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**THE FUNDAMENTAL MORAL PHILOSOPHY
OF PETER SINGER AND THE METHODOLOGY
OF UTILITARIANISM**

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PRESENTATION

Resumen. El objetivo de esta tesis es estudiar los fundamentos de la filosofía de Peter Singer. Es conocido como un autor consistente y lógico. Esta investigación ha tenido como meta verificar esta opinión. Singer rechazó el intuicionismo, pero su principio fundamental –«desinterés» o «punto de vista universal»– es en el fondo intuicionista. Singer también rechaza el subjetivismo como base válida para un sistema de ética, pero su propio sistema es subjetivista. Asimismo, sostiene que la filosofía debe utilizar activamente las ciencias empíricas, pero su uso de esas ciencias es selectivo y arbitrario. En conclusión, Peter Singer demuestra gran inconsistencia en su sistema ético.

Palabras clave: Peter Singer, ética, cognitivismo, intuicionismo.

Abstract. This aimed to study the fundamental principles of the moral philosophy of Peter Singer. Singer is attributed as being thoroughly logical and consistent. The aim was to verify the truth of this claim. Although Peter Singer vigorously rejected intuitionism, his key principle –disinterestedness or point of view of the universe– is intuitive. Singer actively rejected subjectivism as a valid basis for an ethical system and yet on close inspection of his system it is subjectivist in nature. He believed moral philosophy should actively utilize the knowledge provided by the other sciences, which he uses this knowledge is selective and arbitrary. In conclusion, he demonstrates inconsistency in his moral philosophy.

Key words: Peter Singer, ethics, cognitivism, intuitionism.

Peter Singer is an influential moral philosopher. Some have called him the most practically influential philosopher in the twentieth century¹. A review of his book *Rethinking Life and Death* published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* described him as the philosopher who has «had a larger popular readership than any professional philosopher since Bertrand Russell, and more success in effecting changes in acceptable behaviour»². His book *Animal Liberation* sold over 400 000 copies in nine languages³. *Practical Ethics* sold over 100 000 copies in ten languages.

1. The original quote which has been repeated in numerous articles, is the following: «Peter Singer may be the most controversial philosopher alive; he is certainly among the most influential». *New Yorker*, Sept 6, 1999 by Michael Specter. For entire article see http://www.michaelspecter.com/ny/1999/1999_09_06_philosopher.html.

2. SPIKE, Jeffrey, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 333, 22 (1995) p. 1509. The complete quote is the following: «Philosophers, notoriously, are an ivory-towered lot. One philosopher who has never fit that mould is the Australian Peter Singer. Indeed, he has probably had a larger popular readership than any professional philosopher since Bertrand Russell, and more success in effecting changes in acceptable behaviour. Interestingly, Singer is an adherent of a moral theory similar to Russell's, the very modern, Western, democratic (and some would say very British) theory of Utilitarianism».

3. On Paul McCartney's 1993 world tour copies of the book were sold alongside t-shirts. SEE JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics*, Blackwell, Publishers 1999, p. 1.

Singer takes pride in being a moral philosopher. He believes his contribution to this privileged profession is to construct ethics on solid reasoning, free from any irrational influences. Even opponents of Singer have credited him with being a thoroughly logical person.

Is such a conclusion justified? In order to assess this, in the following pages Singer's fundamental moral philosophy –not his ethical conclusions on such matters as infanticide or euthanasia– will be examined, drawing on his articles and books which touch upon the philosophical basis of his ethics.

Much has been written on Singer's views on infanticide, assisted suicide, cloning and even bestiality. He generates intense reactions, some portraying him as a modern day Nazi, the ethicist who wants to kill disabled people or, as one prominent ecclesiastic called him, Herod's Propaganda Chief⁴.

In a recent interview, Singer defended necrophilia⁵. Previously in the magazine *Nerve* he supported bestiality⁶. Such atypical views make it difficult to analyse Singer, some easily dismissing him without deeper philosophical analysis. For others, the questions he raises, on first glance, appear to have no ready answers.

Singer claimed the modern moral philosopher, armed with reason and modern facts, will create a Copernican revolution in ethics, opening up a more advanced way to live. «It is time for another Copernican revolution. It will be, once again, a revolution against a set of ideas we have inherited from the period in which the intellectual world was dominated by a religious outlook. Because it will change our tendency to see human beings as the centre of the ethical universe, it will meet with fierce resistance from those who do not want to accept such a blow to our human pride. At first, it will have its own problems, and will need to tread carefully over new ground. For many the ideas will be too shocking to take seriously. Yet eventually the change will come. The traditional view that all human life is sacrosanct is simply not able to cope with the array of issues that we face. The new view will offer a fresh and more promising approach»⁷.

Peter Singer, a young student and antiwar activist, went to Oxford and proposed to Richard Hare⁸, who was professor of moral philosophy,

4. EGAN, Richard, «Herod's Propaganda Chief», *News Weekly*, October 21, 1995, p. 14. («Saintly of Satanic?» *Time Magazine* [Australia], November 2, 1989).

5. Interview with Marvin Olasky found in <http://www.townhall.com/columnists/marvinolasky/mo20041202.shtml>.

6. SINGER, Peter, *Heavy Petting* found in *Nerve*, <http://www.nerve.com/Opinions/Singer/heavyPetting>.

7. SINGER, Peter, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1994, p. 189

8. Richard Mervyn Hare (1919-2002). His thought will be presented in chapter eight.

that he embark on a doctoral thesis about civil disobedience. This would end with his first book *Democracy and Disobedience*⁹.

Into the apparent stagnation of ideology entered Peter Singer, now a qualified moral philosopher. He was not just going to be some simple commentator on ethics. In an article in *The New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 1974 titled «*Philosophers Are Back on the Job*» he said: «The death of ethical and political argument over important public questions was only temporary». A new breed of moral philosopher, interested in practical action, was here to fix up the mess.

Singer is not interested in abstract discussion of moral philosophy limited to university halls, but approaches ethics with a passion often lacking amongst other moral philosophers. In some senses he has captured, in part, what classical authors considered ethics to be: a speculative science about practical matters. His insistence on applied ethics resulted in his first major ethical work, *Practical Ethics*¹⁰.

«Ethics is about how we ought to live. What makes an action the right, rather than the wrong thing to do? What should our goals be? These questions are so fundamental that they lead us on to further questions. What is ethics anyway? Where does it come from? Can we really hope to find a rational way of deciding how we ought to live? If we can, what would it be like, and how are we going to know when we have found it?»¹¹.

How does Singer define ethics? «Ethics, also called moral philosophy is the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles»¹².

What is the link between ethics and other sciences? Can we learn anything from them? Can ethics be reduced to another science? Singer again explains: «Although ethics has always been viewed as a branch of philosophy, its all-embracing practical nature links it with many other areas of study, including anthropology, biology, economics, history, politics, sociology, and theology. Yet, ethics remains distinct from such disciplines because it is not a matter of factual knowledge in the way that the sciences and other branches of inquiry are. Rather, it has to do with determining the nature of normative theories and applying these sets of principles to practical moral problems»¹³.

This excerpt presents a critique of Singer's philosophical principles in detail, in the light of his own aims. Although it is quite difficult to find a

9. SINGER, Peter, *Democracy and Disobedience*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973.

10. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979.

11. SINGER, Peter (ed.), *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, p. 3.

12. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics-Introduction», *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2004 Edition.

13. *Ibid.*

clear exposition of these principles in his own writings, I will present enough to make a clear assessment.

I will demonstrate that Singer's fundamental principles and ideas, although eloquently presented, are inconsistent, often contradictory, and at times illogical by his own standards. Moreover, I will highlight that his rationality is based on a very peculiar definition of rationality which is open to criticism.

Paradoxically, Singer will create a system that fails to meet the minimum standards of rigour demanded by the empirical sciences he wanted to emulate. The only way it can meet the condition of being rational is to accept his own definitions of rationality, which I will show is quite arbitrary. In many senses Singer is a modern day sophist, winning arguments by sophisticated debate than by truth in argumentation.

Using the analogy of science, if the fundamental moral principles are the *theoretical scientific* foundations of *applied science* –normative ethics– then these limitations in Singer's theoretical foundation nullify his normative conclusions.

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THE FUNDAMENTAL MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF PETER SINGER AND THE METHODOLOGY OF UTILITARIANISM

1. A CRITIQUE OF SINGER'S USE OF SOCIOBIOLOGY

The Expanding Circle was published in 1981. It was an effort by Singer to explain the origins of human ethics, and from that base to explain how we can construct a newly reasoned ethical theory.

In 1982 he published an article in the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* which dealt with the same material¹. He has reiterated these same ideas, with no notable change, in introductions to various anthologies or companions to ethics and also in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article, «Ethics» right up to the most recent editions². He has not retracted or modified in any significant sense what he proposed in 1981 and it can be assumed that he still holds those ideas.

The three main critiques of *The Expanding Circle* which appeared in philosophical journals in English speaking countries can be summarised as unsympathetic. The authors considered merit in studying sociobiology and its association with ethics, yet in general they found Singer's contribution poorly developed, lacking rigour and used as a platform to promote his own preconceived ideas³.

N. J. H. Dent writing in *Mind* would claim that those «who know little or nothing of evolutionary theory, or of sociobiology or of elementary ethical theory will come away from Singer's book knowing more. But those who know something of these already and hope to find in it a deepening and widening of their understanding will, I believe, find it frustrating, for it disappoints that hope»⁴.

1. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics and Sociobiology», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (1982), pp. 40-64.

2. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2006 edition. «Ethics-origins of ethics».

3. In this thesis, the terms «sociobiology» and «evolutionary ethics» will be used interchangeably.

4. DENT, N. J. H., «Book review of "The Expanding Circle"», *Mind*, New Series, 93 (1984), pp. 138-140.

Dent found the book bland and asks: «To whom is this book addressed? Not, one supposes, to the “professional philosopher” nor to the even half sophisticated philosophy student who hardly needs the entry of each new name to be prefaced thus: “the French philosopher” Rousseau (p.3) or “the Cambridge philosopher” Henry Sidgwick (p.29), and who would find the almost ritualistic working through of the naturalistic fallacy (pp.72 ff.) quite unchallenging. Singer must, I take it, have in view the inquiring layman and perhaps such a one would find the book rewarding enough. But even in this case I feel that the book insufficiently invites thought, insufficiently provokes serious reflection or questioning whether about sociobiology or the fundamental basis of ethics. We have what is more like the *presentation of a prepared statement than a piece of philosophical inquiry and argumentation*»⁵.

Dent would further argue that Singer (*The Expanding Circle* p.139) is unable to give an explanation of why altruism to strangers has not disappeared completely through evolution. The explanation offered is that reason is selected for in humans and altruism to strangers will follow. He claims this argument is vague at best. Moreover, Singer stresses this «reason» is to consider *interests impartially*. Dent does not consider the two arguments go together and Singer does not offer reasons why they should. From an evolutionary point of view they probably should not⁶. He believes Singer in fact ridiculously presents the possibility of being able to encourage ethical conduct but spread it genetically⁷.

Anthony Manser, reviewing the book in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, said: «Sociobiology certainly stands in need of philosophical examination, and Singer has seen some of the problems which it raises. Unfortunately, he has been taken in by it to an extent which renders his examination less than useful than it might have been»⁸. He goes on to say that serious biology cannot be done from the armchair, as Singer has done.

Arthur Caplan, writing in the journal *Ethics*, went further: «Singer does an excellent job of laying out the central tenets of sociobiological theory. He is less adept at thinking critically about the use to which this theory can be put in explanation the evolution of morality»⁹.

Caplan critiqued the evolution of certain behavioural traits due to selective advantages in scenarios Singer proposed. Many of these scenarios presume «scarcity and struggle for resources. But in a world of small,

5. *Ibid.*, Italics not in original.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 138-140

7. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle*..., p. 173.

8. MANSER, Anthony, «Book review “The Expanding Circle”», *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 33, no.132. Special Issue: Medicine and Ethics (1983) pp. 305-307.

9. CAPLAN, Arthur L., «Sociobiology and the Preemption of Social Science; The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology», *Ethics*, 93, No.3 (1983), pp. 603-606.

isolated populations, abundant resources, and numerous virulent diseases, selection may not be a very powerful agent in shaping human behavioural evolution»¹⁰. He stresses that these biological factors do not account for «cultural evolution» through imitation, mimicry and learning further accentuating his scepticism.

Caplan's critique highlights Singer's conclusion that impartiality and equal consideration of interests as the only most reasonable foundations for morality among rational creatures is highly presumptuous and does not allow for love, compassion, kindness, friendship and other factors which are important in interpersonal relationships¹¹.

From the above survey of the reviews that appeared in journals, it is clear that in professional philosophical circles, even amongst philosophers sympathetic to Singers applied ethics (such as Caplan), they uniformly concluded that Singer had not approached the subject with rigour, was superficial in his treatment of the evidence of sociobiology, and makes leaps of logic in his imposition of impartiality and universal consideration of interests.

While it could be argued that the book was aimed at a general audience (an argument I will consider further along), *The Expanding Circle* was not just an exposition of a general idea, but was laying foundations for the origin of ethics and metaethics specifically in his own thought. This book, despite its limitations, represents the most unified, detailed and systematic presentation of Singer's fundamental principles that can be found. Consequently, its lack of clarity makes it very difficult to discover on what basis Singer's theory is actually founded¹². Claiming to appeal to the layperson could be misinterpreted as inability to speak and convince experts in the field of moral philosophy –while at the same time always claiming a special role as a moral philosopher– and trying to do some «pop moral philosophising».

In order to present a detailed critique of Singer's use of sociobiology, I will outline a brief history of evolutionary ethics up to the early part of the twentieth century where it faded in relevance. Then a brief survey of

10. *Ibid.*, p. 605.

11. «Similarly, impartiality and a principle requiring the equal consideration of interests may be norms that ought to govern the attitudes and behaviour of judges, arbitrators, police officers, and government representatives. But it seems ludicrous to argue that rationality demands that each individual in every social role always attend to everyone's interests equally and impartially. This is a prescription for physical exhaustion, not morality». *Ibid.*, p. 605.

12. In the subsequent chapter I will also refer to another very brief section of key principles at the beginning of *Practical Ethics*. Nevertheless there again Singer declares that he does not aim to explain those principles nor defend them against criticism, making it problematic to ascertain exactly what he considered on these subjects.

the more recent history of this area of investigation which was more energetically renewed in the 1960's and 1970's. This will be followed by a presentation of recent scientific data together with summaries of articles which have tried to make sense of what data does exist and the explanatory theories supported by the data. Many of the articles reviewed are written by those defending sociobiology yet explaining frankly the problems of the theory.

As Singer based his ideas heavily on the key aspects and presumed scientific evidence for the origin of ethics to be found in evolutionary biology, the initial part of this chapter will serve as an indirect critique of *The Expanding Circle* before I address some questions specific to his own thought. Many of the errors and approaches of the evolutionary ethicists are also found in Singer.

History of Evolutionary Ethics

Charles Darwin

The effort to find a biological explanation for human ethics has been persistent since it was initiated by Charles Darwin. Darwin realised that evolutionary theory would have difficulty in being accepted if it couldn't explain the existence of human morality. Some considered the moral sense of the human person a confirmation for the divine origin of the human species. If moral sense could not be explained by evolution, then the theory was open to the accusation that human beings were still the result of an act of creation. «I fully subscribe to the judgement of those writers who maintain that all of the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important. (...) It is the most noble of all the attributes of man, leading him without a moment's hesitation to risk his life for that of a fellow-creature; or after due deliberation, impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause»¹³.

Darwin devotes two chapters of his book, *The Descent of Man*, to the origin and development of the moral sense. He studied animal instincts and from these studies arrived at conclusions which remain as the basis of the approach to this question in modern sociobiology.

