
Bioethics Outlook

Plunkett Centre for Ethics

A joint centre of Australian Catholic University and St Vincents & Mater Health Sydney

Volume 23, No 1

March 2012

Assessing Peter Singer's Argument for Utilitarianism: Drawing a Lesson from Rousseau and Kant

Stephen Buckle

In *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer argues that utilitarianism is a first step that we must take, if we are to think morally, and that moving away from utilitarianism requires justification. This is a strong claim. In effect, it is to claim that utilitarianism is the default setting for moral thinking and that the onus of proof falls on anyone who resists utilitarianism.¹ The argument has a starting-point in self-interest and is flawed for that reason. This flaw is comparable to a problem in the argument Rousseau advances for a social contract. Kant offers a solution to the problem that shows the kind of adjustment needed to improve Singer's argument. The problem Singer faces stems from an assumption of self-interest typical of evolutionary naturalism, even though when he turns to consider evolutionary theory and its significance, he rejects the assumption.

Singer's Argument in Outline

Singer's argument for utilitarianism is brief. He begins with the claim that to live ethically is to live according to standards of some kind. The standards need not be judged right by others but must be judged right by the individual holding them. People live according to ethical standards, if they can give reasons for their chosen ways of living. As Singer puts it: "The notion of living according to ethical standards is tied up with the notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it."² To live ethically is to live according to standards we can defend, whether or not others share the standards. Living ethically, then, is best contrasted not with living badly, but with living according to no standards at all.

In this Issue we reprint an article by Dr Stephen Buckle, a research associate at the Plunkett Centre, in which he analyses, and evaluates, the starting point in Peter Singer's ethics: that utilitarianism is the default setting for moral thinking. Buckle argues that the starting point is flawed. Since Singer's thinking informs much contemporary bioethics, we recommend Buckle's analysis to a wider audience than the philosophical audience for which it was first written.

Singer adds an additional requirement. He claims that some kinds of reason-giving do not add up to living according to ethical standards. He says: "a justification in terms of self-interest alone will not do ... for the notion of ethics carries with it something bigger than the individual."³ Justifications fail to be ethical if they point only to the ways they benefit us. Singer says: "I must address myself to a larger audience."⁴ Moreover, each of us must do that not merely by addressing ourselves to such an audience, but by including ourselves within it. We must formulate our standards as universal judgments that apply to us because they apply equally to everyone. There are many formulations of this type of thought in the history of ethical theorizing, but for all of them, as Singer says: "an ethical principle cannot be justified in relation to any partial or sectional group. Ethics takes a universal point of view."⁵

Singer further argues that the universal characteristic of ethics is the clue to filling in some basic ethical content. He argues that it shows that being ethical requires us to go beyond our natural point of view, adding: "my very natural concern that my own interests be looked after must, when I think ethically, be extended to the interests of others."⁶ Singer identifies interests with desires in order, he says, to give the broadest possible scope to the argument. He maintains that "if we define 'interests' broadly enough, so that we count anything people desire as in their interests ... then it would seem that at this pre-ethical stage, *only* one's interests can be relevant to the decision" about how to act.⁷ Therefore, when seeking to act ethically, we go beyond our own interests and recognize that the interests of other

beings must count equally with our own. Acting ethically thus "requires me to weigh up all these interests and adopt the course of action most likely to maximize the interests of those affected ... I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected."⁸

The conclusion is a form of utilitarianism. Its general focus on consequences shows it to be a form of consequentialism, and its specific focus on maximizing desire-satisfaction shows it to be a version of preference utilitarianism. For this reason, Singer concludes that the onus of proof falls on anyone who wishes to go beyond utilitarianism. The utilitarian view, he says, "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."⁹ On Singer's view, we begin with a natural attitude of self-interest. We universalize across all the individual self-interests in a population, thereby extending our narrow regard for our own interests into an equal regard for the interests of everyone. Our natural desire to get what we desire is thus transformed into the desire to bring about as much as possible of what everyone desires. This new desire abstracts from what it is that people happen to desire, since all desires are equal. The outlook thus reached is utilitarianism, as a first step in ethical thinking. Inasmuch as universalizing is necessary for ethics, and universalizing brings us to preference utilitarianism, deviations from *it* must be justified. Singer's view can be summed up by describing utilitarianism as the default setting of ethical thinking. If utilitarianism is the default setting for ethical thinking, arising, apparently, only from adding universalizability to the natural attitude, then proponents of all other ethical views

must justify their deviation from the utilitarian position. Singer's argument presents a serious challenge to all deontological or otherwise non-consequentialist moral positions.

