argue from. But there are telling reasons why social, economic, and technological realities have led to a resurgent pairing of Christian ethics and the work of Singer in relation to moral obligations in the face of material abundance and extreme poverty.⁴

This essay pursues these reasons in historical, theological, and philosophical registers. I hope to sketch places where further conversation might be needed, either within utilitarian and Christian traditions or between them. As with other authors in this volume, an overarching goal is to promote a perhaps unlikely coalition of moralities and communities frequently opposed. Ethical theory can aid practical decision-making. But agreement with Singer's claims does not rely upon the utopian hope of achieving consensus about conflicting ethical theories. Undermining his version of preference utilitarianism or his views on human dignity will not defeat his claims about the moral implications of extreme poverty.

Facts matter for moral evaluation. Let me begin by stipulating agreement with the facts that Singer and others have presented about affluence and poverty, including the claim that poverty-related deaths due to exploitation, chronic malnutrition, and lack of access to safe water, sanitation, and adequate shelter are avoidable deaths.⁵ Fundamental to Singer's argument is the recognition of a new interdependence where 'rich and poor are now linked in ways they never were before'.⁶ These conditions often exacerbate political inequalities that result in further exploitation of the vulnerable by corrupt states and economic actors. These facts, I think, require fundamental re-evaluation of various concepts within Christian ethics. For Singer, aid

⁴ See, for example, Esther D. Reed, 'Nation-States and Love of Neighbour: Impartiality and the *ordo amoris*', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 25:3 (August 2012): 327–45, and Bharat Ranganathan, 'On Helping One's Neighbor', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40:4 (December 2012): 653–77. Elements of this essay also draw from Eric Gregory, 'Agape and Special Relations in a Global Economy: Theological Sources', in *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy*, ed. Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 16–42.

⁵ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2009).

⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

to the global poor is not simply a nice thing to do. It is morally required given the vast discrepancies in the sorts of lives led by the affluent and the global poor. To fail to aid distant strangers in desperate need constitutes a wrong, not simply a missed opportunity for good. Christians name such moral failures as sins against God and neighbour. To remedy this moral failure requires changing not simply moral attitudes, but also the practices of people in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Some Christians have adopted radical changes in their way of life after reading the many passages from the Bible that enjoin them to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger (Matthew 25; Luke 3; 16; 1 John 3). Much of modern Christian theology, in fact, endorses a *preferential option for the poor*. Singer has noted that Jesus ‘places far more emphasis on charity for the poor than on anything else’.⁷ Of course, many Christians have not led lives consistent with this biblical vision.⁸ On my view, however, a Christian endorsement of Singer’s arguments – and, more importantly, the way of life they call for – can only be a qualified one.

Initial reservations: proximity and vocation

In a later section, I contrast Singer’s story of a shallow pond with the boundary-crossing love of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Before turning to these stories, it is important to note that proximity and distance present more of a challenge for Christian traditions than Singer’s arguments might address. There is a massive literature on the tension between partiality and impartiality in recent philosophy, especially in debates about cosmopolitanism. They bear upon questions about moral obligations at a very basic level, including the place of morality in a good life. Once the claim of need and the duty of easy rescue are acknowledged, for example, how do we constrain such demands without becoming ‘something other than an engine for the welfare of other people . . . nothing but slaves to social

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19. Singer does not enter long-standing theological debates about good works and salvation, but he claims that ‘helping the poor is a requirement for salvation’ within the Christian tradition. Again bracketing Christian disputes about rights-language, he states that for early and medieval Christians, ‘sharing our surplus wealth with the poor is not a matter of charity, but of our duty and their rights’ (20).

⁸ Singer tells us that he read the Bible during chapel at a Presbyterian boys’ school. He comments, ‘I also read the passage in which Jesus tells the rich man to give all he has to the poor, and adds that it is hard for a rich man to go to heaven as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. I wondered how that squared with the fact that the most expensive car in the school parking area was the chaplain’s shiny black Mercedes’, in ‘An Intellectual Autobiography’, in *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, ed. Jeffrey A. Schaler (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2009), 3.

justice’?⁹ Recent Christian thought also has been focused on debates about universality and particularity.