He began with the premise that the basis of moral sense lay in the need for some animals (e.g. ants, bees, wolves etc) to live cooperatively in order to survive. This group behaviour was called *altruistic* behaviour, a

13. DARWIN, Charles, *The Descent of Man*, 2nd edition, John Murray, London, 1875. pp. 97-111.

survival mechanism that facilitated the survival of the species. He would then elaborate an explanation of the evolutionary origin of moral sense:

«The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable, namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man. For, firstly, the social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them. The services may be of a definite and evidently instinctive nature; or there may be only a wish and readiness, as with most of the higher social animals, to aid their fellows in certain general ways. But these feelings and services are by no means extended to all the individuals of the same species, only to those of the same association. Secondly, as soon as the mental faculties had become highly developed, images of all past actions and motives would be incessantly passing through the brain of each individual: and that feeling of dissatisfaction, or even misery, which invariably results, as we shall hereafter see, from any unsatisfied instinct, would arise, as often as it was perceived that the enduring and always present social instinct had yielded to some other instinct, at the time stronger, but neither enduring in its nature, nor leaving behind it a very vivid impression. It is clear that many instinctive desires, such as that of hunger, are in their nature of short duration; and after being satisfied, are not readily or vividly recalled. Thirdly, after the power of language had been acquired, and the wishes of the community could be expressed, the common opinion how each member ought to act for the public good, would naturally become in a paramount degree the guide to action. But it should be borne in mind that however great weight we may attribute to public opinion, our regard for the approbation and disapprobation of our fellows depends on sympathy, which, as we shall see, forms an essential part of the social instinct, and is indeed its foundation-stone. Lastly, habit in the individual would ultimately play a very important part in guiding the conduct of each member; for the social instinct, together with sympathy, is, like any other instinct, greatly strengthened by habit, and so consequently would be obedience to the wishes and judgment of the community»¹⁴.

This citation comes from chapter four the 1874 edition of the *Descent of Man* which covered the topics of *moral sense*, the *social qualities of animals* and the *origin of sociability* and the struggle between opposed instincts. Here Darwin, aims to offer an explanation of why man is a social animal and how there can be so called transmission of moral tendencies.

In chapter five titled, *On the development of the intellectual and moral faculties during primeval and civilised times*, he traces the advance-

14. *Ibid.*, Chapter IV.

ment of intellectual powers through natural selection, and how civilisation progresses from once barbarous peoples to the nineteenth century enlightened gentleman.

Darwin essentially proposed that kinship and other mores have an instinctive origin. Subsequently, there was the evolutionary step with the development of intellectual animals who possessed an advanced reasoning capacity leading to the development of conscience.

He proposes the «greatest happiness principle» as the standard of right and wrong in these more intellectual animals. The definition of good and evil given by Darwin is that of a hedonistic utilitarian, good being that which maximises pleasure and minimises pain. Doing good to other humans is seen in terms of a biological inclination towards altruism and sympathy, which he believed was helpful to survival. This schematic view of Darwin's thought be the basis of all subsequent explanations of evolutionary ethics, together with the contribution of Herbert Spencer.

Herbert Spencer

The next most prominent thinker in this area was Herbert Spencer. He began his writings on ethics, in a pre-evolutionary phase, publishing his first treatise on ethics, *Social Statistics* (1851), eight years before the *Origin of Species*. Nearly thirty years later, his *Principles of Ethics* (1879-1893) contains a profound influence of evolutionary theory, yet in a more moderated form not containing the elaborated or intense application of evolution to ethics which comes through in the preceding book, *Data of Ethics* (1879).

Spencer is the philosopher who most worked the theory of evolution into ethics (prior to the more recent efforts of Wilson), writing extensively and modifying his theory with time. Despite his theoretical application and evaluation of evolution to ethics, Spencer is honest enough to admit the limitations of this approach in the preface to his final work on this area of philosophy titled *Negative Beneficence and Positive Beneficence* (1893). «The Doctrine of Evolution has not furnished guidance to the extent I had hoped. Most of the conclusions, drawn empirically, are such as right feelings, enlightened by cultivated intelligence, have already sufficed to establish». This honest summary of Spencer, is an apt summary of this entire area of inquiry right up to our own time.

In his *pre evolutionary* phase, Spencer was very critical of the Benthamite «doctrine of expediency» where all men seek as a guide for conduct, the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Spencer argued the standards of happiness are infinite, as the faculties of men differ extensively and balance of desires. Thus the notion of happiness must vary with the disposition and character of each person and hence must be quite varied.

Consequently, «a true conception of what human life should be, is possible only for the ideal man....And as the world yet contains none such, it follows that a specific idea of «greatest happiness» is for the present unattainable». Spencer would go on to say that the expediency doctrine is not an axiom but a «enunciation of a problem to be solved»¹⁵. At this phase of his writing, Spencer advocated some type of moral sense theory¹⁶.

In the intervening period of thirty years between *Social Statistics* (1851) and the *Data of Ethics* (1879), Spencer had changed substantially. An admirer of the sciences, he had witnessed a progress in biological sciences and wanted to employ that in ethics. *Data of Ethics* has first two chapters titled «Conduct in General» and «The Evolution of Conduct». The concept of the ideal man which he had worked into his early writings to explain different ideas takes more relief here with the struggle for existence leading to the development of this «ideal man». «Ethics has for its subject-matter, that form which universal conduct assumes during the last stages of its evolution»¹⁷.

At this stage, Spencer acknowledged the importance of gaining pleasure and avoiding pain as directing principles of action. Moral good was equated with facilitating human pleasure. Pleasure could be achieved in two ways, first by satisfying our own pleasurable impulses or by satisfying the pleasurable impulses of others. Hence, giving food to others gives us pleasure. Moreover, human cooperation is necessary to achieve our aims and hence we develop principles of equity and altruism. Summarising his analysis, he concludes: «If we call good every kind of conduct which aids the lives of others, and do this under the belief that life brings more happiness than misery; then it becomes undeniable that, taking into account the immediate and remote effects on all persons, the good is universally the pleasurable»¹⁸.

Amongst all evolutionary ethicists, there is a desire to reject any divine origin to ethics. In Darwin's autobiography, he makes the following statement: «A man who has no assured and ever-present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones»¹⁹.

Spencer, similarly, would say of «theological theories»: «Religious creeds, established and dissenting, all embody the belief that right and

15. SPENCER, Herbert, *Social Statistics*, 1851, Introduction: «The Doctrine of Expediency», § 2.

16. *Ibid.*, Introduction: «The Doctrine of the Moral Sense», § 5.

17. SPENCER, Herbert, *Data of Ethics*, 1879, Chapter Two: §§ 6, 7.

18. *Ibid.*, Chapter Three, §§ 9, 10.

19. DARWIN, Charles, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, 1809-1882, Nora Barlow (ed.), Norton, New York 1958, p. 94.

wrong are right and wrong simply in virtue of divine enactment. And this tacit assumption has passed from systems of theology into systems of morality»²⁰.

Spencer also rejects intuitionism, claiming that «pure intuitionists» are equated with those «who affirm we know some things to be right and others wrong by virtue of a supernaturally given conscience»²¹. He would explain why intuition has an appeal, blending it with his evolutionary ideas. «Just in the same way that I believe the intuition of space, possessed by any living individual, to have arisen from organised and consolidated experiences of all antecedent individuals who bequeathed to him their slowly-developed nervous organisations, just as I believe this intuition, requiring only to be made definite and complete by personal experiences, has practically become a form of thought, apparently quite independently of experience; so do I believe that the experiences of utility organised and consolidated through all past generations of the human race, have been producing corresponding nervous modifications, which, by continued transmission and accumulation, have become in us certain faculties of moral intuition, certain emotions responding to right and wrong conduct, which have no apparent basis in the individual experiences of utility»²².

Obviously, Spencer has inverted the order of evolution where normally a mutation provides a fitness advantage while, here we see more Lamarckian approach to progress²³.

Finally, to complete this summary, Spencer has two chapters in *Data of Ethics* titled «Egoism versus Altruism» and «Altruism versus Egoism». To abbreviate, Spencer concludes it is not possible to construct an ethical system on either one of these principles and hence the next chapter titled «Conciliation» proposes that during evolution, a *conciliation* between the interests of the species, the interests of the parents and the interests of the offspring has been developed²⁴. This ambivalence between egoism and altruism and the explanation of both will be a prominent feature in evolutionary ethics up to the present time.

Modern Sociobiology

Thomas Henry Huxley lived at the same time as Darwin and had the title *Darwin's bulldog* for his vigorous defence of Darwinism. Never-

20. SPENCER, Herbert, *Data of Ethics*, 1879, Chapter IV: § 18.

21. *Ibid.*, Chapter IV: §§ 19, 20.

22. *Ibid.*, Chapter VII: § 45.

23. This same tendency can also be seen in Singer, as some of the critiques of his book noted.

24. *Ibid.*, Chapter XIV: § 92.

theless, Huxley tried to distance ethics from evolution with regard to morality, seeing a need for external moral principles to guide humans rather than be at the mercy of evolutionary forces.

His grandson, Julian Huxley, tried to revitalise evolutionary ethics during the twentieth century, going against his grandfather's separation of ethics and evolution. Along with others, Huxley tried to construct evolutionary ethics their efforts taking shape in the social Darwinian school of the 1930's²⁵.

The modern term «*sociobiology*» was coined around this time as part of an initiative to begin new interdisciplinary research between zoology and sociology with the aim of finding valid links between the social behaviour of animals and humans.

The most significant modern revival was initiated by Edward O Wilson, professor of zoology at Harvard University, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his work in this area. Wilson's work on this subject *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* forms the basis of Singer's analysis²⁶. His ideas have been covered in chapter one of this thesis.

Singer, aware that a revival was occurring with Wilson, aimed to fulfil what he considered the ideal of the moral philosopher, using the latest scientific data and applying it to ethics²⁷. Wilson claimed that the theory of natural selection should be pursued to explain ethics «*at all depths*». In an earlier book, he made the bold claim that «scientists and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologized»²⁸.

At the outset, Singer stresses that sociobiology will often produce crude results, but he believed that «the sociobiological approach to ethics does tell us something important about ethics, something we can use to gain a better understanding of ethics than has hitherto been possible»²⁹.

He would ridicule those who did not take this seriously: «Nor am I committed to the general thesis that human social behavior can be adequately explained in biological terms. My position is only that here we have a new discipline, or rather a multidisciplinary form of enquiry, trying to answer some of the most fundamental questions about human affairs. As long as we continue to study and cite Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx –none of whose views of human nature can today be ranked as scientific– it

25. Others involved in this effort were C. H. Waddington, G. G. Simpson, Warder C. Allee, Theodosius Dobzhansky.

26. WILSON, Edward O., *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1975.

27. See section on *Moral Expertise* in Chapter two of thesis.

28. WILSON, Edward O., *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1975, p. 27.

29. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, Preface xi.

would be perversely backward-looking to refuse even to consider sociobiology and what follows from it»³⁰.

The present «scientific» situation of evolutionary ethics

Leaving aside the musings, many times fanciful, of sociobiologists, human societies with their large structures of organization, a complex set of relationships in cooperation and interaction are on present evidence unique in the animal kingdom.

Among other primates –for whom Singer has a particular interest and which he employs as part of his argumentation– the cooperation is markedly inferior despite some common genetic ancestry. In fact, ants, bees and the naked mole rat demonstrate far more cooperation, and are the only exception to this general rule and here it is based on genetic relatedness³¹. In the context of evolutionary explanations of ethical behaviour this leaves a large gap to be explained between these insects, or animals lower in the evolutionary spectrum, the primates which are meant to be closer and humans and yet in terms of social cooperation are inferior. Such a divergence necessitates an explanation from evolutionary ethicists.

Not surprisingly, the altruism of humans is unique in the animal kingdom. Humans will automatically engage in altruistic behaviour even when randomly selected and having no kinship³². In the animal kingdom, manifestations of «fitness-reducing» acts to the actor that similarly confer benefits on other individuals are largely restricted to kin groups, and even the firm evidence for this kin altruism remains scarce after many decades of research for reciprocal altruism³³.

30. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics and Sociobiology», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 11 (1982), p. 43

31. FEHR, Ernst & FISCHBACHER, Urs, «The nature of human altruism», *Nature*, 425 (2003), p. 785

32. FEHR, Ernst & FISCHBACHER, Urs, «The nature of human altruism», *Nature*, 425 (2003), p. 785. See also: ANDREONI, J. & MILLIER, J., «Rational cooperation in the finitely repeated prisoner's dilemma: experimental evidence», *Econ. J.* 103 (1993), pp. 570-585. Also GACHTER, S & FALK, A., «Reputation and reciprocity: consequences for the labour relation», *Scand. J. Econ.* 104 (2002), pp. 1-26.

33. FEHR, Ernst & FISCHBACHER, Urs, «The nature of human altruism», *Nature*, 425 (2003), p. 785. HAMMERSTEIN, P., in *Genetic and Cultural Evolution of Cooperation. Dahlem Workshop Report 90*. HAMMERSTEIN, P. (ed.), 1-11, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2003. STEPHENS, D. W., MCLINN, C.M. & STEVENS, J.R., «Discounting and reciprocity in an iterated prisoners dilemma», *Science*, 298 (2002), pp. 2216-2218. HAUSER, M. D., CHEN, K.M., FRANCES, C. & CHUANG, E., «Give unto others: Genetically unrelated cottontamarin monkeys preferentially give food to those who altruistically give food back.», *Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B* (In press).

Part of the problem in trying to make headway in this question is that altruism has been variously defined, with marked variations, and this leads also to problems in analysis when there is no clarity in the terms being debated on.

Some economists tend to define it as «costly acts that confer economic benefits to individuals», focusing on the behavioural aspect rather than the psychological³⁴.

Edward O. Wilson claimed altruism is defined in biology, as in everyday life, as self destructive behaviour for the benefit of others.

Batson defines altruism as «a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare» in contrast to egoism which is «a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing one's own welfare»³⁵. In this definition, instinctive reflex action or automatic actions are not defined as altruistic. His definitions focus on the motivation, and ultimate goal which is either to increase personal welfare or that of another. He did this to highlight within the discussion of altruism a focus on consequences rather than motives, specifically by Dawkins and E. O. Wilson³⁶. Motive may lead to action but may not depending on capacity of actor, but motivation remains present. Implicit in Batson's definition is to stress «self-other» distinction in his definition³⁷.

Elliot Sober, a leader in the initial discussions on altruism, distinguished between three different terms: evolutionary altruism, psychological altruism and morality. The distinction between the evolutionary and the psychological form is that it is not necessary to be in possession of ration-

34. FEHR, ERNST & FISCHBACHER, Urs, «The nature of human altruism», *Nature*, 425 (2003), p. 785.

35. BATSON, Daniel, C., «Experimental Tests for the Existence of Altruism», *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, Vol. 2 (1992), pp. 69-78. Specifically defined on page 69.

36. DAWKINS, Richard, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, New York 1976.

37. This definition of other excluded for him large social units such as some «working to save a marriage» independent of spouses interests or «to serve country». These did not enter his definition of altruism. Moreover, for Batson, altruism need not involve self sacrifice, as one can act for another without sacrifice. Acts can have both egoistic and altruistic goals however, Batson, aiming to configure experimentation to highlight altruism and its distinction from egoism, also claimed that a single motive cannot be both altruistic and egoistic as this implies two goals and hence diff motive.

A person can be egoistic or altruistic and not know it, consequently in his experimentation Batson would not rely on self reports or introspection. However he appears to have erred to far in this distinction claiming that people can act altruistically and not be aware of it, which goes against his very definition and the motivational component. He does stress cost to self is not necessary part of altruism although may involve it *eg.* «to hug to a friend» is altruistic but not necessarily costly. (BATSON, Daniel, C., «Experimental Tests for the Existence of Altruism»..., pp. 70-71.)

ality to be altruistic or selfish in the evolutionary sense, as evolutionary altruists provide fitness benefits on others at their own expense³⁸.

Obviously, this variety explains why serious progress is difficult as often different behaviour is being compared on equal terms. What is meant by altruism in human terms is very different from the way it may be sought in the animal kingdom.

Kin altruism has been the basis of all discussions about altruistic theory in sociobiology and the possibility of other types of altruism, such as group and reciprocal altruism, has been based on kin altruism. Being so important for altruistic theory as the basis of evolutionary ethics, in the next section is a summary of the history of this concept, and its ebb and flow, based on a recent analysis of Edward O. Wilson himself.

The «rise and fall» of kin altruism

E. O. Wilson himself highlights the «rise and fall» of kin altruism as a theory in an article in *Social Research*. How to explain altruistic acts has been a key question to resolve in evolutionary biology. Darwin saw that altruistic behaviour posed a problem (Wilson uses the term «dangerous» with regard to how Darwin saw it) to his theory of evolution. For example, the social behaviour of ants who form castes of distinct workers with specialized subdivisions –such as small nurses, large aggressive and sterile soldier ants– needed explanation as the sterile ants forego their own offspring and this situation is untenable from an evolutionary perspective. Darwin would explain it by saying if the queen ant is able to produce more offspring than a single ant, then the sterile castes would also evolve as part of the same hereditary type so the type is the unit of selection not the «plastic forms» it produces³⁹.

J.B.S Haldane introduced the term *kin altruism* into the terminology of sociobiology by explaining that altruistic acts towards kin allows ones genes to multiply even if the individual never reproduces⁴⁰.