Assessing the Argument

One problem with the argument is revealed in Singer's remarks that utilitarianism is a necessary minimum because it is "a first base that we reach by universalizing self-interested decision-making" such that "we cannot, if we are to think ethically, refuse to take this step."¹⁰ It should be plain that these are not equivalent claims. It is one thing to argue that utilitarianism arises if we universalize self-interested decision-making. It is another to argue that the nature of ethical thinking requires us to take this step. The view that we must take the step amounts to claiming that ethical thinking cannot arise without universalizing self-interested decision-making.

Singer provides no argument for believing this to be true. He simply gives us some examples of self-interested thinking and shows that they can be likened to ethical judgments by extending their scope to include other beings as well. It seems that his argument would be more accurately put by saying that ethical judgments can arise from universalizing self-interested decision-making that takes on a preference-utilitarian characteristic, giving preference-utilitarian thinking a necessary place within ethics. This conclusion may well be true and useful, but it is a long way from the view that preference utilitarianism is the ethical default setting from which other kinds of ethical

judgment can deviate only by providing special justifying reasons.

A second problem with Singer's argument is that it is entirely hypothetical, as is clear in his claim that "we cannot, if we are to think ethically, refuse to take this step."¹¹ Singer presents his argument not as an argument to the conclusion that we should be utilitarians by default, but only that, if we are to think ethically, that is what we should be. He treats ethics not as the domain of reasons of over-riding importance, characterized by a distinctive conception of obligation but as a kind of universalistic judging in which human beings happen to engage.¹² He leaves to one side the question of whether we have any obligation to engage in this kind of behavior. The basic question "Why be ethical?" is not addressed until the very end of *Practical Ethics*. This is surprising, since Singer would seem to be explaining how we should think about the topics he goes on to address.

Singer rejects the Kantian view that there is a rational justification for ethics, in the sense of ethics being justified by the nature of reason itself. Given his starting-point in natural self-interest, this is not surprising. However, despite his starting-point, he does not hold that the answer is in terms of what pays off for a self-interested individual. He does not argue that an ethical life is worth pursuing because our interests are most effectively pursued indirectly. Singer is alert to the paradox of hedonism and comments sympathetically that happiness, while dependent on getting what we want out of life, is more directly related to achieving goals in life, and so is best regarded as "a by-product of aiming at something else, and not to be obtained by setting our sights on happiness alone."¹³ Nevertheless, although he appears to hold

that this contributes to the desirability of an ethical life, he does not take it to answer the fundamental question. Instead, he holds that the justification for ethics lies in a plausible account of the meaning of life. He says that we “go beyond a personal point of view to the standpoint of an impartial spectator” to meet a demand of meaningfulness and adds that the ethical point of view “is a way of transcending our inward-looking concerns and identifying ourselves with the most objective point of view possible—with, as Sidgwick put it, ‘the point of view of the universe.’”¹⁴ This is a surprising conclusion for a philosopher who accepts self-interest as the natural attitude. In fact, we can go further and conclude that for ethical thought to find its home in such lofty thoughts, it must be that we are beings for whom our existence is a question and that in raising the question we reveal our natural attitudes to be more than the element of self-interestedness on which Singer builds. A being concerned with universal judgments because such judgments reflect a concern for the meaning of life is a being with an interest in truth and meaning, and universalizing over such concerns does not arrive at universalized preference-satisfaction. Singer’s answer to the fundamental question “Why be ethical?” thus undermines his conclusion that utilitarianism of some form is the default setting of ethical thought.