Christian ethics, I believe, is trying to find a type of *moral* cosmopolitanism that can endorse virtuous types of particularity even as it rejects vicious ones. Part of the distinctive challenge for Christian theology is that the values of spatial and temporal proximity are never considered merely *in themselves or merely contingent* as Singer suggests – let alone ‘quirky relics of our tribal past’.¹⁰ Nearness and distance have never been ‘just’ geographic or causal. They are thought to be constitutive of the sorts of affinity that make space and time morally, and theologically, relevant. According to classical Christian theology, divine providence has instituted special relationships, particular loyalties, and distinct identities. These embodied realities set limits on the pursuit of justice and care for others. But the religious logic is more than pragmatic. Friendship, familial relations, and even territorial borders have been thought to be gifts of divine providence that reflect something of our given human nature and God’s ordering of the world. Christians discern their own distinctive vocations within this finite, differentiated, and ordered reality. As Catholic philosopher Robert Spaemann argues, the goodness of creaturely life is grounded in the ‘sensuous, spatio-temporal make-up of life’ and the ‘mediating structure of the *ordo amoris*’.¹¹ Karl Barth echoes such claims about the goodness of a bounded creation: the biblical command to love others ‘does not float in empty space’.¹² Christian love, according to Barth, ‘presupposes that the one or many who are loved stand in a certain proximity to the one who loves – a proximity in which others do not find themselves’.¹³

Proximity, then, is more than geographic or contingent. Christian theology has developed strong accounts of particular callings in life parasitic on these notions of providence and creation. They affirm theories of vocation often contrasted with non-theistic theories of ethics. As Robert M. Adams has argued, ‘to accept and pursue a vocation is in large part to have a *personal project*, or a set of personal projects, to which one is committed’.¹⁴ For

⁹ G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 10.

¹⁰ Singer, *Life You Can Save*, 153.

¹¹ Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, trans. Jeremiah Alberg (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 110–11. Spaemann argues that ‘near and far’ are rational relations because ‘the one who is faraway is, at that same time, in a relationship of nearness to others’.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957–1970), III:4, 288.

¹³ *Ibid.*, IV:2, 803. Barth even affirms a ‘special solidarity’ of the Christian community as ‘practical and provisional’ (IV:1, 105; IV:2, 807–8).

¹⁴ Robert M. Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 298.

Christians, this personal project is understood as an invitation from God that Adams describes as having 'my name on them'.¹⁵ These projects must pursue genuine goods. In fact, vocations often demand a type of devotion to goods that are difficult to sustain. But they are not motivated by direct consequentialist concern with doing the most good. Fidelity to a vocation trades on a distinction between mere selfishness and appropriate theocentric self-interest within the diverse body of Christ. Adams, for example, states that we respond to such vocations as '*our part in God's all-embracing and perfect love*'.¹⁶ Adams does claim that there might be indirect consequentialist justifications for moral concerns in terms of vocation. Others, like John Hare, have suggested that God coordinates our particular vocations to a final, comprehensive good. Philosophers Tim Mulgan and Brad Hooker have developed sophisticated versions of what Christians might call 'vocations' within their own versions of consequentialism. It strikes me that Singer's utilitarianism has a more difficult time accepting these analogous conceptions of vocation that sustain commitment to particular goods (even moral goods) when tempted to abandon such projects for alternative ones. Mulgan's and Hooker's 'messier' versions of consequentialism are at odds with Singer's stricter utilitarianism.¹⁷ They represent suggestive types of consequentialism for Christian ethics that might make room for both human needs and personal goals.