William D. Hamilton in 1964 developed the kin altruism hypothesis further proposing more direct genetic evidence through his *haploidiploid*

38. SOBER, Elliott, «Evolutionary Altruism, Psychological Altruism, and Morality: Disentangling the Phenotypes», *Evolutionary Ethics*, M. H. NITECKI and D. V. NITECKI (ed.), SUNY Press, Albany, 1993, pp. 204-205.

39. WILSON, Edward O., «Kin Selection as the Key to Altruism: Its Rise and Fall», *Social Research*, 72, 1 (Spring 2005), p. 159. This summary of Darwin's position is based on Wilson's article.

40. HALDANE, J.B.S., *The Causes of Evolution*, Longman, Green, London, 1932. Also HALDANE, J.B.S., *Population Genetics*, New Biology, Penguin Books, 18, 1955, pp. 34-51.

hypothesis, promoted by many other sociobiologists, including E. O. Wilson himself. This theory was based on the fact that certain animals such as ants, bees, wasps (*Hymenoptera*) practice the mechanism of reproduction whereby the fertilized egg becomes a female and the unfertilized becomes a male. In these organisms the full sisters are three quarters genetically related while mothers and daughters are only one half genetically related. Hamilton claimed that all animals that live such colonial life have this genetic feature and are Hymenoptera. The only exception at this time is considered to be the termites which practice diploid sex determination where full sisters are no more closely related than mother and daughter.

Hence, the equation $rb > c$ explains *Hamilton's Rule*, where altruism is practiced when the cost of offspring «c» to altruist is offset by the greater number of benefit «b» in offspring to the recipient and the altruist is greater⁴¹.

However this theory was corrected by Trivers and others, as the theory did not take into account that males need to be produced and hence, as males only share one quarter of the genetic material, a correction takes place. Furthermore, it has since been shown that altruistic worker castes exist in other species not associated with haplo-diploid reproduction.

Wilson claimed a return to the theory that natural selection as the driving force to altruistic behaviour in colonies and the prevalence of kin in these colonies is not due to the genetic relatedness but seems consequent on acting altruistically within colonies and hence having common parentage⁴².

Kin selection which generated an «industry» for three decades has been reduced, in Wilson's words, to «a weak dissolutive role»⁴³. This is the history of kin altruism which forms the basis for all other explanations of altruism in the origin of ethics, such as group and reciprocal altruism. This theory is the basis of the initial part of *The Expanding Circle* calling into question a significant part of the premises of Singer's book.

The need of evolutionary theory to explain «egoism versus altruism»

Considered more in depth, it will become clear that ethics is much more than altruism, although that is a significant part of it. The excessive focus on altruism and reduction of ethics to this alone is in fact a product

41. HAMILTON, W.D., «The Genetic Evolution of Social Behaviour: I, II», *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 7 (1964), pp. 1-52.

42. WILSON, Edward O., «Kin Selection as the Key to Altruism: Its Rise and Fall», *Social Research*, 72, 1 (Spring 2005), p. 164.

43. TRIVERS, R.L., *Natural Selection and Social Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York 2002; WILSON, Edward, O., «Kin Selection as the Key to Altruism: Its Rise and Fall», *Social Research*, 72, 1 (Spring 2005), p. 165.

of the very nature of evolutionary ethics, as evolutionary theory focussed on survival of the fittest.

Evolution had all the features of an inherently egoistic which is why I highlighted Spencer's own consideration and inclusion in his book of chapters «Altruism versus Egoism» and «Egoism versus Altruism» ending in another chapter titled «Conciliation»⁴⁴.

If evolutionary theory is inherently egoistic and concerned with fitness and survival, how can morality, which is a data of life in humans, be explained? As we have seen, for Darwin this was a real concern. The very nature of human morality distinguished us from animals.

Evolutionary ethics focussed on solving the *problem of altruism* and in the process reduced ethics to altruism. Darwin would explain it in terms of survival of the «group» concerned. Others theories began emerging to explain it in terms of fitness. Most explanations remain very troubled, with few causative mechanisms realistically available, and as I have shown, kin ethics recently returning to Darwin's original explanation of three centuries ago to find some justificatory explanation.

The biologists notion of altruism is distinct from the typical understanding. Reciprocal altruism, as it is often described by sociobiologists, is enlightened self interest⁴⁵. Robert Trivers explained it in the following way: «...models that attempt to explain altruistic behaviour in terms of natural selection are models designed to take the altruism out of altruism»⁴⁶.

Hamilton, as we have seen above, had spoken of «inclusive fitness» which is the evolutionary fitness when one organism is not acting for its own good (fitness), not the fitness of the «doer» of the altruistic act but on close relatives. However, this is also not altruism but rather self interest. If my aim is to increase the fitness of a group *etc* because it suits me –inclusive fitness– then this does not fit the definition of altruism if it is defined as acting with an intention to assist the interest of others at the expense of his own interests.

Egoistic interpretations of altruism in humans fail to produce evidence and do not work. Batson and his colleagues have designed interesting experiments which give opposite explanations to egoistic accounts of altruism⁴⁷.

Fehr's published research in the journal *Nature* (which was partly outlined above) indicated that if studies are done on the nature of «altruism» in humans, the observational approach reveals factors which cannot be explained by biology.

44. See outline of the ideas of Spencer above.

45. As Singer acknowledged in accord with Trivers

46. TRIVERS, Robert, «The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism», *The Sociology Debate*. A.L. CAPLAN (ed.), Harper & Row, New York 1978, pp. 213-226.

47. BATSON, Daniel C., *Experimental Tests for the Existence of Altruism...*, pp. 69-78.

This very troubled reality of providing an explanation for altruism has had various defenders. Sesardic, in an article in *Ethics*, attempted to introduce a more nuanced consideration of altruism –as explained above something already prefaced by Eliot Sober– distinguishing between psychological altruism (altruism_p), which is to act to advance the interests of another at the expense of one's own, and evolutionary altruism (altruism_e), which is the effect of the behaviour that increases the fitness of another organism at the expense of one's own.

He argues that «although we lack direct evidence in favour of (evolution of psychological altruism through natural selection) –because there is no generally accepted causal story about how altruism_p was produced by natural selection– there is nevertheless weighty indirect evidence supporting it. The very nature of the altruism_p predisposition in humans, the fact that it is so widespread, that it extends at least as far back in time as to the period of hunter-gatherers, that is sustained by powerful emotions, that it is already present in very early childhood (Schwartz 1993, p. 322), and that it occupies such a manifestly central place in human mentality, all this taken together strongly suggests that altruism has its roots in our evolutionary past. This is not a knockdown proof, but in the opinion of many scholars such considerations carry enough weight to regard the evolution of psychological altruism through natural selection as much more than just a fruitful working hypothesis»⁴⁸.

Alternate explanations are that it was once selective but no longer is or that it was or is attached to something that was selective, such as a vestige or a byproduct⁴⁹.

Mark Ridley and Richard Dawkins said: «Civilized human behaviour has about as much connection with natural selection as does the behaviour of a circus on a unicycle... Similarly, there probably is a connection to be found between civilized behaviour and natural selection, but it is unlikely to be obvious on the surface»⁵⁰. The fact that a bear can balance on a unicycle is a result of natural selection but it is absurd to suggest that the skill of riding a unicycle makes bears better adapted to the environment⁵¹.

48. SESARDIC, Neven, «Recent Work on Human Altruism and Evolution», *Ethics*, Vol. 106 (1995), pp. 128-157. Citation specifically from page 139. Sesardic argues that Rawls considered evolution of human nature and justice a likelihood. (RAWLS, John, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1972, pp. 502-503). He also states that other authors have argued similarly and hence it is worth pursuing and defending.

49. SESARDIC, Neven, «Recent Work on Human Altruism and Evolution», *Ethics*, Vol. 106 (1995), pp. 140.

50. RIDLEY, Mark and DAWKINS, Richard, «The Natural Selection of Altruism», *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, J.P. RUSHTON and R.M. SORRENTINO (ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, N.J. 1981, pp. 19-37.

51. SESARDIC, Neven, «Recent Work on Human Altruism and Evolution»..., pp. 141.

The vestige theory claims that altruism once provided fitness but now in different circumstances it does not anymore do so. Some have offered this explanation, but it is incredible and has been discredited above⁵².

Explanations such as those of Sesardic highlight the poverty of ideation surrounding this topic. The reality is that we cannot explain why on many occasions, humans do cooperate and have a complex ethical approach if we just resort to evolutions and it is farfetched to say this must be the only explanation.

It is true that proponents of evolutionary ethics have never been able to come to a stable definition of «altruism». Is it just enlightened self interest? Or is it something more benevolent? Darwin believed that moral action could be motivated by a genuine concern for society, that is, «he admits that moral action might well *not* be in the interest of the individual»⁵³. Prominent Darwinist Michael Ghiselin adamantly stated: «scratch an “altruist”, and watch a “hypocrite” bleed»⁵⁴.

The dilemma of trying to explain ethics from animal altruism is neatly summarized by David Stove: «Any discussion of altruism with an inclusive fitness theorist is, in fact, exactly like dealing with a pair of air balloons connected by a tube, one balloon being the belief that kin altruism is an illusion, the other being the belief that kin altruism is *caused by* shared genes. If a critic puts pressure on the illusion balloon –perhaps by ridiculing the selfish theory of human nature– air is forced into the causal balloon. There is then an increased production of earnest causal explanations, of *why* we love our children, *why* hymenopteran workers look after their sisters, etc., etc., Then, if the critic puts pressure on the causal balloon –perhaps about the weakness of sibling altruism compared with parental, or the absence of sibling altruism in bacteria– then the illusion balloon is forced to expand. There will now be an increasing production of cynical scurrilities about parents manipulating their babies for their own advantage, and vice versa, and in general, about the Hobbesian bad times that are had by all»⁵⁵.

52. TOOBY, John and COSMIDES, Leda, «Evolutionary Psychologists Need to Distinguish between the Evolutionary Process, Ancestral Selection Pressures, and Psychological Mechanisms», *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12 (1989), pp. 724-725.

53. ALLHOFF, Fritz, «Evolutionary Ethics from Darwin to Moore», *Hist. Phil. Life Sci.*, 25 (2003), p. 58.

54. Quoted in: YOUNG, Robert, «Darwinism is Social», *Darwinian Heritage*, KOHN, David (ed.), Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985.

55. STOVE, David, *Darwinian Fairytales*, Avebury, Aldershot 1995, p. 167.

Bradie, admitting the naturalistic position, and believing no objective morality exists, was nevertheless very critical of evolutionary explanation for the widespread idea that there are *objective* moral standards. E. O. Wilson and Michael Ruse, for instance, argue that «human beings function better if they are deceived by their genes into thinking that there is a disinterested objective morality binding upon them, which all should

Singer, while supporting some conclusions he is able to derive from evolutionary biology to serve his purpose, does consider that reason is very important in ethics and is the only explanation of altruism towards others. What he understands by reason will be considered in the next two chapters. Having in the preceding part of this chapter directly explained above some of the problems for sociobiologists –which apply to Singer and to the ideas he proposed in this regard– the remainder of this chapter will explore more specific aspects of Singer and his use of sociobiology.

Problems in Singer's use of sociobiology

Problems of philosophical reasoning and style

In the preceding pages I have highly different aspects of sociobiology and the deficiencies involved in employing biology to develop ethics. They have offered a critique of evolutionary ethics as Singer proposed in his works.

The consensus of all the reviews in philosophical journals of *The Expanding Circle* (presented in the early part of this chapter) was that the book lacked rigour of analysis. Compared to the authors I have cited above, many of them avid evolutionary ethicists, it is clear that Singer did not present his arguments with the sophistication and scientific rigour appropriate to the subject matter.

Firstly, it could be argued that Singer was not a professional biologist and hence, being a moral philosopher, was not able to present a very scientific interpretation of the subject matter. Yet as explained in chapter five, this is a methodological problem which has plagued moral philosophy as it has repeatedly tried to employ the empirical sciences without knowing the limits of the application of that science.

Secondly, while it may be argued in Singer's defence that in the early 1980's this scientific sophistication may not have been totally possible with the data at hand (although a comparison with other articles printed around this time will also show that this view is being very indulgent towards Singer⁵⁶), the same cannot be argued for the subsequent two decades.

obey» (113). Does this mean that Wilson's and Ruse's gene line is in trouble? After all, if what they wrote is true, then they and anyone who believes them will no longer «function better». More seriously, if some moral perspectives are merely our genes deceiving us, maybe Wilson's and Ruse's own view of morality is nothing more than a genetic ruse. (BRADIE, Michael, *The Secret Chain: Evolution and Ethics*, NY State University Press, New York 1994, p. 198.

56. One example that could be cited among many is ROSS, Angus, «The Status of Altruism», *Mind* 92 (1983), pp. 204-218.

Singer has not modified his view in any evident way despite changes in science which was the basis of his argumentation, and continues to write on this aspect of ethical theory unchanged which is a static approach to someone who wanted to be very modern in his approach to moral philosophy.

A fair method of judging Singer's effort in *The Expanding Circle* is by the standards of moral philosophical reasoning he himself set for others as comes through in his own critique in 1980 of Lande and Slades' book *Stages: Understanding how you make moral decisions*. This critique, a few years before his own book emerged, is surprising in the standards it sets (to some it may even appear to be hypocritical)⁵⁷.

Singer is highly negative towards the manner in which the authors presented their ideas on the stages of moral development and moral decision making. Among many criticisms offered, he chides the authors' *uncritical* acceptance and use of Lawrence Kohlberg's research, and specifically, that they did not cite the criticisms to which Kohlberg's research had been subjected.

Singer found *Stages* to be a very superficial book, aimed at a public with an interest in moral development theory. «The contrast between this book and a work on morality by a professional philosopher or psychologist could not be greater. Scholarly works, of course, are not intended for a popular audience; but there must be something less vacuous than *Stages* which would not be too difficult or dry for the general reader»⁵⁸.

Surprisingly, reviewers of Singer's book will criticise him also for this same problem. As I cited in the first pages of this chapter, Dent considered that the book does not provoke reflection or thought about the subject matter it considered and was more a «prepared statement than a piece of philosophical inquiry and argumentation»⁵⁹.

Were these authors fair to Singer? It is true that in *The Expanding Circle* Singer, within a relatively short space, aims to cover a very complex topic –origin of ethics, cultural anthropology, naturalist fallacy and science, the role of reason in ethics, etc– in trying to offer a foundation for this moral philosophy?

57. LANDE, N. & SLADE, A., *Stages: Understanding how you make moral decisions*, Harper and Row, San Francisco 1979.

58. SINGER, Peter, «Book review of "Stages: Understanding how you make moral decisions"», *Ethics*, 91 (1980), pp. 153-154. (Yet more paradoxically, Singer will also cite Kohlberg's research in support of his argumentation in *The Expanding Circle*. The first is in pages 98-99 and the next pages 137-139. It is only in the latter citation and at the very end he mentions in passing criticisms of Kohlberg's work, which has only increased over time and after having positioned Kohlberg's research to support his own theory.)

59. DENT, N. J. H., «Book review "The Expanding Circle"», *Mind*, New Series, 93 (1984), pp. 138-140.

However, his methodology is very eclectic, polemical (Dent's comment of Singer offering a «prepared statement» and not an inquiry are very apt) consisting of mixing science, with anthropology, psychology, politics and moral philosophy. While all these areas are important and related to moral philosophy, the methodology must be respectful of the accuracy and limits of those ancillary sciences and must be used appropriately.

Singer presents supporting arguments, which are very speculative, as conclusive arguments. Isolated data are interpreted through broad and loose extrapolation into complex theories, with little reference to serious scientific studies in the area.

All this is combined with a collection of names and quotes (he quotes such disparate thinkers as Plato, Humphrey Bogart, Edmund Burke, Francis Crick, Johann Goethe, Robert Lee, Levi-Strauss, Becker, Kant, Hume, Einstein... only to name only a few!) which gives the impression of breadth of knowledge, a picture of erudition, yet this is more eclectic than an investigative study of some depth.

To illustrate this paucity and faulty *scientific* reasoning for someone who wanted to be modern and professional, I will present schematically the flow of reasoning and topics in two sections in the book which I have selected randomly from key aspects of the book.

The sub-heading on «*Kin Selection in Human Ethics*», which aims to explain the generalised consensus of kin selection and its role in human ethics, has the following flow of ideas within four, A5 size pages:

He begins with Sidgwick's claim that duties to family are important, then within the same paragraph he explains the thoughts of cultural anthropologist Westermarck, followed then by anthropologist Marshall Sahlin's views, then the situation of famine relief in Africa which is meant to be an indication that we care more about our own children than those in Africa. Following this he presents the views of Plato on the family and community as presented in the *Republic*, the efforts of Jewish Kibbutz settlers to create a community distinct from family and the failure of the Kibbutz projects due to many reasons including funding issues and the present lack of stress on Jewish society (this is also interspersed with a brief account of British efforts during WWII to make sacrifices, as opposed of efforts by the government in post WWII Britain in appealing to the «spirit of Dunkirk» to halt economic decline), then the Communist Manifesto aiming to abolish the family.