Singer’s view is not that we should be moral, because we should take up the point of view of the universe but that if we do, we take up the perspective from which ethical thinking can flow. Singer says: “If we are looking for a purpose broader than our own interests, something that will allow us to see our lives as possessing significance beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious

states, one obvious solution is to take up the ethical point of view.”¹⁵ This may be true, but it is not a reason why taking up the point of view is necessary or obligatory. On the view Singer advances, ethics remains a matter of choice.

If we link this to the initial argument for utilitarianism, the argument seems to lead to an incoherent position. We begin from a natural attitude of self-interest and then universalize judgments made from such an attitude, because of a different attitude of concern for significance beyond such self-interested attitudes. Singer’s tendency to describe his argument in terms of beginning in self-interest and then of extending the self-interest to apply equally to all beings deserving consideration is a misdescription of what he actually puts forward. What he offers is not so much an extension of his avowed starting point as its abandonment. This falls short of his explicit position that a simple argument establishes utilitarianism to be the nub of ethics and that this has radical implications for a wide range of ethical issues. The radical theses are present, and they do follow, in broad terms, from the viewpoint he takes to be a moral minimum. However, the argument is specious, and the viewpoint that is its supposed grounding cannot be made to cohere with the starting-point in natural self-interest.

Singer tries to generate ethical conclusions from an inadequate starting-point and tries to justify his position by appeal to a viewpoint which fits his ethical conclusion but not his starting-point. He oscillates between two different conceptions of the nature of human beings, a tough-minded naturalism relying only on self-interest that would have us eschew moral appeal and a high-minded

viewpoint which connects regard for the meaning of life with the condition of all relevant beings that our actions affect.

Rousseau on Civil Freedom

In drawing a distinction between two conceptions of liberty that he calls positive liberty and negative liberty, Isaiah Berlin maintains that Rousseau's theory of freedom, particularly in *The Social Contract*, exemplifies the positive conception of freedom and is problematic for that reason.¹⁶ Berlin's attack tends to obscure the fact that Rousseau employs both conceptions of liberty in his argument. Rousseau's argument for the social contract is an argument about the transformation of negative liberty into positive liberty. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau claims that practical philosophers have read back into the state of nature, and so into the original nature of human beings, all the vices they detect in civilized society. He says: "They speak of savage man and they depict civilized man."¹⁷ His target is Hobbes, who described life in a state of nature as a war of all against all.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the positions of Hobbes and Rousseau have more in common than this suggests. Although Rousseau takes men in a natural state to be peaceable, he does so for conditions of a solitary state. Hobbes considers men in a state of nature to be in the company of others. There is nothing to stop men from functioning well in isolation on the view Hobbes advances. He portrays men as self-preserving machines which could be expected to function well in solitude, even if poor and brutish. There is no reason why Rousseau should disagree with this. On his view, men in a natural state are corrupted by the company of other men, because other

men bring with them an urge to compete for social standing.¹⁹

The compatibility of the position taken by Rousseau and the position taken by Hobbes extends to the nature of the freedom that the men enjoy. Hobbes dismisses the ancient idea of liberty as civic self-government, charging that it represents a confusion of the liberty of action of a state with the liberty of an individual from a state.²⁰ He adds that, at bottom, there is only one concept of liberty. In Berlin's terms, it is wholly negative, nothing more than "the absence of opposition."²¹ This is the kind of freedom that Rousseau advances for natural men, as is evident when he says: "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains."²² To be born free is to be born in the natural state, and so to be unrestricted in choice of actions. As Rousseau says: "natural liberty ... has no limit but the physical power of the individual."²³ The same conception is also discernible in his account of the breakdown of family structure before the creation of any political society. The bonds of family structure are dissolved when children reach maturity, because such dissolution is the attainment of freedom.²⁴ The attainment of freedom removes limitations on the exercise of a person's powers. How the powers are exercised is not the issue. Natural freedom is an absence of limitations.