Of course, as Adams and others recognize, Christian appeals to vocation (or its secular analogue) have been made to justify oppressive social, political, and economic arrangements. Vocations, for example, were often linked to feudal notions of 'stations' or 'estates' widely rejected by modern Christian ethics. Even today, however, Singer's perspective exposes these appeals as problematic in light of the ways in which human beings *choose* to 'distance' themselves from neighbours in need, artificially shielding their wealth and themselves from the global poor. Empirical realities like developed channels of transportation and effective means of aid (powerfully articulated by Singer) challenge conventional discussions of a

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 292. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁷ Hooker's utilitarianism, for example, tries to accommodate special loyalties in light of expected maximal utility. Singer responds to Hooker and other views of this kind by arguing that their agreement with regard to 'moderately demanding obligations to help the poor is more important than the differences between us' (Singer, *Life You Can Save*, 149). At times, however, Singer's examples suggest that some affluent are *particularly* obligated to some poor given complicity with *particular* economic and political policies that lead to an unjust distribution of wealth. Many Christians share this concern and find themselves supporting particular causes because of a historical practice of injustice in a particular region of the globe. However, it is not clear to me how Singer generates such a concern from his utilitarian perspective.

Christian *ordo amoris*. By my lights, long-standing Christian claims about the providential or created structure of moral obligations need revision. Poverty, especially extreme poverty, is no longer seen as a basic fact about the human condition. The ‘neighbourhood’ and the ‘road’ have changed in ways that could not be imagined by classical Christian political theologians. We pass by on the other side of this road, literally and figuratively, every day. Of course, this passing still admits radically different responses to global poverty.

Philosophers like Charles Taylor tell long stories about why we today feel a wider range of moral obligation, a revolution often associated with the rise of humanitarianism and changes in attitudes towards human suffering. For Taylor, ‘never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates’.¹⁸ Singer claims most people do not respond to this demand in morally satisfying ways. Taylor, however, expresses more of a Weberian lament about the nature and character of these demands, tracing the transformation of the Church’s proselytizing work into a secular project of ridding the world of suffering. The embodied life of Jesus, while certainly open to interruptions and attentiveness to those in need, suggests that even he did not perform every possible act of beneficence, especially if beneficence is equated with meeting material needs. He seems to have eaten leisurely and attended beach parties. His teachings and lifestyle evoked the scorn of those following the more ascetic John the Baptizer. The diverse examples of Christian saints also resist any singular (let alone welfare maximizing) conception of the imitation of Christ as a model for Christian living. In fact, to turn the parable into a moral axiom is to pervert the very contingency of the Samaritan’s response. So someone like Taylor might argue.

A longer history: poverty and the early Church

Christian attitudes towards poverty span a wide spectrum. Poverty has been regarded as ‘both a virtuous ideal and just reward for wrongdoing, as central to the concerns of the gospel and as peripheral, as inevitable as well as unacceptable’.¹⁹ There are now many historical studies of arrangements for

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 695. Different Christian responses to poverty and the parable of the Good Samaritan are an important part of Taylor’s larger story of disenchantment and secularity.

¹⁹ Michael H. Taylor, ‘Poverty’, in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper (Oxford University Press, 2000), 552–4.

poverty relief between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁰ These social histories complement various philosophical accounts of the transformation from Christian charity to utilitarian benevolence.²¹ In fact, unlike Taylor's dour contrast between a Christian world of charity framed by transcendence and a secular world of bourgeois reform framed by immanent human flourishing, Samuel Fleischaker argues that a commitment to distributive justice itself emerges only after the developments in social science and moral philosophy epitomized by someone like Adam Smith.²²

Alongside these historical debates, it might be helpful briefly to recall a more distant past: the Christian Church of late antiquity. It is an alien and enchanted past. But thanks to developments in the social history of this period, we can now appreciate the extent to which the biblical imagery of 'treasure in heaven' – joining the heavenly and the earthly by money and religious giving – was a defining feature of early Christianity. Many moderns, Christian included, find this union mercenary and distasteful. But these historians argue that while the Greco-Roman world was capable of sponsoring tremendous generosity, it was Christian bishops who invented a category of 'the poor' in their exegesis of Jesus' new mapping of the social world. For Augustine and many pre-modern Christians, the central social imaginary became not the division of citizen and non-citizen, but that between the rich and the poor. As Peter Brown puts it, early Christian thinkers started to pit 'love of the city' against 'love of the poor'.²³ Secular philosophers often contrast global justice (duties owed to those outside one's borders) and social justice (duties owed to fellow citizens). This early Christian shift, I think, opened the space for a new and influential type of *moral* cosmopolitanism at odds with a preoccupation with civic glory or honour. It relied on a notion that what goes to heaven literally goes through the poor. For these Christians, precisely because the poor are unable to reciprocate gifts, commerce with the poor was a