This gives the impression of an extremely unusual and polemical format for a serious work of moral philosophy. Moreover, Singer here appears to be convincing all of the obvious, that family is an important structure in society, sometimes given priority by individuals over the needs of others. This did not require much convincing for the average person.

One would presume Singer's aim was to convince us that this has its origins not in some moral conviction or law in the human person that love for family is important, but that it has a definite causal link to our animal ancestors from whom we have emerged from, and how this is similar to or different from such an evolutionary feature, if it exists. Singer does not provide any additional scientific data to support this, other than relying on Wilson, and as I have shown, Wilson had recanted the explanations offered on this topic in that period. Singer relied on scientific data, which he does not articulate and explain well how it merges with his theory, and that data is not gravely faulty. This is a problematic situation.

In the section on reciprocal altruism, an even more problematic theory to explain in modern sociobiology, Singer offers no scientific supporting evidence at all. What he does offer are three pages with only some probability figures (very *probable* probability figures) as his scientific empirical evidence to justify a hypothesis that reciprocal altruism can have biological origins, a theory at present with no scientific data to support it. In applying it to humans he dedicates eleven A5 size pages, under the subheading «*Reciprocal Altruism and Human Ethics*».

Here he begins by appealing to Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss who stressed the importance of this concept (unfortunately without providing any citation nor source of their ideas), then a claim that Howard Becker proposed we refer to man as «Homo Reciprocus» (Singer does not mention that the article of Becker which he does cite is from 1960 which is not exactly current research for a book written in 1983 on the current state of a new area of science). This is followed a proposition of a mechanism for such reciprocity. He says: «It is surprising how many features of human ethics could have grown out of simple reciprocal practices like the mutual removal of parasites from awkward places that one cannot oneself reach»⁶⁰. From this example he draws a thesis about reciprocity which to any serious person is an exaggerated conclusion from a possible scenario. Subsequently, Singer proposes how a monkey may have worked out who to reciprocate with, depending on how he receives «grooming» from another: «If I take an hour meticulously removing every louse from someone else's head, and she refuses even to look at my head, the verdict is clear!»⁶¹. This is followed in the same pages by with a citation of the Greek historian Polybus, then a reference to the rituals of gift giving in certain societies, the ideas of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount, the reality of cheating in modern societies and working overtime as an argument for loyalty and justice, the San «Bushmen» of the Kalahari and their arguments over spoils of a hunt concluding with a reference to an altruistic prisoners dilemma. I have omitted a number of oth-

60. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle*..., p. 37.

61. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle*..., p. 37 (Exclamation mark not in original!).

er things for the sake of brevity which were squeezed within these eleven pages of justificatory defence of the realistic nature of reciprocal altruism.

The only defence for Singer here is that this was written for a more general audience. If that is the case, then his own critique of *Stages* must be applied to his work and he must be judged by the standards he set for other authors. In regard to *Stages*, he said: «Scholarly works, of course, are not intended for a popular audience; but there must be something less vacuous than *Stages* which would not be too difficult or dry for the general reader»⁶². Ditto for Peter Singer.

More problematic is the fact that Singer has based his theory on some scientific speculations and hypothesis and has not modified scientific aspects of his theory as science progressed; especially when it has not progressed as he would have hoped. While he is not expected to be a scientist, if he is to look for the origin of ethics in science, then he must also be ready to modify his theory with the science or accommodate parts of it wherever needed. E. O. Wilson is more integral in this regard by providing an honest assessment of the state of kin ethics in sociobiology and declaring that he had initially supported a faulty hypothesis⁶³.

The origin of ethics and rejection of «traditional values»

In the search for the origin of ethics, Singer wants to explain why we have certain moral tendencies such as altruism which are a real «data» of moral experience. He would sweepingly propose, against the tide of evidence, in 1994: «Once we admit that Darwin was right when he argued that human ethics evolved from the social instincts that we inherited from our non-human ancestors, we can put aside the hypothesis of a divine origin for ethics»⁶⁴. Here we can note part of his project: to eliminate «divine origin» for ethics which meant Judaeo-Christian ethics and also traditional ethics in general.

He argued that people resist that our ethics originated from animals, as we all argue animal reactions are instinctive and we are self-conscious. The efforts to draw these sharp lines have always failed, he claims. We now have evidence that «chimpanzees and gorillas can learn more than a hundred words in sign language, and use them in combinations of their own devising. Scientists are now laboriously discovering what many dog

62. SINGER, Peter, «Book review *Stages: Understanding how you make moral decisions*», *Ethics*, 91 (1980), p. 154.

63. Wilson, Edward O., «Kin Selection as the Key to Altruism: Its Rise and Fall»..., pp. 159-166.

64. SINGER, Peter, *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, p. 6.

owners have long accepted; we are not the only animals that reason»⁶⁵. It is difficult to take such emotive arguments seriously, but Singer is serious. We must make an effort to discover what he wants to say.

As he argued in the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, finding an answer for our common ethical beliefs in altruism and biology would allow for a rejection of traditional ethical views, once we realise that such views are evolutionary and hence, we can rationally think it better to act otherwise⁶⁶. Singer does not look for a total foundation for ethics in biology and rejects the «take over bid» of ethics by sociobiologists such as E. O. Wilson⁶⁷. In that search for origin, he looks for an explanation of preexisting ethical behaviour. Upon finding that origin, he then can explain its evolutionary source, accept what needs to be accepted, and also try to say that if ethics is a science –avoiding falling into the naturalistic fallacy which he highlights at this stage of the book– we must go beyond mere evolution or biology and create our own ethical system based on other principles. He would use the analogy of an escalator, which I have already given in Part one of the thesis, and with our understanding of sociobiology and our reason, we can go to new *levels* in ethics.

E. O. Wilson's had proposed in his book that issues such as homosexuality, premarital sexuality, contraception are rejected as moral issues by sociobiology. Although Wilson's own argument against the «traditional ethic» on these subjects is open to debate based on the very theory Wilson was advocating as I highlighted in chapter one, Singer was only too ready to accept this conclusion of Wilson.

Sociobiology also allowed him, or at least offered him an argument against natural law theories of ethics. Singer's interpretation of natural law is that it bases what is right or wrong on biological nature. According to his understanding of this system, something is wrong because it does not accord with the evolved biology. He would say that we cannot be limited by biological reasoning but we can use our freedom to make such decisions⁶⁸.

65. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, pp. 27-28.

66. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics and Sociobiology», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (1982), p. 56

67. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981, pp. 56-58.

68. Singer's biologistic interpretation of natural law ethics is wrong. Natural law theorists, do not base their arguments on biological «naturalness». The naturalness they appeal to is a consequence of human reason. It is *natural* intellectually, not biologically. They consider that the human person to have a reasoning capacity, able to consider the rightness or wrongness of actions. Moreover this intellectual ability naturally *discovers* a «code» of what is right and wrong in much the same way as we build up what is right and wrong in non moral areas of our intellectual life. It is not natural because it is biological, although the biological aspect is an important part insofar as a human person is biological. In fact, this is one of the few theories that can account for a uniformity of ethical codes among so many varied cultures and creeds.

He says in his article in 1982 in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*: «Philosophers in the analytic tradition have not made any systematic investigation into the origins of our common moral convictions. They have regarded that as a task for historians rather than philosophers. As a result analytic philosophy has been regarded as naively uncritical by many Continental thinkers, who have been more concerned with the social origins of our ideas. Now the sociobiologists have added a further perspective from which our common moral convictions may be scrutinized, the perspective of our evolutionary theory. If our common moral convictions can be shown to have a biological basis we may have to think again about accepting them at face value as self evident starting points of moral inquiry»⁶⁹.

While conceding some of the difficulties, Singer seems to take lightly the real difficulties associated with altruism and its explanations. Although Singer has never discarded or superseded what he proposed in *The Expanding Circle*, at the same time he has demonstrated that he skirts over the real difficulties of the questions by talking of «refining and developing». He would employ it to reject social contract theories of ethics prevalent at the time with the popularity of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, which posed a barrier to the introduction of his own new system. It can be noted in following citation from 1994.

«Is the search for the origins of ethics over? Is it now just a matter of refining and developing the Darwinian view? In one sense, the answer is "yes". The modern scientific approach to the origin of ethics that began with *The Descent of Man* has become much more sophisticated in the past two decades. We are beginning to understand the extent to which humans are ethical by nature. We know that we are neither purely good by nature nor purely evil, but ambivalent. No social contract was ever required, because we were social primates before we were human beings. Nevertheless, we tend to compete with each other for food, sexual partners, and status. Though Darwin did not clear up all the mysteries of the origins of ethics (the interplay between reason and desire raises issues that he did not explore sufficiently), he did provide the outline of what is surely the right answer to the question...»⁷⁰.

This «providing the outline» once again goes against Singer's effort to put science on a more solid footing. We are left with speculation which, at best, is empirically very speculative. The stream of modern data and research has gone against the key tenets of Singer's position. The type of altruism he is seeking to explain in humans does not exist in the animal world. He may imagine it, but it is not real. Yet he remains committed de-

69. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics and Sociobiology», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (1982), p. 56.

70. SINGER, Peter, *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, pp. 19-20.

spite much evidence to the contrary. He is so committed to his theory despite the evidence that he seeing our ethics so similar to elements among social animals that «they render implausible attempts to deny that human ethics has its origin in evolved patterns of behaviour among social animals»⁷¹. Such a rigidity to a theory inspite of internal evidence renders Singer's appeal to be more scientific hollow.

Unscientific speculation to explain moral behaviour

Singer is aware that humans also undertake great feats of altruism, such as the examples during the Nazi concentration camps which he himself cited in *The Expanding Circle*. Acts of genuine humanity and moral order despite abysmal ethical environments⁷². This all too evident existence of altruism towards strangers, needed an explanation without resorting to an «external source» (the divine origin which he talks about above) and Singer acknowledged that.

Although not always employing altruism in his investigation in the same way, at one point he does explain clearly that selfishness is not altruism and it cannot be considered as such⁷³. It needs to be not self interested in its motive. To explain this non self interest he gives some other very remote and unproven, hypothesis.

For example he suggests that self interested people are not good for our welfare and hence evolution will give us an ability to distinguish, yet no causative mechanism is given, and is so counter evolutionary as self interested people are good for their own welfare and hence, in an evolutionary setting they will propagate more and overcome selfless people. This has been an overwhelming difficulty for evolutionists to explain. Singer however says: «Evolution would therefore favour people who could distinguish self-interested from altruistic motivation in others, and then select only the altruistic as beneficiaries of their gifts or services»⁷⁴. From here he claims that evolution will give us a capacity to select genuinely altruistic partners. No evidence for this «capacity» is presented, nor any explanation of how we can actually discern genuine altruism from deceit and self interest under some guise. The entire section reads quite more like science fiction, a style full of wild hypothesie and speculation to support his theory.

71. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle*..., p. 29.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

74. TRIVERS, Robert, «The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism», *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 46 (1971), pp. 48-49. See also SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle*..., pp. 43-44.

If one cannot resort to external sources of ethics, as Singer has set himself, to what can be the possible explanation of compassion and altruism toward's others when it has no possible benefit to the individual? Singer would turn to Darwin. Yet, the problem with Darwinian thought is that it is not genuine altruism, but egoism. As I have shown the data indicate altruism is not of that form when studied scientifically and carefully.

As I have shown, the bulk also of modern evidence denies the existence of non kin altruism or any good evidence for it. Yet Singer persists in presenting this theory. In his collection of articles on ethics published in 1994, *Ethics*, he persists in including an entire section of the book, of some fifty pages, titled *Common themes in Primate Ethics*, despite the absence of scientific evidence to support such a claim. This section includes articles by the well known Jane Goodall (*Helping Kin in Chimpanzees*), Frans De Waal (*Chimpanzee Justice*), etc.

An indicative example of hyperbolic reasoning is the following example he offers in his 1982 article in the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in order to explain why female promiscuity is looked down upon in society but not male promiscuity. He claimed that the reason lies in the fact that propagation by males is best done by males spawning many children increasing the survival of their genes. On the other hand women are limited in how many children they can bear and in order to ensure longer term survival, and the possibility of grandchildren who will care for them in old age, they prefer lasting relationships. Hence, ethical norms following this suggested biologic connection will not discourage male promiscuity that can lead to spawning many children, while promiscuity in females which can lead to «spawning» many children is condemned by society⁷⁵.

Obviously, this example falls into a scientific error of proposing a cause-effect relationship without offering any serious connection or evidence to support such a theory. I could propose that if both women and men spawned as many children as possible, then some will survive and hence even if women don't have caregivers in old age, that doesn't matter as they have passed on their genes to the next generation and in greater number as there are greater offspring and they can die having created more of the species. Having caregivers in old age is not what drives evolution but survival of the species. More offspring means more would survive in the long run and once again greater survival of the species. In fact, evolutionary perspective makes more sense and is in accord with the normal mechanism of proposing group altruism.

From the above section it is clear that theories of the origin of evolutionary ethics can be designed to meet a variety of interesting hypotheses

75. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics and Sociobiology», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (1982), p. 59.

any author decides. Even considering Singer's proposal as remotely possible from a biological perspective, how would it work? Where is the evidence among animals that reproducing many offspring among some animals is condemned or regarded as inappropriate. Singer imposes a cultural and rational assessment onto an animal/human model, with no evidence for the evaluative component in the animal world. At most, what he can say is that this code «evolved» among humans. But here, he is not talking about biological evolution but about cultural factors and development⁷⁶.

What Singer aimed to achieve by such *examples* as the one above was to stress the supposed fact of *double standards* in pre-existing codes. This double standard sociobiology allow us to remove, as it will have no moral connotation but only a biological one. This leads us to a key part of Singer's use of sociobiology. The aim is to provide an answer to the question of the origin of ethics, or more specifically, to provide an answer to the question of why we have certain ethical thoughts and common ways of living ethically despite the cultural differences.

Singer, ever since, rejected a divine origin of ethics. As I highlighted, he also rejected a Hobbes view of ethics, which is primarily in this case ethical egoism as the basis of society, which we have considered in chapter six. Similarly, he rejected any social contract theories such as that of Rousseau or those of Rawls in more recent times. He did not reject a cultural origin to ethics, highlighting the thought of Westermarck. He would state clearly that «sociobiologists who did not allow for a major cultural component would be a dogmatic fool»⁷⁷. But although considering cultural components important, he limits his search for an answer to sociobiology, as this also allowed for a harmony with his ideas on animal rights and argument against specieism.

Summary: Reasoned arguments to construct a new moral theory

Singer aimed to employ evolutionary ethics to explain the pre-existing world of accepted moral codes. This preexisting world is in accord with something he learned from Hare, which is the level 1 type moral reasoning (prole type)⁷⁸. This «explanation» of many ethical codes allowed

76. There, it is possible to offer fictitious connections of imaginary possibilities. Few serious authors would defend such a claim and if it were the case, it would not be able to explain why traditional ethics in Judeo-Christian cultures actually encouraged monogamy, while in other cultures a type of «sacred» prostitution was allowed among women. Nor could it explain the present situation of male and female sexuality which is not a reaction against biology but against a traditional ethical base.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

78. I have already discussed this in chapter eight under the section on Richard Hare and will review again in the next two chapters.

them to all be open to reconsideration. Once reconsidered and found acceptable they can be kept; if not, they can be discarded.

As I have shown, Singer's use of scientific approach is defective from many perspectives. However, even granting him the benefit of the doubt on his articulation of the origin of ethics, how did he propose to reconsider existing codes and construct a new system?

Singer considered the role of reason as essential in ethics. He was not an evolutionary ethicist in the strict sense and saw the naturalistic fallacy as a «limiting factor» on sociobiology⁷⁹.

Singer gave reason pride of place in ethics. In the next two chapters, I will analyse from different perspectives what he understood by reason, its role and how Singer supports his hypothesis for a construction of a new more modern ethical system.

2. ANALYSIS OF SINGER'S VERSION OF «RATIONAL ETHICS».

What reasoned ethics meant for Singer and its deficiencies

Singer's entire moral philosophy was aimed at resolving practical ethical issues. The difficulties presented by analytical philosophy at the end of the 1950's and 1960's led to the conclusion that moral philosophy could not contribute to normative moral conclusion.