On the view advanced in *The Social Contract*, the justification for the transition from a state of nature to a civil state depends on freedom being preserved. Rousseau sums up the problem in the following terms: "How to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with

the others, obeys no one but himself, and remains as free as before."²⁵ Freedom must be preserved if the civil order Rousseau proposes is to be justified. Unfortunately, the requirement is not satisfied, because Rousseau equivocates on the meaning of "freedom." Plainly, if natural men, by entering civil society, remain as free as before, then they must remain free in the same sense in which they are free in a natural state. That this cannot be so is indicated by Rousseau's summary of the social contract itself: "Each one of us puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body, we incorporate every member as an indivisible part of the whole."²⁶ Individual decision-making for a person's own life is replaced by joint decision-making by everyone for the lives of each and all. Hence it is no longer true that the individual is subject to no constraint, that he is simply his own master. Rousseau recognizes this but covers it over by raising the moral tone when he writes: "The passing from the state of nature to the civil society produces a remarkable change in man; it puts justice as a rule of conduct in the place of instinct, and gives his actions the moral quality they previously lacked. It is only then, when the voice of duty has taken the place of physical impulse, and right that of desire, that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations. And although in civil society man surrenders some of the advantages that belong to the state of nature, he gains in return far greater ones; his faculties are so exercised and developed, his mind is so enlarged, his sentiments so ennobled, and his whole spirit so elevated that, if the abuse of his new condition did not in many cases lower him to something worse

than what he had left, he should constantly bless the happy hour that lifted him forever from the state of nature and from a stupid, limited animal made a creature of intelligence and a man."²⁷

Rousseau tacitly admits that an advantage of the natural state which is given up is natural liberty itself. He says: "What man loses by the social contract is his natural liberty and the absolute right to anything that tempts him and that he can take; what he gains by the social contract is civil liberty and the legal right of property in what he possesses.... We might also add that man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom."²⁸ But this is to admit that the passage to a civil state requires giving up what was supposed to be preserved, the liberty enjoyed in the natural state. The transition from the natural to the civil state is in fact a process in which a person trades the negative liberty of doing what he wants for the positive liberty of active citizenship, together with moral freedom. It may be that this transition is justifiable. But it is not justifiable on the grounds that freedom is preserved, because, purged of equivocations, it is not. In this sense, then, the argument of *The Social Contract* is a failure.

The problem Rousseau faces is much the same as the problem Singer faces. Rousseau also begins with a kind of tough-minded view, in the form of a natural man who cares only about getting his own way, and seeks a path to a high-minded conclusion in which everyone will be guided by the attainment of a self-governing community and inspired to do so by the idea of living according to a self-given law, where a law is characterized by

universality in both origin and scope.²⁹ The problem is that the tough-mindedness of the first step makes the conclusion unattainable. A natural man has no reason to exchange natural freedom for civil and moral freedom. If we, or our ancestors, ever were such natural men, civil and moral freedoms would never have been valued and would never have come to be. The upshot is that, as in Singer's argument, Rousseau's starting-point entirely rules out his goal.

Kant's Revision of Rousseau

The passages from *The Social Contract* that we have considered show that Rousseau's political thought is intended to capture some basic moral values, in particular an idea central to the moral thought of Kant, moral freedom or autonomy. In a similar spirit, the fundamental ethical principles advanced by Kant can be taken to be designed to serve political as well as moral concerns. The various forms of the categorical imperative can be taken to give the meaning of practical reason for an individual considered in isolation, in relation to other individuals, and in relation to an at least possible political community. It is illuminating to approach Kant's ethics indirectly, by first analyzing his political thought.³⁰

Kant acknowledges that Rousseau's works exerted a profound influence on his thought, also making it clear that he worked hard to understand and assess the views of Rousseau.³¹ In one comment, he indicates how he differs from Rousseau by saying that Rousseau proceeds "synthetically and starts from the natural human being, I proceed analytically and start from the civilized one."³² This is

more than a methodological difference. By starting from the standpoint of a civilized human being rather than a natural human being, Kant transforms the justificatory task of ethics and politics. Unlike Rousseau, who must justify civil society by justifying the transition to civil society and moral freedom to natural men, Kant can address his justificatory arguments entirely to civil men. This means that instead of being confronted with the impossible task of trying to justify civil freedom by claiming that it involves no loss of natural freedom, Kant needs only to argue the case for civil freedom on its own terms. He is thus able to endorse Rousseau's political conclusions while avoiding the problem Rousseau faces.