²⁰ See Brian Pullan, 'Catholics, Protestants, and the Poor in Early Modern Europe', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35:3 (Winter 2005), 441–56.

²¹ Natan Sznajder, 'The Sociology of Compassion: A Study in the Sociology of Morals', *Cultural Values* 2:1 (1998), 117–39.

²² Samuel Fleischaker, *A Short History of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²³ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 73. Brown continues, 'Charity to the poor in the fourth century was presented by many Christian writers in much the same way as the "gratuitous act" was once presented by existentialist writers in the 1950s. It was an almost terrifying statement of potential boundlessness. But it was also an act of imaginative conquest. To claim such useless persons as part of the body of the Christian community was to claim society as a whole, in the name of Christ, up to its furthest, darkest margins' (76–7).

sacrament of God's grace. Wealth was of divine origin, belonging to God, and charity was returning the gifts of God to the people of God. The many sayings of Christ (Matthew 10:42; Mark 9:42; 12:42; Luke 21:2) furnished preachers with an 'entire aesthetic of reversed magnitude . . . they infused the humdrum practices of Christian giving with a sense of drama'.²⁴

What is important to note about this counter-culture is not simply a moral view that took compassion seriously. Preachers did sensitize hearers to the suffering and misery around them, much like Singer's popular writings. For these early Christians, however, it was part of something like a 'culture war' between Roman and Christian ideals. Christian bishops offered discourses on compassion and prophetic justice from the Hebrew Scriptures that rivalled, if not exceeded, the best of contemporary global justice literature. Augustine, in fact, feared that wealthy converts who desired to rid themselves of their wealth would leave their dependents destitute and succumb to Pelagian temptations of moral heroism. Picture Bill Gates or Warren Buffett immediately giving away *all* of their wealth after reading Jesus' instruction to sell possessions and give to the poor (Matthew 19:21). Augustine would come to counsel regular giving and daily prayers for forgiveness, a spiritual and moral practice 'for the long haul'.²⁵ His attitude towards wealth was similar to his attitude towards sex and politics: use it with care, but do not be dominated by it. This type of Christian preaching generated gifts from the very rich and the average giver, leading to a long Christian tradition of the stewardship of wealth. About 80 per cent of the wealth in the churches of late antiquity came from 20 per cent of the rich. This might not adhere to Singer's standards, but it was better than the broader giving patterns of Rome where only 2 per cent of citizens funded public charities.

To be sure, the early Church wrestled with many of the same issues that continue to this day. Is Christian solidarity with the poor conceived in terms of faceless and statistical 'others' or as brothers and sisters in Christ?²⁶ Are the poor 'beggars' for charity or, as the Hebrew Scriptures suggest, 'plaintiffs' for justice? Do the 'least of these' in Matthew 25 refer to all human persons created in the image of God or only to 'the brethren' of the Christian community? The pathos of remembering the poor in the early Church was intimately bound up with a renewed emphasis in Christian

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁵ Brown, 'Augustine and a Crisis of Wealth in Late Antiquity', *Augustinian Studies* 36:1 (2005): 5–30 (26).

²⁶ Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 77.

writings on the interrelatedness of the love commands. In fact, Augustine dared to suggest that the two commands to love God and neighbour 'cannot exist without each other'.²⁷ Societies are judged by the quality of their loves, and the treatment of the poor became a characteristic motif of Christian social criticism.