Singer, closely following the project Hare had established in this regard, did not believe this should be the case⁸⁰. He considered moral philosophers needed to resolve the impass'e that moral philosophy had found itself locked within⁸¹. The rise of the «applied ethics» departments and the «practical ethics» movement was the result of this effort. For this growing movement a new breed of «moral experts» were needed.

How did Singer see the task of the moral philosopher? He considered there was a need for a professional familiar with moral concepts and with moral arguments, armed with time to think and gather information to adjudicate on these problems. Such a moral philosopher would also be competent in arguments and detect inferences that lacked validity or consisted of defective logic⁸².

Singer was not unaware of the difficulties in this project. In the introduction of a collection of articles on applied ethics of which he was the

79. See chapter one of thesis.

80. HARE, Richard M., «Ethical theory and utilitarianism», *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Amartya SEN and Bernard WILLIAMS (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982, p. 23.

81. SINGER, Peter, «Moral Experts»..., pp. 115-117.

82. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

editor, he stressed the difficulties, admitting that moral philosophy is faced with the criticism of being just about emotion, with no objective truth. While admitting that such an argument is «controversial» (the reality of no objective truth in ethics), he does not reject it. He limits himself to stating that even if the conclusion is accepted –that we have no objective truth in ethics– we should not abandon the goal of seeking «standards of consistency and relevance» in regard to the important subject matter of ethics⁸³.

This search for *consistency and relevance* must be borne very much in mind if the Singerian project in moral philosophy is to be understood. Here the influence of Hare is quite clear. Hare, in his article «Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism», written in 1976, had lamented about the state of moral philosophy. He claimed that he and others had worked hard in analytical philosophy to study the meaning of moral terms and the possible valid reasoning in morals, largely in order to solve practical moral problems. Yet, to his dismay, he felt that when many philosophers turned to practical moral problems to resolve them instead of clear logic they had resorted to rhetoric and prejudice (prejudice being the name he often gave to intuition)⁸⁴.

Hare's two levels of moral reasoning, discussed in chapter eight, would influence Singer's approach to «reasoned» attitude to ethics. In his article «Moral Experts», Singer would not accept the view that moral philosophy should cede to society and to the «experts» in moral issues within society such as the religious leaders, politicians and so on. He could only accept this position if both the general principles and the application to particular cases were «perfect and undisputed». This would be the equivalent to well worked out reasoning of the «archangelic» intelligence. Only in these circumstances he says could he then live by the code unreflectively (this is the prole type existence of Hare). However, this was not the actual situation in his opinion and hence, although it was difficult, this «thinking out» was important, and he (and others) would need to play an archangelic role⁸⁵.

Singer considered the accepted societal ethical norms disputable and hence in need of reworking. However, he could not just base his objection on the fact that they were disputed, but they needed to be disputable on some basis. He had even questioned the possibility of objectivity in morality, something we will consider in more detail. The impossibility of objectivity being the case, on what grounds were the views disputable?

He had advocated that we would need to develop our ethics to be *reasonable and considered*. This same approach was evident in the works

83. SINGER, Peter (ed.), *Applied Ethics...*, pp. 6-7.

84. HARE, Richard M., «Ethical theory and utilitarianism»..., p. 23.

85. SINGER, Peter, «Moral Experts»..., p. 116.

of Hare as we have seen. Hare needed to defend his theories against subjectivism, and he would resort to his prescriptivism, being able to «prescribe» because we had a considered well reflected position in our ethics.

Hare's view on moral intuitions is repeated almost *verbatim* by Singer in his article, «Moral Experts». Singer asks for «clarity» in argumentation. This clarity means possessing the facts and overcoming our «unreflective moral intuitions» in our decision making⁸⁶.

Intuitionism was in many ways for both Hare and Singer partly a synonym for religious ethics. What they considered to be those *unreflected prole type* views that people have and that by the level two reasoning (archangel) we can sift out, removing the chaff, and if anything remains it will be well reasoned. If not, then we begin with some other basis to reason. The project of constructing ethics without religion was very predominant in the considerations of Singer, especially with regard to bioethics⁸⁷.

The existentialist philosophers, Heidegger and Sartre, did not appeal to Singer. Metaphysical in their considerations, Singer was not open to follow their argumentation about the priority of existence and essence⁸⁸. He claimed they considered ethics a commitment, a «leap of faith»⁸⁹.

Accepting Singer's simplistic reduction of Sartre and Heidegger for the sake of discussion of his thought, if these authors had reasoned that ethics were a commitment, it would that imply they considered it to have a subjective content or essence, reasoned discourse does not contribute anything additional, we must just commit to one view or another and act accordingly.

This approach does not appear very different from what Singer offered. He himself had admitted, and as I will show again further on, that ethics depended on desire. If that is the case why not just a «commitment» as Sartre and Heidegger?

Singer, like all utilitarians, was vigorously against subjectivism. Subjectivism and egoism eat away at the core of utilitarianism leaving it bare and pointless as a moral system. Sidgwick, who according to Singer was one of the most prominent utilitarians, was vigorously aware of this.

What *rational* and *reasoning* meant for Singer is extremely difficult to ascertain with clarity as will become evident. He had claimed in *The Expanding Circle* (after considering the merits and role of sociobiology) that unless there is a rational component to defend «at least one of our ethical principles» then even biological explanations would lead to subjectivism. Singer wanted to derive «ultimate ethical principles» from some source.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

87. KUHSE, Helga and SINGER, Peter, *Should The Baby Live? ...*, p. 125.

88. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, p. 84.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

According to him, other ethical systems rest on opinion and are open and not vulnerable to criticism⁹⁰.

So *rational* meant at least having *one* foundational premise to begin with and then proceeding logically from there. Singer had appealed to a long tradition of philosophical reasoning in ethics beginning with his reference to Socratic effort in questioning the existing standards, and followed by such others as the Stoics, Aquinas, Kant and Sidgwick.

Of particular interest to Singer was Hobbes's *discovery* of Euclidean geometry as an analogy. The geometric model would be very apt for Singer as his system would be deductive in that sense, having some principles, or at least one principle, and deduce others.

The rationality he advocated was rationality in a broad sense meaning it considered «reflection» on our own existence and its meaning. Yet, in the same breath, Singer admits that those who do not take part in it are not irrational or in error⁹¹.

In *The Expanding Circle* Singer would echo Hare again in something he considered essential to moral discourse. Presenting his theory about sociobiology and ethics, he explained that his proposition is speculative. Yet he claimed it was «internally coherent» and contained an «inherent internal logic of ethical thinking»⁹². Singer had even cited the now discredited work of Lawrence Kohlberg to support his argument for his generalised appeal to reasoning, using it to support his general appeal of its importance of reasoning in ethical consideration of average people as they mature.

Singer's ideas while largely from Hare, also have some resonance with the ideas of Richard Brandt on ethical reasoning⁹³. In Brandt's well known book, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, the concept of «rational desires» emerges⁹⁴. Brandt, possibly stimulating Singer in employing sociobiology, had sought a solution for ethics in cognitive psychotherapy. Brandt considered the answer to what is good, can be found in this method. People, after exploring profoundly their desires through psychotherapy, and ruling out such things which create aversions in them, due to bad experiences in infancy or at other stages, would reach a point of having only considered and calmly reflected desires. The good is what Brandt called *rational desire*. These rational desires would give our codes and this is what we can base right or wrong upon. In such a state Brandt considered

90. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, p. 85. J.L. Mackie would conclude precisely this point from sociobiology, indicating that it leads to stericism.

91. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, p. 219.

92. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, p. 90.

93. Brandt was considered in chapter eight with regard to rule utilitarianism.

94. BRANDT, Richard, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979.

people would have rational desires of benevolence, but he was unable to affirm that acting egoistically would be erroneous.

Brandt's rational desires merge well with what Singer aspired to, a «consistent and relevant» view. Views that are pondered and reflected. However, interestingly Brandt acknowledged in the end what he proposed *were* desires. They were not statements of some truth. This is what others would call the non-cognitivist position. Singer, as we will see, held this view, but was ambivalent about it, because a rational desire is no more than a desire, and because *rational* and *desire* appear to be in conflict. For Brandt they need not be in conflict if desires can be for a rational purpose, but here we enter into some external validating aspect of desires and actions. «Rational» here meant free of negative influences, aversions. It is difficult not to see that the negativity here is measured against something objective⁹⁵. From this view of Brandt's, ethics will at least be *considered and pondered*, which is what Singer advocated.

Yet, Singer did not just want this. He reacted strongly, as we noted, to Rawls's view which is also pondered and considered. So obviously it is a consideration within some broader context of *consideration* or *reasoning*. What this context is proves difficult to ascertain. In order to get closer, it is worthwhile considering in more detail the few times where Singer has volunteered more information about what he means about reasoning in ethics. One such source is in his article on the *is-ought* dilemma already presented in chapter two.

The limitations of Singer's critique of the «is-ought» dilemma

For Hare, Singer and Rawls, linguistic philosophy and emotivism had left moral philosophy in English-speaking countries in an unresolvable situation. The foundations of the problem lay ultimately in Hume, as I have explained in chapter seven.

Hume claimed that moral obligation cannot be derived from an analysis of the real world. The solution to this difficulty is not the scope of this present work⁹⁶. What is important is Singer's reply to this very problematic issue in English moral philosophy.

The very framing of Singer's reply gives an insight into his views on reason. The article we have already seen, «The triviality of the debate over Is-Ought and the definition of moral». To call a question that had plagued a

95. I will return to this view later and see its concordance with Singer.

96. It would suffice to say that among many solutions, Aristotle had foreseen the problem and offered a solution two thousand years earlier (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk VI, Ch 9, 1142 b23-25; Bk. VII, Ch 3, 1146 b25-35).

line of philosophical reasoning as *trivial* would either indicate that you had resolved the problem or that you considered the problem irrelevant.

The first possibility –to have solved the problem– Singer did not accomplish. Hence, by considering the problem as irrelevant Singer has indicated the importance he attributed to it with regard to moral philosophical reasoning. His approach reflects an attitude: if problems are unsolvable, they are best ignored.

However, this problem was foundational in English philosophy. It touched upon the very *nexus* between reason and the possibility of ethics. Hume reduced ethics to emotion and feeling. Reason does not have a normative role but only an «executive» role in fulfilling desires. Hume also subscribed to a moral sense theory which also left ethics in a dimension of feeling. Even considering murder itself, the content of the act for Hume could only be found in the moral feeling not in the actual act itself⁹⁷. With this background, could human activity have a moral dimension that was not just subjective?

Singer very aware of this risk preferred to avoid the term subjectivism in his article saying it was «misleading» term and preferring to call subjectivism «form and content neutralism»⁹⁸.

To avoid naming the Humean position, Singer imposes another structure on moral principles which will provide another title. Upon analysis, this reveals the same meaning but avoids the negative connotation. What «*content* neutrality» meant was that *matter or content* involved in the moral principle could be pleasure or happiness or whatever else was desired to be pursued as his overriding principle of moral action. The «*neutrality of form*» meant that the principle need not abide by what Singer considered key formal structure such being applicable universally.

What form and content neutrality offered, which the term subjectivism did not allow, was that it implied a «considered» or «reflected» system or basis of ethics, not just whimsical opinion, despite the fact that this *neutrality* would conclude in a particular system that the acting person could do whatever they desired or considered. Ultimately, it was subjectivism that was «reflected» or «considered». The person following this system would take this «neutrality» as overriding because he is acting on a «coherent» set of principles⁹⁹.

The *neutralist* position was, in contrast to the *descriptivist* position, a position where a principle must satisfy both *form* and *content* criteria

97. See chapter seven under Hume.

98. SINGER, Peter, «The triviality of the debate over “is-ought” and the definition of moral»..., p. 51.

99. When a man does not follow this system, Singer claims he is not acting rationally and we will need to look for some other explanation for his action such as temptation or addiction, etc. *ibid.*, p. 52.

such as maximising happiness (content) and impartially considered (form). Once you accept the principle with these features, you can construct a «watertight reasoning from statements of facts to moral conclusions»¹⁰⁰. The only difficulty with this system is that it lacked, according to Singer, reasons for acting. If someone disagreed with the system there was no motivating factor, while the prior had more motivating factors implicit as egoism and subjectivism usually do.

Singer concluded this article by saying that he has only offered some proposals or descriptions of the solutions offered to the problem of the «is-ought» gap. He acknowledges no solution is offered because no «definition of morality can bridge the gap between facts and action»¹⁰¹.

Singer also admitted that clarity about moral terms, or clarity about what one means by «moral judgement», are important as pivotal to make clear. Once clarified, then progress from there should be made from these preliminary foundations, but philosophers should not get stuck to it. «My complaint is that what should be regarded as something to be got out of the way in the introduction to a work of moral philosophy has become the subject-matter of almost the whole of moral philosophy in the English-speaking world»¹⁰².

Singer was vividly aware that within the epistemological and metaphysical framework of the philosophical system within which he had been nurtured and worked, Hume had constructed a Gordian knot that was insoluble. He was careful not to commit himself to a solution. On the one hand, he believed we can reason about morality, yet on the other hand, he could not offer a solution to this problem. A deep ambivalence pervades his approach to this entire aspect of his moral philosophy, a foundational and pivotal aspect. This ambivalence colours his approach to the remainder of the areas in moral reasoning.

In fact, it is very notable that Singer is very careful not to enter too deeply into the problem, and in all his writings there is a careful circumnavigation of this area. A conflict existed between the rational barrier constructed between reason and action by Hume, and Singer's intense desire to be able to give reasons for action. Yet, he is careful not to offer solutions and get immersed in intellectual discussions, thus being unable with credibility to offer solutions to «practical ethics». He had seen Hare end in this dilemma and he was determined to avoid it.

In summary, Singer believes our reasons for acting are determined by us, and once determined we must put a consistent argument consequent to this system. He appreciates and tries to foster the system proposed by

100. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Richard Hare of considering happiness and suffering from a universal perspective. However, in the end he cannot justify such a position because of the fact-action gap. What reason can offer is that once a clear set of principles is agreed upon, we can adhere to them and build on consistently. A Euclidean approach to ethics.

Ethical Dualism: Singer as a non-cognitivism and a cognitivist

As I indicated above, Singer was aware of the divide between *facts* and *action* that was created within the empirical philosophical system he inherited and adhered to, and the inconsistency it produces.

He himself would acknowledge this position in replying to a critique from Frank Jackson in the book *Singer and his Critics*¹⁰³. «But looking back at the various places in which I have discussed the role of reason in ethics, I find that –as I suggested in commenting on Jackson’s firm statement that I am a non-cognitivist– I persist in having two thoughts that are not easy to reconcile. One is that reasons for action are dependent on desires, and the other is that reason can take us to a broader perspective from which the good of one being is no more significant than the similar good of another. The dependence of reason on desire is simply the Humean view, which has always seemed to me the natural and obvious position about reasons for action...»¹⁰⁴.

Non-cognitivism is an ethical position which claims that «ethical sentences are not capable of truth, are not truth apt, do not express propositions, do not represent how things are, are expressions of special pro and con attitudes rather than beliefs and are to be classed with prescriptions rather than statements»¹⁰⁵.

Jackson in criticising Singer claims non-cognitivists cannot give validity to their inferences. He gives the example:

- *Gambling is wrong.*
- *If gambling is wrong, then getting other people to gamble is wrong.*
- *Therefore, getting other people to gamble is wrong*¹⁰⁶.

Such sentences cannot be argued by non-cognitivists to preserve truth as these sentences are not aimed at being true or false. Jackson declares that people make these statements all the time and non-cognitivists need to be able to give an explanation¹⁰⁷.

103. We have already seen this quote but it is worthwhile to present it again for the present analysis.

104. JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 280.

105. JACKSON, Frank, *Non-Cognitivism, Validity and Conditionals* in *Singer and His Critics*, Dale JAMIESON (ed.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1999, p. 18.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

107. Jackson himself was a cognitivist, but in this article, he offered Singer and other non-cognitivists a possible solution to the dilemma he claimed they found themselves in.

Singer would reply to Jackson's critique with some of his own counter-examples¹⁰⁸:

Frank: *What shall I make for dinner?*

Morag: *Make either chicken or Szechuan eggplant with garlic sauce.*

Frank: *Have you forgotten that Peter is coming, and he's a vegetarian?*

Morag: *So don't make chicken.*

Frank: *Shall I make the eggplant, then*

Morag: *(her voice rising): Look, I told you to make either chicken or eggplant, and then when you reminded me that Peter is coming, I told you not to make the chicken. Can't you work out for yourself what I am telling you to make?*

Frank: *(coolly): I'm sorry, dear, but I really can't. You have uttered only imperatives. Since imperatives are not truth-apt, no inferences can validly be drawn from them.*

He also offers one other example:

Doctor: *Here's the prescription. Get it filled at the pharmacy on the way out. But if you have to drive within four hours, don't take these tablets.*

Patient: *I have to go home in an hour, and I can't get home tonight without driving.*

Doctor: *Have the prescription filled and take the tablets immediately.*

The patient may ask further:

Perhaps you didn't hear what I said-I have to drive to get home, and I can't wait for hours before going.