It is not clear whether Kant thought there ever were natural men along the lines that Rousseau describes, or whether he thought such historical speculations simply irrelevant to the justificatory task. Either way, he solves the difficulties that Rousseau faces by replacing the notion of a natural man having natural liberty with the notion of a civil man having civil or moral liberty. The result is a consistent position in which the republican ideal found in *The Social Contract* is firmly endorsed. This is evident from the various formulations of the categorical imperative itself, which fall into place when viewed in the light of Rousseau's civil ideals.

The first formulation of the categorical imperative is an affirmation by Kant of the importance of acting according to a self-given universal law: "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."³³ This formulation plainly corresponds to the values of a civil man with moral freedom, on Rousseau's view, since for such a man "obedience to a law one prescribes to

oneself is freedom.”³⁴ For a civil man to obey only such laws is for the man to treat himself as an end and not merely as a means to the ends of some other person. By obeying only laws, he obeys only universal principles which apply to other people no less than to himself. This leads to the second formulation of the categorical imperative by Kant: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”³⁵ This formulation, in turn, implies the possibility of a whole community in which every member is treated as an end by every other member. Hence the third formulation arises in which the republican ideal maintained by Rousseau is affirmed, which Kant offers as: “all maxims from one’s own lawgiving are to harmonize with a possible kingdom of ends as with a kingdom of nature.”³⁶ The reference to a kingdom of ends is actually misleading. As Mary Gregor notes, “kingdom” in this context could also be translated as “commonwealth.”³⁷ This is certainly in the right spirit. Kant himself says that the term means “a systematic union of various rational beings through common laws” and explains membership in such a union in terms of prescribing and submitting to universal laws.³⁸ This is what Rousseau also affirms.³⁹ The nub of Kant’s position is that, because human beings are rational creatures possessing moral freedom and natural dignity, human beings are creatures already fitted for enjoying moral freedom and all that the notion of moral freedom implies. Kant thus changes the starting-point in order to arrive successfully at the conclusion advanced by Rousseau.

Two Considerations

Whether our aim is, with Rousseau, to argue for a certain conception of an ideal polity, or, with Singer, for a conception of the default setting in ethics, we need to begin from conceptions that render the conclusions possible. Both philosophers ignore this requirement. Both seek to establish other-regarding or other-including conclusions from what are primarily self-regarding premises. Both thus seek to build practical systems on foundations that render the systems unattainable, because, from the perspective of their starting-points, the systems are unintelligible. Beginnings must not render endings unattainable. Kant’s wider theoretical concerns, as revealed in the different formulations of the categorical imperative and affirmed in his explicitly political writings, show that he proposes a moral starting point and a political goal that are, in contrast, made for each other.

If Rousseau and Singer both fail to heed this point, it is worth asking whether the failure is due to a shared commitment. In fact there is a shared commitment in the initial tough-mindedness itself, the assumption of the bottom-line truth of psychological egoism. The same assumption is made by other philosophers, particularly philosophers who advance contract theories and game theories with conclusions that are supposed to be generated from the outlook of a rational egoist.⁴⁰ But psychological egoism is problematic, since it depends on re-interpreting what look like straightforwardly other-regarding behaviors as if they are, in fact, subtle forms or consequences of self-regard. Evidence for psychological egoism is likely to be found to be compelling only by people already persuaded of its truth. To

people who oppose psychological egoism, the re-interpretations come up short. This is summed-up well in Francis Hutcheson's response to the self-interest theories of Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville. Hutcheson says that Hobbes and Mandeville distort the facts and have wrongly "treated our desires or affections, making the most generous, kind and disinterested of them, to proceed from self-love, by some subtle trains of reasoning, to which honest hearts are often wholly strangers."⁴¹

If psychological egoism repeatedly emerges in arguments of philosophers seeking to justify practical conclusions, the reason, at least for more recent philosophers, has to do with the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theories. Such theories characteristically would have us suppose that moral and political values are somehow products of human history, new creations which emerge from a bleaker past. This has been a conspicuous legacy of Darwinism, in which living creatures are the product of competition among different organisms. Darwinian evolutionary theory builds in the idea that self-interest is a necessary condition of survival and flourishing. Controversy remains over whether the level at which such self-interested competitiveness operates has to do with individuals, groups, or genes.⁴² But the version which has penetrated deeply into our culture is the individual version, such that it has become natural to suppose that human history runs from barbarism to civilization, including, most importantly, progress from psychological barbarism to psychological civilization. This is what allows us to make sense of the passage from allegedly natural self-interest evident in the arguments of Singer and Rousseau.