Augustine and other early Christians knew little about the capacities of governments or other institutional actors to relieve poverty. His politics of compassion did inspire numerous practical activities within the Roman Empire's economic system. It was left to later Christian thought to develop institutional charity, or the type of distributive justice that Fleischaker describes. Poverty was simply a fact of life in this darkness after the fall. But Augustine offered a foundational reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan with formative consequences. In *On Christian Teaching*, he writes:

That the commandment to love our neighbour excludes no human being is made clear by our Lord himself in the gospel . . . When our Lord was asked, 'And who is my neighbour?' by the man to whom he had pronounced these same two commandments and said that the whole law and the prophets depended on them, he told the story of a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho . . . Who can fail to see that there is no exception to this, nobody to whom compassion is not due?²⁸

This reading continues to attract many modern thinkers seeking to widen the scope of justice beyond national borders. The early Church, however, often preferred more allegorical interpretations that linked the parable to the saving work of Christ. It was not a very popular text among those worried about building in-group Christian solidarity in the face of various opponents. Of course, the parable has also been a fraught and polemical text in the history of Jewish and Christian relations. The history of Christian readings that rebuke Jewish legalism shapes the experience of modernity, especially this side of Luther's reading of Paul. The parable has encouraged many to think that Christianity preaches universal love while Judaism encourages narrow particularism. Like any biblical passage, the parable has been pressed into the service of many different political and moral agendas. In the 1940s, Henry Luce called upon the United States to be a 'Good Samaritan' to the world, a harbinger of renewed concerns about Christian care for the world. One of the more famous conservative appeals

²⁷ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 8:5.12.

²⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.31.

came from the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. In the heat of welfare debates, Thatcher remarked in a television interview, ‘no one would have remembered the Good Samaritan if he’d only had good intentions . . . He had money as well.’²⁹ Her defence of capitalism follows many who argue that commercial societies expand the opportunities for care. From a very different angle, Martin Luther King, Jr, often invoked the parable to speak about the need to transform economic structures alongside his calls for personal charity.

King’s powerful sermons reflect the visceral quality of the Greek in the parable. The Samaritan is moved in his ‘bowels’ by compassion. Critics of humanitarianism often remind us that compassion interferes with prudence and judgement, not to mention masking relations of power. Augustine also diagnoses the pathologies of compassion. He offers the following example that reminds us of Singer’s shallow pond and so-called ‘compassion fatigue’:

You must take on somewhat the very affliction from which you want the other person to be freed through your efforts, and you must take it on in this way for the purpose of being able to give help, not achieve the same degree of misery. Analogously, a man bends over and extends his hand to someone lying down, for he does not cast himself down so that they are both lying, but he only bends down to raise up the one lying down.³⁰

He worries that compassion can provoke a self-righteous attitude that demeans the dignity of persons and reduces them to an object – a frequent temptation in providing goods and services to the poor. Augustine warns:

Once you have bestowed gifts on the unfortunate, you may easily yield to the temptation to exalt yourself over him, to assume superiority over the object of your benefaction. He fell into need, and you supplied him: you feel yourself as the giver to be a bigger man than the receiver of the gift.³¹

Some critics hold that the rhetoric of compassion and solidarity are merely bourgeois ideologies of social control. In fact, many recent discussions of humanitarianism adopt a severe form of scepticism and call for more revolutionary change. Augustine, like Singer, does not allow this type of suspicion to get in the way of his call for charity. Augustine claims that Christian love is unconditional and universal, but ‘love, like a fire, should

²⁹ Cited in Richard Owen Griffiths, ‘The Politics of the Good Samaritan’, *Political Theology* 2:1 (1999): 85–114 (96).

³⁰ Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, trans. David L. Mosher, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America), 83.72.2.

³¹ Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John*, in *Augustine: Later Works*, trans. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 8.5.

cover the nearest terrain before it spreads farther afield'.³² But what is the 'nearest terrain'? Augustine offers this influential picture:

All people should be loved equally. But you cannot do good to all people equally, so you should take particular thought for those who, as if by lot [*quasi quadam sorte*], happen to be particularly close to you in terms of place, time, or any other circumstances.³³

This formulation is strikingly egalitarian and universal, especially for a Christian tradition that can also romantically celebrate the local, the private, and the familial. Augustine claims that a Christian cannot love *every* neighbour. But she should love *any* neighbour who contingently happens across her way. Time and opportunity place limits on the realization of universal love that Augustine thinks must await the consummation of love when God is 'all in all' (1 Corinthians 15:28). It was left to Thomas Aquinas to develop it with exacting clarity.