Or possibly:

Are you saying that it is so important for me to get started on the tablets immediately that this overrides your general advice on not taking the tablets before driving?

In offering these solutions, Singer is claiming that they presuppose that the form of hypothetical syllogisms applies validly to imperatives. If it is denied that imperatives have validity that will not help the patient and if the patient was a logician and aware that imperatives are not truth apt, she would be no wiser about what to do.

He claims that the problem lies in the fact that true conclusions stem from true premises, and as imperatives are not true or false, you cannot apply the above logical reasoning. He hopes logicians will broaden their definitions to accommodate this difficulty. «It ought to be possible to

108. JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, pp. 271-272.

recognise that arguments consisting of imperatives can be valid, while preserving the difference between indicatives and imperatives. My guess is that the solution to this broader problem will provide us with an account of validity in ethical inference that can continue to support a distinctively non-cognitivist view of nature of ethics. But finding such a solution is a task I shall leave for others»¹⁰⁹.

Yet, behind the methodology of linguistic philosophy and the definitions of validity with regard to types of propositions and specifically imperatives, Singer has camouflaged the problem, which Jackson himself did not address.

The cases he mentions are more of the hypothetical type rather than imperatives of true moral dimensions. In the first case, if chicken was made, no ethical problem would have occurred apart from offence to the guest and possibly a hungry guest that night.

However, even accepting the cases mentioned, the solution offered by Singer indicate the contrary of what in reality non-cognitivists propose. They actually admit that the imperatives, as constructed by Singer, are *true* statements. In asking what to cook, Peter was looking not just for imperative statements –«Cook this!»– but some *factual* details that may help his selection, and once provided he could make a valid conclusion. The factual detail of Peter’s vegetarianism, influenced the decision. The fact was turned into an *ought* by Morag. The statements were truth apt.

Singer concludes his critique of Jackson by saying: «I just took it for granted that the standard rules of inference work for ethical judgments as they do for statements of fact. I was more interested in how one could get argument going between people who differ about the ethics of such questions as abortion, our obligation to assist famine victims in other countries or our right to use non-human animals as means to our ends»¹¹⁰.

However, Singer’s stance on non-cognitivism was not as firm as his mentor’s, and included «added» features. «While I do incline towards the view of ethics developed by R.M. Hare, according to which ethical judgments belong to the same broad family as imperatives, I am less firm in my non-cognitivism (...). This is, in part, because I cannot deny the plausibility of Henry Sidgwick’s claim that it is a self evident truth that from «the point of view of the Universe», the good of one individual is of no greater significance than the good of any other»¹¹¹. In *The Expanding Circle* and *How Are We to Live?* I have tried to argue that this, or something like it, is a com-

109. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

110. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

111. SIDGWICK, Henry, *The Methods of Ethics.*, 7th edition, Macmillan, London 1907 p. 382.

mon element in many developed ethical traditions, and that it is something that we come to understand through our capacity to reason. Thus, I have come close to saying that there is at least one important ethical judgment that is true, or can be known. To that extent, I would not want to call myself a non-cognitivist»¹¹².

Singer's assertion of the importance of the Sidgwick «point of view of the universe» as a principle that is self evident, opens the door to self evident truths. What are they? Are there more self-evident truths? Why are they the «common element» of many ethical traditions? How can we justify this common element? What are the epistemological foundations for this element? Singer is very silent in this regard and that silence leaves his own argumentation very vulnerable.

Singer admits that to explain this position, without resorting to some objective truth in moral statements, can be negotiated by «sophisticated reasoning» but he is honest enough to admit that the *reasoning* lacks validity. «I could, no doubt, accept Sidgwick's axiom but refuse to use the term "true" of ethical judgments. Then I could be classed as an objectivist non-cognitivist (...) who hold that "X is good" is a "prescription whose rationality is a priori derivable". Sidgwick's axiom would then become an *a priori* rational prescription. But at this point, the distinction between non-cognitivism and cognitivism becomes so fine that it is scarcely worth insisting upon»¹¹³.

The impass'e, which is truly thuo, and a consequence of an inherited problematic epistemological tradition, is navigated by Singer with a mental sleight of hand, and with some support from Hare. «The objectivist who remains committed to being a non-cognitivist could still say: "We can know that one ethical judgement is rational and that another is not, but since ethical judgements are prescriptions, we cannot, strictly speaking, know anything about the truth or falsity of ethical judgements". To which I would respond: "Maybe so, but who cares? From the perspective of anyone interested in the prospects for reasoning in ethics, what your position has in common with objectivism in ethics –including objectivist forms of cognitivism– is much more significant than what it has in common with other forms of non-cognitivism"»¹¹⁴.

Richard Hare made a similar point in *Sorting Out Ethics*: «The term «cognitivist» and «non-cognitivist» are misleading... The important question is whether one can think rationally about moral questions. In other

112. JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 270. This "something we come to understand through our capacity to reason" which Singer mentions here will be considered again in considering his position on intuitionism.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

words, are there ways of doing our moral reasoning well or badly? This important question is concealed by those who speak of cognitivism and non-cognitivism, and of knowing that moral statements are true»¹¹⁵.

Both Hare and Singer are suspect in their argumentation, ignoring a logical inconsistency in order to bridge the analytical gulf, with a simple «who cares» reply or an appeal to «think rationally». A distinction is made between truth in propositions and rational discourse. A void is introduced by claiming that we can argue *reasonably* or *rationally* about ethics, but that we cannot know if it is *true*. If that is the case, maybe the person listening to Singer or Hare might say «my logic, my rationality tells me something different from yours». They will be paralysed against this subjectivism. If it is just an intellectual exercise, with no basis in reality, each one will play their own «game of rationality», while Hare and Singer can play theirs.

The above paragraphs are indicative of a frustration where English moral philosophy and its epistemological underpinning had found itself. Singer acknowledges the system doesn't work within the philosophical tradition from which he comes from, yet he insists that the end justifies the means, at least in the case of ethical argumentation.

In a critique of the article *The triviality of the debate over «is-ought» and the definition of moral*, Michael Smith believes that Singer is erroneous in claiming that the «is-ought debate» and the definition of moral are trivial. «On the contrary these debates acquire significance precisely because the substantive issue concerns our reasons for action»¹¹⁶.

And he goes on to say: «Are reasons desire dependent?, is a substantive philosophical question if ever there was one. Singer is therefore wrong that the debate over “is-ought” is trivial. Moreover, and importantly (...) this substantive philosophical question must be answered in the affirmative if we want to hold on to some fairly common sense assumptions about the nature of morality»¹¹⁷.

Smith admits that if moral beliefs and reason are desire dependent we can never have ethical discourse: «...desires for ends themselves can be caused not rationalised. It therefore looks like we could only ever get people to acquire such desires via a process akin to *conversion*. Even though it might look like we are engaged in a rational argument, we would in fact have to use rhetoric, or association, or manipulation of some other kind, in order to get them to acquire desires for suitable ends. At a certain level of abstraction, then, the task of getting people to be morally

115. HARE, R.M., *Sorting Out Ethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p. 56.

116. Smith, Michael, “The Definition of Moral”, in *Singer and His Critics*, Jamieson, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 39.

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

motivated would be no different to the task of getting them to buy this or that product as the result of a cleverly devised and manipulative advertising campaign»¹¹⁸.

Singer objects to Smith's criticism but, as can be seen, he does so inadequately. He claims that his use of the term *trivial* was contextually dependent on the debate at the time, he then admits that the debate it is anything but trivial. However he offers no answer to the real question. He objects to Smith's claim that if there are no reasons for action independent of desire we can only end up in manipulative advertising. «The arguments I use in *How We are to Live?* to defend the view that an ethical life is likely to be more satisfying one than a life devoted to earning more money and consuming more goods could be seen as an attempt to inform people about the consequences of different ways of living, and thus to help them arrive at a maximally informed, coherent and unified set of desires. This is hardly like a "manipulative advertising campaign". Manipulative advertising campaigns use misinformation or highly selected partial information, and attempt to play up desires which are often at odds with other, more *significant desires*»¹¹⁹.

«Significant desires». Desires that are more informed, more considered. This is rationality in ethics for Singer and is reminiscent of Brandt's rational desires. Yet, Brandt also new he could not negate other ways of living, such as egoism. Singer rejects egoism as a valid form of ethics¹²⁰. Brandt, as I explained, could not say it was irrational to be egoistic. Singer would reject egoism as being based on uninformed desires, specifically on the desire not informed by the *form* of the «point of view of the universe», that is universal disinterestedness.

However Smith, highlighted a key aspect of what reason means for Singer. Singerian rationality, following that of Hare, is not about truth in statements but more about a method of reasoning that is rational. But reasoning is about arguments leading to truth and not just some appearance of consistency. A syllogism can appear correct and yet one of the premises is erroneous. It can meet the conditions of rational thought but not be correct. Ethics is about rightness or wrongness of actions, not rational sounding reasoning. If the thread of Singer's method of argumentation is followed, as I have highlighted in the previous chapter and in this and the following, his technique is what Smith predicted: it would be a very sophisticated form of rhetoric, association, manipulation.

118. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 279 (italics not in original).

120. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, p. 10; SINGER, Peter, *Expanding Circle...*, p. 128.

Failed rejection of relativism and subjectivism

In the first chapter of *Practical Ethics*, Singer devotes a few pages to denying certain errors about ethics. Two errors that particularly preoccupied him were subjectivism and relativism.

Relativism claims that ethics is relative to the cultural context and the society one is living within. He considered relativity in ethics wrong. The only sense it may be correct for him is from a consequentialist point of view, where in one society something may be wrong because it will not lead to the best outcome, while in another it will be right because due to actual factors in that society it will lead to the best outcome. Singer uses a specific example of «casual sex» which may be wrong in a society without good birth control and hence will lead to «the existence of children who cannot be adequately cared for»¹²¹, but if there is adequate contraception available then «casual sex» is not wrong. This is acceptable relativism from a consequentialist paradigm.

Singer considered that relativism grew in the nineteenth century as a result of emergence of sociological data regarding non-European societies which had, or at least appeared to have had, radically different values to the ones existing in Europe. This led to a view among some that ethics is relative, lacking objective validity. According to Singer, the Marxists developed this further by seeing morality as the imposition of the ruling class, morality thus dependent on economic class in control. He claims that Engel realised this and added a further claim that in a society without class antagonism, there could be a «really human morality»¹²².

If ethics is relative, Singer argues that it is hard to reject such situations as slavery because people could say that it is accepted by the majority and hence it is acceptable, the only way it could change is if we change public opinion. Singer believes these difficulties are enough to «sink» relativism.

Yet paradoxically, Singer himself had used the relativism of ethics to reject ethical systems he is not in agreement with. As we have already highlighted in chapter three, he refers to King Darius to discredit pre-existing mores and falls into a simple error of logic. I will not repeat the negation of his false example here¹²³.

Yet, it was subjectivism which generated Singer's strongest objections. In chapter, I reviewed Singer's denial of John Rawls's assumption that Henry Sidgwick employed a form reflective equilibrium. Within that critique, Singer accused Rawls of subjectivism in «the most important

121. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics*..., p. 4.

122. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

123. See Chapter Three, «Egoism, Relativism and Conventional Morality».

sense of this misused term»¹²⁴. As we have already seen, Singer objected to the very term subjectivism and the way it was used. He was vividly aware his own system could be guilty of subjectivism if not *adequately* defined, as I also noted above.

In accusing Rawls, he defines what he means by subjectivism explaining that Rawls claimed a moral theory will be seen as valid with reference to the considered moral judgements the theory is tested against, hence having no sense in which it could be considered as *objectively* valid. In different societies with different codes, all the systems could be equally valid¹²⁵.

He claims Rawls will lack this *objective* validity as defined by him, and hence he falls into subjectivism. Singer's own theory will avoid this definition of subjectivity within the theoretical framework of his own ethics, by at least having a *formal structure* –that is his principles will include a necessity of disinterestedness or equal consideration of interest. Hence, his system is able to be independent of the other moral theories it is considered against. Thus, according to Singer, it is not subjective in that regard.

Whether he has adequately portrayed Rawls' position is not within the scope of this present work. What is more important is how Singer has avoided the accusation of subjectivism. Subjectivism as generally considered, and as considered by Singer, is a system of moral reasoning where one opinion is as equally valid as another, right and wrong being judged by personal criteria, not by objective external criteria¹²⁶.

In *The Expanding Circle* Singer indicated that without a rational component to ethics which allow us to defend our fundamental principles, then biological or cultural explanations «would leave us in a state of deep moral subjectivism». One ethical principle would have no preference over another. «If ultimate ethical premises cannot be derived from anywhere, they are starting points which we choose to accept or reject; and if there is no basis for making this choice, ethics ultimately rests on subjective judgements which are immune from criticism»¹²⁷.

Singer would claim that his theory is not subjective because it has a *formal structure* (form) being equal consideration and may even have a content structure (content) which is the seeking to maximise happiness. These rest on the ultimate principles of universalisability and the pleasure of utility.

124. SINGER, Peter, «Sidgwick and Reflective Equilibrium», *The Monist*, 58 (July 1974), p. 494.

125. *Ibid.*

126. See his definition of subjectivism in SINGER, Peter, «Ethics», *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2004 edition.

127. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, p. 85.

This may seem initially plausible. However, on close scrutiny, when we reflect on his argumentation throughout his work, Singer is guilty of subjectivism in many aspects.

We noted that he admitted he is a non-cognitivist and could see that desires are the motive of actions. That would definitely class him as a subjectivist, as desires are personal, variable and not motivating to some external criteria. So, on Singer's own admission, he is a subjectivist to this extent.

Similarly, he had earlier claimed it is a self-evident truth that from the «point of view of the universe», the good of one person is no more important than the good of another. He is extremely critical of intuitionism. Is the self evidence of this aspect a result of induction? If so, has he reached it from the world of facts and hence gone against the fact value divides? If not, then Singer's «self evidence» is no more than opinion, and thus Singer is no less a subjectivist than Rawls.

Further aggravating the claim to subjectivism is his presentation of the issue of the importance of reason in ethics in his book *Practical Ethics* already cited in chapter two. Singer, after presenting the importance of rationality in ethics, concludes that «the process is not a necessary one and those who do not take part in it –or, in taking part, do not follow it all the way to the ethical point of view– are not irrational or in error»¹²⁸.

How is it possible to be acting unethically and not be in error? It may be that Singer would have to define deliberate decision not to follow rational conclusions of ethical reasoning as not error and thus not a wrong action. If that is the case, this is subjectivism as the system someone else may choose to follow is not wrong either.

On the other hand, if you are not wrong following what Singer has struggled to claim is an *objective* system, then his own objectivity is relative, and really the actions are opinions and his system is subjective.

Singer could claim that ethics is prescriptive with a logical framework, but one of the main accusations against prescriptivism was its subjectivism and his own claim that you are not wrong to not follow the prescriptions confirms this conclusion.

Further on in *Practical Ethics* he says: «“Why act morally?” cannot be given an answer that will provide everyone with overwhelming reasons for acting morally. Ethically indefensible behaviour is not always irrational. We will probably always need the sanctions of the law and social pressure to provide additional reasons against serious violations of ethical standards. On the other hand, those reflective enough to ask the question

128. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, p. 219.

(...) are also those most likely to appreciate the reasons that can be offered for taking the ethical point of view»¹²⁹.

Hence, his view of reflection gives the *reflector* reasons which may aid him to accept the view offered. Yet, it is an opinion and they may decide to act differently. As he has said: «Ethically indefensible behaviour is not always irrational». What could this mean? It could be interpreted that sometimes people may act not in accord with accept societal norms –here Hare’s level one reasoning is present– and may act rationally on a level two premise. On both counts, it is subjectivism.

The second part of the above statement claiming we will need the pressure of law and society to prevent this «ethically indefensible behaviour» (i.e. sanctions) seem to imply that a person may think they acted rationally, and has acted according to what he or she thought is correct based on their own assessment, yet are in error according to some «external» criteria as the need of laws and pressures seems to imply. Once again subjectivism, as Singer has defined it and as it is commonly understood, appears again.