This explanation seems more plausible with respect to the position taken by Singer than the position taken by Rousseau, inasmuch as Rousseau was not in a position to advance a Darwinian evolutionary theory. The problem is, however, more apparent than real, since he was an adherent of a broadly evolutionary theory of human development taken from Epicurean materialism. This is evident from his speculative history of humankind in *A Discourse on Inequality*, which is a pessimistic reworking of the Epicurean account found in *On the Nature of Things*.⁴³ In fact, the similarity of the Epicurean account and popular versions of Darwinism is great enough to encourage the thought that the popular versions of Darwinism are little more than continuations of the ancient Epicurean account. The positions of Rousseau and at least popular Darwinian evolutionary theorists may be considered together to explain their shared intellectual starting-points. Singer, for his part, is an avowed adherent of the broad outlines of Darwinian thought.⁴⁴ It is plausible to suppose that in forging his argument for utilitarianism, he has been influenced by popular Darwinian evolutionary theorists and that this explains his approach to the justification of morality.

Implicit in Kant's revision of the position taken by Rousseau is an understanding that the justification of morality requires justification to the complex beings that we are, and that we should avoid appeal, however implicit, to speculative theories of our origins. In particular, we should avoid building in evolutionary assumptions that wrongly lead us to seek to justify moral views by reference to the outlook and interests of a hypothetical precursor. Kant's revision of the position

taken by Rousseau is thus of more than historical interest.

Evolutionary Ethics as Advanced by Singer

The central place of self-interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory and its problematic implications for much human behavior is evidenced by the recurring discussions on the origins of altruism. Altruism may or may not be common, but it undeniably exists. But if survival depends on self-interest, how can altruism exist at all? The most-favored answer is that altruism arises as a consequence of individual self-interest itself. On this view, altruism arises because of the complexities of life choices for self-interested individuals in social environments. The complexities favor cooperative paths to individual goals, as illustrated by game-theoretic accounts of the generation of cooperation through tit-for-tat strategies. This kind of answer is well-suited to the argument that Singer offers in which self-interest is widened to include the interests of other beings. However, for such an account of the origin of altruism to be relevant for ethical justification, two additional features of popular Darwinian evolutionary theory need to be added. One of them is that evolution on the Darwinian model is incremental, such that the first human beings differed in only limited ways from earlier anthropoids. The other is that ethics is a uniquely human phenomenon.

The two features of popular Darwinian evolutionary theory imply that the first human beings were primitive, barbaric, big-brained, but unreflective creatures for whom ethical thought remained, as yet,

over the horizon. Inasmuch as they had to invent ethical thought, ethical justification must begin with the task of persuading such creatures to abandon their barbaric ways. On this view, ethics arose because such creatures gave up their barbaric ways. It arose justifiably in so far as their abandonment of their barbaric ways was rational, and, being the creatures they were, insofar as their abandonment of their barbaric ways conformed to their self-interest. Ethical justification then is a matter of showing that ethics is reducible to self-interest in some enlightened form. If this is right, there is a favorable implication for ethical theories advanced by philosophers who appeal to evolutionary naturalism. The supposition that ethical justification must begin from self-interest flows not from evolutionary naturalism itself, but from the two features of popular Darwinian evolutionary theory. If the conception of ethical justification is problematic, the problem can be avoided if the two features are detachable from evolutionary naturalism.