Shallow ponds and the Good Samaritan

Singer's arguments regarding obligation to the global poor also invoke Aquinas, citing the argument that superabundance is owed to the poor by right. His reliance on common moral intuitions and disturbing facts about global poverty has combined to accomplish a rare feat for moral philosophy: it has changed the way people actually live. Like a good preacher, his reasoning aims to convince people and change their behaviour without leaving them paralysed by guilt. In this case, as Singer hoped, it has changed how they spend their money. 'The Singer Solution to World Poverty', published in *The New York Times*, raised more than \$600,000 for Oxfam and UNICEF in one month. More recently, Singer has offered a public standard that follows a sliding scale calling for between 5 and 10 per cent of one's income in the fight against global poverty.³⁴ For many, the immediate appeal of Singer's moral argument emerges from the elegance of his shallow pond analogy.

Framing the issue in this way elicits a response that Singer hopes will overcome Darwinian constraints on altruism or what he calls 'the bounds of human nature'.³⁵ Debates continue as to whether or not a global economic order exacerbates inequality in relative terms but also helps the poor in absolute terms. Most Christian ethicists join Singer in admitting that free markets can promote moral goods even if they also feed a vicious consumerism. In fact, as

³² *Ibid.*, 8.4. ³³ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.28.29.

³⁴ Singer, *Life You Can Save*, 164–5. ³⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

already noted, modern economies allow us to consider aid to distant strangers in previously unimaginable ways. This opportunity raises the moral stakes of affluence and changes the way obligations might be understood.

Some objections to Singer's modest principle are less palpable than others for Christians who affirm charity's intimate relation to justice. Christians, presumably, do not need justifications for why they should act morally or consider the interests of others. Counter-arguments that the very poor merit their fate are both empirically dubious and irrelevant for those called to imitate Christ's unconditional love. Game theory claims that the poor *will* squander their resources in anticipation of unreciprocated aid or the dangers of foreign aid do merit prudential regard for effectiveness (i.e. incentives and regulations), but they do not undermine the moral imperative. They may also neglect possible transformations in the game itself. Most importantly, objections fail in the light of the consumer behaviour of affluent Christians. Critics, for example, might argue that Singer's moral ideal implies that affluent citizens reduce themselves to the level of a Bengali refugee. This scenario would mean that no resources are left for future aid – a bad consequence both economically and morally. If affluent Christians were sacrificing anywhere close to the point of what used to be called *evangelical poverty*, then this objection would warrant more attention. Few Christians reach even the parity considerations of 2 Corinthians 8:14: 'as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality'. Singer himself admits that 'most middle-class people in rich nations don't have to make this choice'.³⁶ But questions remain.

How should we distinguish between luxury and necessity? One imagines all sorts of practical pleas: 'this vacation is necessary for my psychic integrity or to save my failing marriage'; 'this new car or new suit is necessary for my work'; 'a university education for my son will help him give more aid to the poor in the long run'; 'I can help the poor in my country more effectively than the poor in distant countries'. Here we enter the attractive world of commensuration of goods.