The only defence Singer may be able to offer is that the person reflected on it and made a considered judgment. Hence, the only addition Singer makes to what is commonly understood as subjectivism, is an opinion driven action, independent of objective morality that is considered cognitively or reflected. Whether cognitively **and** correctly is another matter and Singer may offer some suggestions here, and even forcefully as he will do in some places rejecting systems that are against his own –the Rawlsian one is an apt example– yet based on his own analysis it is no more than subjectivism in the end.

Either way, Singer falls into subjectivism.

In *Practical Ethics*, he had offered a very brief critique of subjectivism. After rejecting the traditional claim of subjectivism that says ethics is solely personal opinion, he goes on to articulate three views of subjectivism which he believed were not open to this objection. Considering these three carefully we find that his distinctions leave he himself open to criticism of subjectivism.

The first he describes is that of C.L. Stevenson who claimed that «ethical judgements are neither true nor false because they do not describe anything, neither objective moral facts, nor one’s own subjective states of mind. (...) ethical judgments express attitudes»¹³⁰. However, what are attitudes but a state of mind. What is the distinction? This very distinction appears subjective.

The second example he gives is that of R.M. Hare who urged that «ethical judgements are prescriptions and therefore more closely related to

129. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

130. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

commands than to statements of fact. On this view we disagree because we care about what people do»¹³¹. A very moving claim, but once again if we care about what people do, is this not a statement of our state of mind a feeling? How is this not subjective? What if I care more than others or less than others? Caring about what people do must be measured against something objective. Otherwise, we may be guilty of some type of paternalism, and someone may ask that we «care» a bit less about what they do.

The third was that of J. L. Mackie, who defined «objective moral standards» as a legacy of religious ethics or personal wants and preferences objectified. All Mackie has done is taken the subjective dimension of our thinking and given it a feature which may make it appear to be more reasoned but remains just as obvious as nothing but subjective because in saying objective morality is objectified religious or personal ethics, we have introduced arbitrariness into it.

Singer says that these three authors offered plausible accounts of ethics «provided they are carefully distinguished from the crude forms of subjectivism which sees ethical judgments as descriptions of the speaker's attitudes»¹³².

These authors deny a realm of ethical facts which is part of the real world and Singer does not disagree with this. However, what these authors all acknowledge is a role for reason and arguments in ethics. So, Singer does not reject subjectivism *per se* but a subjective ethics which does not allow us to reason out our opinions. Considered opinions is what he is after. However, considered opinions are not a guarantee to being correct. Someone may reflect on an opinion at length and another may have a view on a subject, an opinion, which in the end is more correct. To move from opinion to certainty, the reasoning needs to consider the fact at hand, employ data, know what we are trying to resolve and the method with which we should resolve it. Just thinking about it, if we do not reason correctly, it does not move us any closer to the true view. And in the end, if ethics is not objectively right, why is an opinion less credible than an agonised non-objective moral decision?

Summary

Singer argued that the non existence of an objective realm of moral facts should not be a concern, as long as we do not conclude that there is the non-existence of ethical reasoning. To defend the *practical* ethical conclusions he would do in *Practical Ethics*, Singer devotes a few pages giv-

131. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

ing a «statement of the assumption on which this book is based». In his own defence, he says an entire chapter would be needed to defend his assumptions. Unfortunately, Singer never defended these assumptions in any book.

Singer argues that the beginning of ethics is the «notion of defending the way one is living, of giving a reason for it, of justifying it. (...) We may find the justification inadequate, and may hold that the actions are wrong, but the attempt at justification, whether successful or not, is sufficient to bring the person's conduct within the domain of the ethical as opposed to non ethical»¹³³.

Defending our notions, reflecting on them, is ethics. Yet, it is not just that as we may consider some thing as wrong. So the reflection has parameters of accuracy and truth. This reinforces again Singer's ambivalence, or more correctly bivalence within moral reasoning, holding two conflicting positions. Ethics is not-cognitive, and ethics is cognitive.

The very quote cited above indicates the Singer's subjectivism, because any subjectivist has thought about what he wants to do and has said: «I think my system is correct but I also acknowledge yours may be correct, or we are both correct». This reasoning has met the conditions of Singer and remained truly subjective.

In replying to his critics in *Singer and His Critics*, he would lament about «the apparent impossibility of ever learning to write with sufficient precision to make my meaning clear to every reader»¹³⁴. A more accurate assessment of his problem is that he Singer never presented his thought in a systematic manner anywhere, and so it is not surprising that critics would find many inconsistencies or deficiencies in his thought.

This indeterminacy and lack of clarity in Singer has many signs of being deliberate. Singer is too intelligent to not have considered them. Before something can be avoided, its existence, and need to be avoided, is present in the reason.

Singer was all too aware of the difficulties Hare found himself in over the years in defending his metaethical theories and his repeated attempts to further clarify and improve on his ideas in response to criticism. Once one presents a complete system, or at least a somewhat developed system, one is open to analysis and critique. Singer, having witnessed this, and as we have being more preoccupied with practical ethics, sought to avoid it.

Extremely intelligent and knowing where weaknesses lay in his reasoning, and also aware of the strong points of what he had to advocate, it is impossible not to conclude that Singer would negotiate a trajectory

133. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

134. JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 269.

which would avoid all the possible philosophical minefields and allow him to appear consistent so as to advocate his *practical ethics*.

This lack of thorough development in the difficult areas of fundamental moral reasoning is evident in the relative paucity of articles in professional philosophical journals critiquing or developing Singer's thought. It appears that Singer was not taken seriously as a professional philosopher in the fundamentals of philosophy and so despite his widespread success in publishing and sales he was not a subject of philosophical reflection.

My own efforts to study the fundamental moral philosophical foundation of Peter Singer, have illustrated for me this difficulty in trying isolate what he actually considered about moral reasoning, right and wrong, objectivity in morals etc. It has necessitated a thorough and broad search, with very little presented concisely and, often, as stressed so far and will be revealed further on, Singer contradicts himself in his different writings. This contradiction could be considered as evolution or development of a theory but in Singer it lacks such characteristics. This is the opposite with his mentor, Richard Hare, where it is very easy to know what he thought and the progress of his thought.

Singer's main goal was to change habits and action. In fact, where he is most quoted and most referred to is in the field of applied ethics. That interesting field which applies a smattering of moral philosophy, with a predominant utilitarian focus, to practical topics, predominantly bioethical, but also economic and political.

Here with a few assumptions that sound reasonable much can be gained, and the field in the 1970's and onwards was ripe for the taking. Everyone wanted to be ethical, introduce ethics committees without resorting to the «traditional» ethical models. A whole new generation of «high priests» were created, who needed some reasoned and convincing arguments to develop their applied science. As they were in general less aware of the difficulties Singer would be able to propose his views here with less criticism.

I have tried to present in this chapter what Singer understood by a rational moral philosophy. I have tried to articulate it by how he attempted to negotiate the «is-ought» dilemma which made the possibility of deciding what is right or wrong through reason and beyond desires difficult if not impossible.

This attempted resolution by Singer necessitated also a response to the accusation that if the right action cannot be rationally known as true then all moral philosophy is subjectivist. His response introduced elements into moral principle of so called content and form which we considered.

While wanting to remain in accord with the Humean non-cognitivist position which he considered as the to be reasonable, he also could see the need for a self-evident principle of the point of view of the universe

in ethics, the principle he apprehended from Sidgwick in order to be able to construct a philosophy.

This introduced another break in his system and resulted in him oscillating between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. His own responses to this duality, which we have seen above, put him in a very ambiguous position.

3. PHILOSOPHICAL SOURCES OF SINGER'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY: UNIVERSALIZABILITY AND PREFERENCE UTILITARIANISM.

Influence of Richard Hare on Singer: Key principles in Hare's philosophy

Richard Mervyn Hare, whose key ideas I have covered in chapter eight, was a significant influence on Singer, leaving a profound impact on his thinking. Singer would claim that his meeting with Hare was a «decisive moment in his life», and he had not known Hare his life would have taken different directions¹³⁵.

In the introduction to *Practical Ethics*, he remarks: «the mark left by R.M. Hare, who taught me at Oxford, is apparent in the ethical foundations underlying the positions taken in this book»¹³⁶. Singer would in many aspects adopt the positions of Hare, and would also learn from the Hare's mistakes.

As a indication of how highly he valued Hare's thought, in an obituary at Hare's funeral, later published in the journal *Utilitas*, Singer would claim that «when the history of twentieth century ethics comes to be written, I believe that it is Hare's own work that will be seen as having made the most important contribution»¹³⁷.

Singer believed as a young student in Melbourne in the late 1960's that many considered emotivism to be an inadequate system and Hare's universal prescriptivism would replace it. Although Singer's lecturers in Melbourne favoured intuitionism or Aristotelianism, he believed they judged their own theories against Hare¹³⁸. Subsequently, in his honours year at Oxford, Singer was required to read Hare's *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason*. He would say this style of clear prose would become a model for his own writing¹³⁹.

One of Singer's first published articles, which we have already considered, «*The Triviality of the Debate over "Is-Ought" and the Definition*

135. SINGER, Peter, «R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy», *Utilitas*, 14 (2002), p. 313.

136. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, Preface.

137. SINGER, Peter, «R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy»..., pp. 309-317.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

139. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

of *Moral*», was guided by Hare. It is possible to see also Hare's own ideas in this article. Singer would admit that Hare's method of arguing became his own.

Emotivism was the prominent theory in English-speaking moral philosophy. Its attraction was partly because it was a moral system which allowed the «liberated» generations who wanted to reject the ethics of the «elders», but would also lead to relativism in ethics, no one system being better than another. As Singer would claim, all they say before Nazism was «I disapprove of Nazism: Please do likewise»¹⁴⁰.

Hare agreed with the emotivists that moral statements are not descriptive, that is, they do not describe natural objects or non natural objects like intuitions. However, he would claim moral statements are *prescriptive statements*; thus, like imperative statements, they follow logical rules. Singer suggested an example of such rules: one cannot say, at the same time «close all the windows» and «leave the centre one open», as there is a contradiction¹⁴¹. This logic of imperative reasoning Hare thought could be applied to moral statements. This same logic in moral language would permeate all of Singer's.

The second important contribution of Hare's thought, according to Singer, is he would open the door to universalisability, and this particularly appealed to Singer. A more detailed assessment of Hare's contribution to this area will follow, but it is important to note that this *formal* quality of moral reasoning also permeates Singer's approach to moral philosophy.

Singer credits Hare with resolving or distinguishing between critical and intuitive thinking. This arose in response to the dilemmas in utilitarianism and the so called *hard cases* which were presented against utilitarianism. I have briefly highlighted in chapter eight some of Hare's proposed replies. Essentially, Hare considered we should operate on a non-reflective (perhaps on an intuitive level) in daily life and then also embark on critical thinking at other times. Singer considered such distinctions very important specifically as he, like Hare, was very critical of intuitive reasoning and particularly in moral philosophy¹⁴².

Hare had also rejected, in *Freedom and Reason*, the claim of A. J. Ayer's and others that moral philosophy is of no use for deciding on the

140. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

141. *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

142. Singer, in his obituary to Hare, would cite some scientific research involving brain imaging which apparently indicated when people give so-called intuitive replies, it is the emotional centres of the brain which are acting and when they give more considered replies it is both the emotional and cognitive centres acting. (Greene, J. D. et al., «An FMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgement», *Science*, 393 (2000). Also Greene, Joshua and Haidt, Jonathan., «How (and Where) Does Moral Judgement Work?», *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6 (2002). Cited by Singer in SINGER, Peter, «R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy», *Utilitas*, 14 (2002), p. 315.)

correct moral action. He considered this absurd as moral philosophy would have no point¹⁴³. He considered all his work in clarifying the meaning of moral words and moral reasoning, was for an «ulterior motive» to be able to resolve the practical problems that trouble us¹⁴⁴. Singer credits him with having a significant role in the beginning of the applied ethics movement, the work that would govern Singer's career.

Hare's desire to consider practical ethical issues is evident in encouraging Singer to follow his desired doctoral thesis regarding civil disobedience, concluding in Singer's first book, *Democracy and Disobedience*¹⁴⁵. Hare had already written a paper about peace, and he would later write articles such as «What is Wrong with Slavery», «Abortion and the Golden Rule» and so on¹⁴⁶⁻¹⁴⁷.

Hare also prepared in many ways, and probably subconsciously, Singer's views on speciesism. Singer acknowledges that Hare had written in 1962, well over a decade before Singer's *Animal Liberation*, the following quote, crediting him with summarising the essence of his own ideas. Hare had said: «In all cases the principle is the same, am I prepared to accept a maxim which would allow this to be done to me, were I in the position of this man or animal, and capable of having only the experiences, desires etc of him or it»¹⁴⁸.

Hare's work also coincided with the minimisation of the importance of Oxford, and dominance of American universities and moral philosophers. His reaction to the widespread popularity of Rawls is a reflection of this strain, and is also reflected in Singer's writings.

As we have discussed, the emphasis in ethics was moving to «practical ethics» rather than to metaethics, and American universities accepted this move with open arms. As I stressed in chapter eight, Hare was critical of this effort: «If philosophers are going to apply ethical theory successfully to practical issues, they must first have a theory... Moral philosophy therefore needs a basis in philosophical logic, the logic of the moral concepts»¹⁴⁹.

As is very evident, Hare left a profound impact on Singer, and that impact would remain throughout Singer's career. Yet Singer never developed works on fundamental questions of moral philosophy because he also saw the difficulties and ridiculous positions that Hare would end up in. It

143. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

144. HARE, Richard M., «Ethical theory and utilitarianism»..., p. 23.

145. SINGER, Peter, *Democracy and Disobedience*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973.

146. HARE, Richard M., «Abortion and the Golden Rule», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 4 (1975), pp. 201-222.

147. HARE, Richard M., «What is wrong with slavery», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 8 (1979), pp. 103-121.

148. HARE, Richard M., *Freedom and Reason*..., p. 223.

149. HARE, Richard M., *Essays on Bioethics*, Oxford, 1999, § 10.

appears that Singer would keep his ideas as vague as possible and hence less open to direct critique.

Universalisability as a key principle in ethics and the basis of utilitarianism

As we have noted, Hare introduced the notion of universalisability into moral language. We have summarized how Singer saw this notion in chapter three and how he merges it in many occasions with Sidgwick's notion of disinterestedness, being in some ways for him indistinguishable, at times both terms appearing within the same sentence.

Singer inherited this «formal» aspect of moral judgments, universalisability, from Hare for whom it flowed from the structure of his theory of moral language and prescriptivism.

Singer considered the notion of universalisability evident in many philosophical traditions – Jewish, Christian, Stoic and Kantian notions of ethics – but he believes Hare gave it a «logical precision»¹⁵⁰.

He claims: «In Hare's treatment, however, these ideas were refined so as to eliminate their obvious defects. Moreover, for Hare universalisability is not a substantive moral principle but a logical feature of the moral terms. This means that anyone who uses such terms as right and ought is logically committed to universalisability»¹⁵¹.

Hare claimed a universal judgment must be based on its universal properties not being able to include proper names, personal pronouns or any such property into the moral judgment. If I saw it is wrong for a third person to cheat, I also must apply it to myself.

It implies that if we judge a particular action to be wrong then any similar action must also be wrong, allowing for *relevant differences*. However a lot will depend on what is allowed to count as a *relevant difference*. What are these relevant differences? Hare says all features may count, except those that contain ineliminable uses of words such as I or my, or singular terms such as proper names. So, if someone steals from their employer to buy a new television it is wrong, but doing so to feed victims of a Tsunami may make a *relevant difference*.

This notion of universalisability can also be used to test whether a difference alleged to be relevant –for instance, skin colour or even the position of a freckle on one's nose– is really relevant. Any moral judgment must be made in all conceivable cases. Hence if a German Nazi claimed a Jew should be killed, he would also accept that condition if he were found

150. SINGER, Peter, «R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy»..., p. 311.

151. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics», *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2004 Edition.

to be a Jew. Hence, any principle must be universalisable. With this pre-supposition, Hare claimed to have bridged the emotivist position to a more objectivist position. However, he would eventually be criticised by proponents of both positions.

In Hare's work universalisability was a consequence of the analysis of moral language. It allowed for functional moral judgments. Singer himself considered this to be faulty and had offered a critique of Hare's theory when he was a young student in Oxford¹⁵². He also makes mention of this concern without referring to it directly in his work *Practical Ethics*. Singer's critique was that if universalizability was a consequence of the analysis of moral language and if morality was prescriptive a problem existed. If someone takes as their overriding principle «to do whatever benefits themselves» and made that principle is prescriptive, then we have a moral principle which is non universalizable. If we deny that this is a moral principle because it is not universalisable, then morality is not prescriptive. For Singer that universalisability flowed from moral language alone was not convincing. He says: «Taking ethics as in some sense necessarily involving a universal point of view seems to me a more natural and less confusing way of discussing these issues»¹⁵³.