Both features of Darwinian evolutionary theory are detachable. There is good reason for regarding ethical values not to be entirely absent from non-human realms, at least in the sense that sympathy, reciprocity, self-sacrifice, and other admired values of a more instinctive kind find expression in non-human realms. This does not require us to deny that instinctive forms of other-regarding behavior may be far removed from an ethic of universal principles, but it does require us to deny the thought that an evolutionary history of human ethics must involve a passage from barbarism to civilization. In addition, although evolutionary theory as advanced by Darwin is incremental, the modern synthesis of Darwinian evolutionary

theory with genetics undercuts this commitment. If the random variations on which natural selection depends are genetic mutations, and if the phenotypical consequences of small genetic changes can be significant, then there is no compelling reason for Darwinian evolutionary theorists to hang on to the model of incremental phenotypic variation. This thought is reinforced by recent work in developmental biology showing the governing role of some genes.⁴⁵ Whether or not there is an ethics gene, there is no reason not to think that the genetic changes which resulted in human beings brought about changes sufficiently striking to render the development of ethics, as we now know it, inevitable. There is no good evolutionary reason to resist the thought that the origin of modern ethics was the realization of the immanent potential of a new kind of being and hence no good reason for thinking that ethical justification must conform with self-interest.

Despite his argument for utilitarianism in *Practical Ethics*, Singer's own engagement with evolutionary theory leads him to much the same position. Thus he remarks, at the outset of *The Expanding Circle* that "human beings are social animals. We were social before we were human."⁴⁶ He adds: "Understanding the development of altruism in animals will improve our understanding of the development of ethics in human beings, for our present ethical systems have their roots in the altruistic behavior of our early human and pre-human ancestors."⁴⁷ He also says that ethics is "a mode of human reasoning which develops in a group context, building on more limited, biologically based forms of altruism."⁴⁸ But if this is so, ethical justification does not need to begin from self-interest, because, on

Singer's own evolutionary view, it is not the natural attitude at all. Yet in *The Expanding Circle*, Singer argues for a preference-utilitarian default setting on almost the same grounds that he gives in *Practical Ethics*: disinterestedness applied to egoism delivers the principle of the equal consideration of interests as the rational basis of ethics.⁴⁹ He does introduce one variation, insofar as disinterestedness is not applied all at once by appealing to the principle of universalizability, but develops steadily, because reasoning itself develops in this way, being "like stepping onto an escalator" which steadily leads to wider views.⁵⁰ However, appealing to a gradual development of disinterestedness does not change the basic argument.⁵¹

Footnotes

- ¹ See Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 14.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹² See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), ch. 10.
- ¹³ Singer, *op. cit.*, p. 218.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 218–219.
- ¹⁶ See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- ¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 78.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University

- Press, 1991), ch. 13.
- ¹⁹ See Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 197–207.
- ²⁰ See Hobbes, op. cit., p. 149.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 145.
- ²² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 49.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 65.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 50.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 60.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 61.
- ²⁷ Ibid., pp. 64–65.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 65.
- ²⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 82.
- ³⁰ See Roger J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 1.
- ³¹ See Immanuel Kant, "Remarks in the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime," in Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, eds., *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 86, 95–96.
- ³² Ibid., p. 75.
- ³³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 31.
- ³⁴ Rousseau, op. cit., p. 65.
- ³⁵ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 38.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 44.
- ³⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 41n.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 41.
- ³⁹ See Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 62.
- ⁴⁰ See David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- ⁴¹ Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), p. vi.
- ⁴² See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ⁴³ See Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), bk. 5.
- ⁴⁴ See Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); see also Singer *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Co-operation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999).
- ⁴⁵ See Sean B. Carroll, *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2006).
- ⁴⁶ Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 3.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 5.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 149.
- ⁴⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 100–111.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 88.
- ⁵¹ I would like to thank two referees and Thomas Magnell, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, for their very helpful comments and suggestions on a draft of this article.

Originally published online in the *Journal of Value Inquiry*: 16 July 2012 ©Springer Science+Business Media B.V. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Bioethics Outlook

A quarterly bulletin of the Plunkett Centre for Ethics

The Plunkett Centre is a centre of Australian Catholic University and St Vincents & Mater Health

www.acu.edu.au/plunkettcentre/

Tel: +61 2 8382 2869; Fax: +61 2 9361 0975; Email: plunkett@plunkett.acu.edu.au