Many interpreters point out that the Good Samaritan is not a 'model of heroic, individual extraordinary self-giving at all, but rather a model of love based on interdependence'.³⁷ The Samaritan acted within, and relied upon, a network of communal resources. In fact, it was because he was able to *trust* the innkeeper (another member of a despised group) that he was able to go

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁷ Gerald Schlabach, *For the Joy Set Before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 150.

about his personal affairs. Aquinas, as Singer notes, affirms the rightness of the distribution of 'superabundance' given Christian convictions about the common good. Singer, however, does not comment on Aquinas's seminal discussion of the differential 'order of charity' that shaped Christian morality and continues to inform practical decisions about aid.³⁸

Aquinas's gloss on Augustine sits uneasily with Singer's conclusions about the Christian tradition:

[Augustine] says *by reason of place*, because one is not bound to search throughout the world for the needy that one may succor them; and it suffices to do works of mercy to those one meets with . . . He says *by reason of time*, because one is not bound to provide for the future needs of others, and it suffices to succor present needs . . . Lastly he says, *or any other circumstance*, because one ought to show kindness to those especially who are by any tie whatever united to us.³⁹

Aquinas's further appeal to the judgement of prudence may strike Singer as pregnant with the possibility of moral evasion. Given the role of human sin in socially constructing relations of nearness and distance, Christians should also question the role these arguments play in debates about moral obligation. Should the concept of neighbour change with the globalization of the neighbourhood?

Recent developments in theology signal an emerging rejection of twentieth-century universalism, which was once celebrated against nineteenth-century theologies bound up with nationalism and racism. John Milbank, for example, joins Spaemann and Barth in arguing that that the 'specificity of given proximity . . . is *our only* creaturely way to participate in God's equal love for all'. Of course, Milbank also affirms the biblical command to care for 'those strangers with whom suddenly we are bonded whether we like it or not, by instances of distress'.⁴⁰ Milbank's economics are decidedly socialist, though religious rather than secular in origin. I suspect he would worry that Singer's proposals traffic too much in the abstraction and austerity of universalism that makes charity an anxious duty, rather than a festive gift offered in gratitude to God. But my question for Milbank and other Christians remain: does globalization change the way we experience the 'sudden bonds' of strangers?

³⁸ Edmund Hill notes that Augustine's 'rather casual way of leaving the order of charity to chance will not satisfy the scholastic mind, certainly not that of Saint Thomas. He devotes thirteen articles to the subject in his *Summa Theologiae* . . . going into great detail. He decides, for instance, that love of parents takes precedence over love of one's children and love of one's father over love of one's mother'. Hill (ed.), *Teaching Christianity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 127 n. 28.

³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q71, a1.

⁴⁰ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 39.

Legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron offers a nuanced reading that also celebrates a traditional concern about ‘communal and religious boundaries like those that separated Jew and Samaritan’. Yet Waldron elevates another feature of the parable:

those who fail to help the man who fell among thieves are portrayed in the parable as *going out of their way* not to help, or *going out of their way* to avoid a decision about whether to help . . . their not helping is an intentional doing: a decision to cross the road, a choice not to go out of their way to avoid the predicament.⁴¹

This reading suggests a helpful practical question in making judgements about material resources: are you crossing to the other side? Regularly to ask that question requires more than just being prepared to be interrupted by the ‘sudden appearance’ of a fallen neighbour. It shifts the force of the parable from the philosophical status of the neighbour back to the practices of being neighbourly.

Singer does not spend his life searching the shallow ponds of the world. And there is no biblical indication that the Good Samaritan spent the rest of his life looking for remote strangers in need. Singer aims high in principle. But his public standards accommodate human frailty in practice. Even Singer, whose own practice is much greater than his public standard, admits to ‘not doing all that I should do; but I could do it, and the fact that I do not does not vitiate the claim that is what I should do’.⁴²

Levels of giving by most Christians pale in comparison to Singer. No more than 5–10 per cent of religious giving in the United States goes to charitable uses such as helping the poor. Most of that charity supports domestic rather than global causes. Christians share Singer’s candid admission that humans are failing to do what is right even when not intentionally willing evil. How does one understand this moral failure?

Conclusion: moral dilemmas

What sort of dilemma does the injustice of global poverty present to us? Not, perhaps, one of the ‘dirty hands’ variety, in which we must violate prohibitions for the sake of a greater good. But it does plausibly confront us

⁴¹ Jeremy Waldron, ‘Who Is My Neighbor? Humanity and Proximity’, *The Monist* 86:3 (2003): 343.

⁴² Peter Singer, ‘Outsiders: Our Obligations to Those Beyond Our Borders’, in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, ed. Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29.

with conflicting obligations. Reflection on global poverty seems to involve weighing *prima facie* obligations or various goods we could be promoting against each other, as well as complicity in failing to meet obligations that seem morally required. To meet this challenge, some adopt Kantian language, arguing that such duties are imperfect. Most Christians who feel the pull of aiding the distant poor also feel some conflict with other duties, but not in the way that constitutes a genuine moral dilemma, since reducing what we spend on those near and dear will rarely constitute a real harm. But are there moral costs for those who follow Singer's modest principles? Do the global poor still have justified complaints?

Most Christian traditions adopt an eschatological optimism. This might have a certain confluence with utilitarian hopefulness in the face of doubts about the goodness or harmony of the world, deep pluralism of values, and the avoidability of personal guilt. I take it that most utilitarians reject moral dilemmas. There is always a best possible act available for utilitarians, especially if a distinction between making something happen and allowing it to happen is rejected. Many Christian traditions, especially Thomism, also reject claims that the world is structured in a way that compels one to sin. Moral perplexity is due to ignorance, weakness of will, or perhaps perversity of will. We might feel sad about our failure to aid the global poor, but we are not forced to do evil. The ethical life cannot be that internally inconsistent. To speak theologically, creation is thought to be deeper than the fall. Our anguish is a type of non-moral anguish. As Spaemann puts it, 'often the only solidarity which is possible with another is an ineffectual wish to help'.⁴³ Of course, some Christian moral traditions are more open to an even deeper moral tragedy. Divine-command theories sometimes entertain the prospect of genuine moral dilemmas that force us to flee to the grace of God. Some even rely on consequentialist arguments about the best of all possible worlds that include such dilemmas in order to generate piety and dependence on grace.

Responses to global poverty, I think, would do well to address such concerns. The fate of the global poor in an age of affluence should elicit moral anguish about our fragmentary and broken loves. This anguish appears regardless of 'direct' causal contribution to the plight of the severely poor, even sometimes through our best efforts to help them, which unintentionally reinforce patterns of domination. Of course, some Christians are *direct* agents of exploitation and domination against the global poor. They might recognize a grief born of guilt. But how do we distribute complicity

⁴³ Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, 111.

for individuals caught up in systems of injustice thought to be no fault of their own making? The difficult questions that need to be taken up include: How was the state of affairs caused? To what extent is it an effect of unjust acts? Who is obligated to do what to ameliorate the unjust state of affairs? Are any of these obligations absolute? How do the relevant *prima facie* obligations of assistance weigh relative to other such obligations? And so forth.

Pursuing such analyses plausibly lends credence to a familiar Christian notion that our actions *always already* participate in sinful realities. Augustinians would call it original sin. Singer states 'the rich *have* harmed the poor'.⁴⁴ Such cases are not resolved by appeal to *prima facie* duties, pity for the state of the world, or heroic actions of individual Christians or utilitarians. Following Aquinas, we might characterize moral anguish in the face of global poverty as *perplexus secundum quid*.⁴⁵ In such circumstances, we are all faced by situations that involve such a massive history of unjust actions that our wills are not able to respond rationally. Such indeterminacy may reflect not only what Christians call incontinence, but conditions imposed by failures of practical reason itself. If such a tragic tension exists between rationality and the moral life, Christians do well to pursue their own accounts of how a commitment to the moral life relates to divine forgiveness and sanctification. In fact, much of the Christian tradition has counselled repentance as a way of responding to human failure, deflating our pretension to act morally. But it seems to me that Christian responses to global poverty may require identifying and confessing the sin of sloth. To the extent that utilitarianism is a secularized Christian ethic, it may have analogous conceptual resources for dealing with moral anguish even in its denial of moral dilemmas. Christians would be wise to listen.

⁴⁴ Singer, *Life You Can Save*, 29.

⁴⁵ For discussion of Aquinas and modern approaches to moral dilemmas, see Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Moral Dilemmas', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (Autumn 1990): 367–82.

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