Singer would add very little to the intelligibility of the term universalisability as a formal concept of morals. He would always mention it more in context of examples and importance. It seemed logical to him that ethics would be universalisable yet his reasons did not fully concur with Hare's.

Singer's universalisability merges in with disinterestedness which we have seen in the work of Sidgwick. This alternates frequently with the expression of the «point of view of the universe». In *The Expanding Circle* he explains: «Disinterestedness within a group involves the rejection of purely egoistic reasoning. To reason ethically I have to see my own interests as one among the many interests of those who make up the group, an interest no more important than others. Justifying my actions to the group leads me to take up a perspective from which the fact that I am I and you are you is not important. Within the group, other ethical distinctions are similarly not ethically relevant. That someone is related to me rather than to you, or lives in my village among a dozen villages that make up our community, is not an ethical justification for special favouritism; it does not allow me to do for my kin or fellow villagers any more than you may do for your kin or fellow villagers. Though ethical systems everywhere

152. SINGER, Peter, «R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy»..., p. 313. Hare in his discussions with Singer claims he had foreseen this problem and that Singer had misinterpreted parts of *Freedom and Reason*.

153. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics*..., pp. 203-204.

recognise special obligations to kin and neighbours, they do so within a framework of impartiality which makes me see my obligations to my kin and neighbours as no more important, from an ethical point of view, than other people's obligations to their own kin and neighbours»¹⁵⁴.

More conclusively in *Practical Ethics* Singer says that a distinguishing feature of ethics is that it requires us to go «beyond our own personal point of view to a standpoint like that of the impartial spectator who takes a universal point of view»¹⁵⁵.

He would go on to stress that «Ethics takes a universal point of view (...) In making ethical judgments we must go beyond our own likes and dislikes. (...) Ethics requires us to go beyond “I” and “you” to the universal law, the universalisable judgment, the standpoint of the impartial spectator or ideal observer, or whatever you choose to call it»¹⁵⁶.

As we have seen, he merges it in with the impartial spectator of Henry Sidgwick. For Sidgwick this was an intuitive concept. Singer, as we have seen would call it a «self-evident truth». This impartiality, taking the interests of others into account and not just my own, gives meaning to Singers question «Why be moral». Morality is not egoism for Singer. Egoism discredits itself from being morality because it does not fit into this scheme of morality. Morality must consider the *other* as well, and thus it rejects egoism.

However, this idea does not come from the natural world for Singer. Hare offered another approximation to it from language and prescriptivism. Yet for Hare, it was also imposed on moral language. It could not be defended, nor was Hare able to defend it, that someone could prescribe egoism as an overriding principle. Under the guidance of Hare in the essay on the «is-ought» question, Singer also acknowledged as much. Sidgwick had also realised that egoism cannot be rationally rejected without this consideration and then this consideration of others does need to be accepted.

So although Hare offered a foundation in linguistics for this universality, it was a linguistic argument and would not have appeal if you did not subscribe to the prescriptivism of Hare. It did not have the motivating component of moral language.

Thus the «concern for the others universally considered» is only a linguistic imposition. It must be remembered that Hare did not think moral terms reflect natural properties nor intuitive properties. Hence it was a «fruit» of language. If you did not accept the language then the term was not essential.

Yet Hare, and more so Singer, knew that when people begin to reason ethically and seriously want to consider what is right, this posture fundamentally opens them up to consider the *other*.

154. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, pp. 117-118.

155. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, pp. 203-204.

156. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Upon reflection, this view is a rather impoverished perspective of more profound and meaningful concepts in human ethics. Here, the criticism of Bernard Williams in *Utilitarianism, For and Against*, is very apt. «A common element in utilitarianism's showing in all these respects, I think, is its *great simple-mindedness*. This is not at all the same thing as lack of intellectual sophistication: utilitarianism, both in theory and practice is alarmingly good at combining technical complexity with simple-mindedness. Nor it is the same as simple-heartedness, which it is at least possible (with something of an effort and in private connexions) to regard as a virtue. Simple-mindedness consists in having too few thoughts or feelings to match the world as it really is...»¹⁵⁷.

It is unclear whether universalisability is justice or charity, or just a linguistic tool to impose on our moral equations so that the syllogism produces the result we want. Is it just fulfilling duty or is it to sacrifice one's own concerns for others even when not necessarily obliged to support¹⁵⁸? It is just a feeling of compassion, a feeling which I may or may not decide to indulge or something we owe to other people as people regardless of my feelings.

The very appeal of disinterestedness in their writings stems from the fact that all of us, the reader, has an implicit understanding of this concept and its importance in ethics and in fact is a paramount aspect of ethics. It is highly likely that Hare could have derived a multitude of other principles or conclusions from his prescriptivism. That universalisability emerged indicates that this was something he «sought» to derive from his study of moral linguistics and it is not something that just emerged in the equation. Singer, in part agreeing with Hare and in part disagreeing, also sought this aspect in morality and realised it was important, but said it was *self-evident*, a very nebulous statement in the case of Singer.

Neither author ponders more deeply the source of this principle which stems from a more prior consideration which is that people are important, inherently important because of being persons with an inherent dignity. In trying to invalidate egoism, Singer turns to this principle but he also realised that he could never invalidate it apart from trying to play his linguistic «trick» of saying that egoism as a moral principle lacks the form of universalisability. What would effectively invalidate egoism is founding

157. SMART, J. J. C. and WILLIAMS, Bernard, *Utilitarianism For and Against...*, pp. 149-150. Italics not in original.

158. I consider here justice to also include, for example, care for those in poor countries who are suffering from famine in third world countries, as they have a right to access to the minimum of the earth's resources for their own needs. This is not charity as I consider it. Singer will raise this point in his essay «Famine, Affluence and Morality» which I will consider in the next chapter. (SINGER, Peter, «Famine, Affluence, and Morality», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1972), pp. 229-243)

ethics on the need to respect human dignity which comes prior to purely selfish self interest, something which Sidgwick, Hare and Singer could never effectively achieve.

We do not naturally consider the others because we consider that when we speak morally we make prescriptive statements, and when making prescriptive statements, we consider they should be universal and hence applicable to all not containing any singular terms or proper nouns. No one thinks like this except a linguistic philosopher and even then they have to work hard to justify it.

Sidgwick considered this aspect of ethics intuitive and essential to a justifiable ethical system as we saw in chapter seven. Singer highlights this universalisable elements existed in many ethical systems: Judaic codes, Christian ethics, the categorical imperative of Kant and even the axiomatic principles of the utilitarians. However, this does not mean they all held it analogously.

Put very briefly, the *Golden Rule* is predicated on the fact that all are *ontologically* equal, made with a unique dignity and hence merit equality and equal consideration as a person, no one being more valuable than another. Yet, the principle of equality is secondary to the importance of the human person and the dignity of that person, each person and every person.

Kant's universalisability has two dimensions. One stems from his vision that men can never be means to an end but are ends in themselves, hence the formulation: «*Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only*»¹⁵⁹. However, a good will must follow the law and the law can never be a hypothetical imperative depending on outcomes or circumstances but a universal prescription to guide the will, hence another aspect or dimension of universality which is again distinct, «*Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature*»¹⁶⁰.

In Singer's system universalisability is an appealing concept to his readers, having an appeal he will not admit is intuitive. The utilitarian is unable to answer *why* we should treat all people equally. The utilitarian cannot explain why one individual is equal to the other. They want to accord the equality, almost feeling bound to do so, without giving a philosophical justification¹⁶¹.

For moral philosophers such as Singer who commence with this initial foundational principle –that an ethic must be applicable to all with

159. KANT, Immanuel, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, New York 1996, p. 422.

160. *Ibid.*, p. 429.

161. In fact being consistent, we should not treat all equally because, as we will see later, that is speciesism.

equal consideration— they appear to be stating secondary conclusions and making them primary. A whole series of questions are raised and not answered.

The universalisability is an indirect appeal to equality and impartiality. Yet, why are all individuals equal? Why must I apply ethical principles equally to all not giving more weight to my own interests? On what is this equality founded? Why can't I deny that equality? Is universalisability compassion, and if so how can this feeling of compassion be normative not just be subjective? Is this just an emotional sentiment, a non-cognitive desire, or is there some deeper meaning? An appeal to universalisability without indicating a more philosophical foundation, leaves the system exposed to the egoist, something Singer saw only too well and hence his perpetual battle to fend off egoism.

As we saw, Sidgwick would build his justification upon principles such as justice and prudence, which he defined in his own way, yet ultimately admitting they are intuitive. Singer does not offer equivalent principles.

The struggle to find a more logical foundation to universalisability in ethics caused great difficulties for Hare, Singer's intellectual predecessor. Singer comes no closer to offering a solution to the dilemma, and as I will show in the section on intuition later in this chapter, he removes his only possible way to justify its existence in a rational way, especially as he wanted to offer a rational system of ethics.

Singer's argument for benevolence and utilitarianism

What disinterestedness did allow for Singer was a real solution to benevolence, the justification of which had been, as we have seen, a scourge of all utilitarians. If we are disinterested, take a universal point of view, then we will consider others. Here we have a an important key to resolving the problems of utilitarianism.

Hare in his article «Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism» prefaces what he would develop more fully in his book *Moral Thinking*, his derivation of utilitarianism from prescriptivism and universalizability. Utilitarianism was not a theme which was prominent in Hare's early work but became more so with time. He built his system on the «formal properties of the moral concepts as revealed by the logical study of moral language; and in particular on the features of prescriptivity and universalizability which I think moral judgements, in the central uses which we shall be considering, all have»¹⁶². I

162. HARE, Richard, M., «Ethical theory and utilitarianism»..., p. 25.

will not enter into a critique of Hare here, suffice it to say it was very much criticised¹⁶³.

It is interesting that although Singer does not follow exactly the same strategy, he does approach it in similar ways. Once again, we must remember that Singer, apart from *The Expanding Circle* which is more focussed on sociobiology, undertook very little work in fundamental moral reasoning to justify his assumptions. As I have already indicated, in the beginning of *Practical Ethics* he gives a disclaimer for his brevity. However this brevity, while indicative of a fundamental strategy of Singer's style, is what we must work with.

Singer asks in practical ethics: «Can we use this universal aspect of ethics to derive an ethical theory which will give us guidance about right and wrong?»¹⁶⁴. He believes philosophers from the Stoics, to Hare and Rawls have done this and have not met with general acceptance.

His conclusion about the Stoics is not quite clear, as it is not commonly accepted that the Stoics began with universalism to build their ethics. They sought a universal moral law which could be discovered by reason in the nature of things, which is very different from what Singer proposed. What Singer would call universality for the Stoics is derived from the universal moral law of the equality of all persons which they would discover by reason. Hare, it is true, attempted this as we have seen and perhaps his reference to not meeting with general acceptance refers to this. Rawls's project was quite different from this, more seeking to discover reflected judgements, to derive a consensus view on the considerations of justice.

Singer, in *Practical Ethics*, explains that in his view that the universal aspect of ethics is «formal and bare» and so if it were used to defend one particular system, those doing so would be accused of «smuggling our own ethical beliefs into our definition of the ethical». However, he then progresses to do his own *smuggling*. While not proposing to offer a system, he uses the principle of universalizability in ethics to defend taking a «broadly utilitarian position»¹⁶⁵.

Singer says if we begin to reason ethically we will consider the interests of all and not just our own. Consequent to this we will need to weigh up and «adopt the best course of action most likely to maximise the interests of those affected. Thus, I must choose the course of action which has the best consequences, balanced, for all affected. This is a form of utilitarianism»¹⁶⁶.

163. ROXBEE COX, J. W., «From Universal Prescriptivism to Utilitarianism», *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 36. No. 142 (1986), pp. 1-15.

164. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics*..., p. 11.

165. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

166. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

He does admit that universal aspect of ethics could deduce other theories, but according to him utilitarianism arrives «swiftly». In a certain sense it does come swiftly when Singer asks the questions he wants to be answered. Hence, again Singer as he does, simplistically proposes something then saying that this «places the onus of proof on those who seek to go beyond utilitarianism. The utilitarian is a minimal one, a first base which we reach by universalizing self interested decision making. We cannot, if we are to think ethically, refuse to take this step»¹⁶⁷.

It is interesting to note here that Singer «smuggles» in his own theory. According to him what we weigh up when we do ethics are «interests» and only interests. Then we will automatically embark on utility from the very step, but utility in the context of universalizability and so we will have a classical utilitarianism.

It is very questionable when the average person embarks on ethics they consider interests alone. What most consider is the right action, not how to calculate the right, but what *is right*. On occasions, they may look at two equally acceptable actions and decide, logically, to do that with best results overall. At other times, they decide not to do something because it is wrong despite its results. At other times, they may decide to do what is right even if their our own interests and possibly the interests of the majority are not maximised, but they consider it the best course of action. Maximisation in many natural ways comes after consideration of what is good, what is right. Singer will consider this as intuitive prejudice. His view of intuitionism will be carefully explored later in this chapter, my critique here is limited to how he considered utilitarianism was the most logical and natural system to adopt as stated above.

Moreover, in his presentation of this development towards utilitarianism in general ethical thinking, Singer introduces a type of «original position» which is an imitation of Rawls, someone he was vigorously critical of. Hare had done the same in his article «Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism» and admitted it. Singer is not so open about it.

More concerning is that from this very simplistic thought experiment proposed above in the introduction to *Practical Ethics*, Singer emerges with his theory of utilitarianism from this and then will go on to make the very radical normative conclusions about abortion, infanticide an euthanasia without any scope for critique of his theory generated so simplistically.

Singer, quite bafflingly, after claiming his little thought experiment led him to classical utilitarianism, would go on and argue (or more careful-

167. *Ibid.*, p. 13. Singer would continue. «If we are to be persuaded that we should go beyond utilitarianism and accept non-utilitarian moral rules or ideals, we need to be provided with good reasons for taking this further step. Until such reasons are produced, we have some grounds for remaining utilitarians».

ly saying that is has «been suggested» thus exonerating himself from responsibility for this view nor providing citations) that his view of maximising preferences was the view of Bentham and John Stuart Mill who according to him «used “pleasure” and “pain” in a broad sense which allowed them to include achieving what one desired as a “pleasure” and the reverse as a “pain”. If this interpretation is correct, the difference between classical utilitarianism and utilitarianism based on interests disappears»¹⁶⁸. This rapid dispatch of quite disputed themes even in utilitarian discourse, from someone who aspired to the highest level of argumentation, who claimed Hare had mentored him in intellectual rigour, and who was also very critical of Anscombe in her article «Modern Moral Philosophy» for lacking rigour, is dazzling¹⁶⁹. Very few would subscribe to Singer’s view in regard to what Bentham considered and Mill’s view. Even Singer himself would contradict this very statement, claiming the opposite position, in other locations without admitting a change¹⁷⁰.

This is not an essential point, but just indicative of Singer’s sophistic style of avoiding difficulties and simplifying genuine problems.

Preference utilitarianism and its limitations

Singer developed an interest in utilitarianism in his undergraduate days. One of his lecturers in particular was critical of utilitarianism, highlighting some of its limitations. On considering these criticisms Singer felt they were unjustified and all had adequate replies.

In 1972 he wrote an article in *The Philosophical Review* defending act utilitarianism. While the article has little to contribute to the discussion on act utility, Singer begins it by saying that much of the criticism of act

168. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

169. JAMIESON, Dale, *Singer and His Critics...*, pp. 274-275.

170. See his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on «Ethics»; See also interview on radio in 2001, replying to a question by Rachael Kohn, the interview that «*the utilitarian perspective as maximising the quantity of happiness for society as a whole and also for its individuals?*». Peter Singer replied: «I’d like to qualify that just in a couple of ways. Firstly, what you’ve given is the classical or hedonistic view; you mentioned Jeremy Bentham, and that’s the view that Bentham would have supported, but there are more variants around now and for me it’s not so much happiness as the satisfaction of preferences or of what people want, so that someone might want something that’s not only for their happiness, they might want to write a great poem and that might not be done for the sake of happiness, but it might be a very essential desire that they have, loosely we call them preferences. So I would want to see that satisfied if it were in my power to do so. Even if it wasn’t going to make someone happy, so that’s one variation». («Talking Taboo with Peter Singer», Interview with Peter Singer by Rachael Kohn, ABC –Australia– Radio National, *The Spirit of Things*. February 9, 2001).

utilitarianism comes from people who propose unusual situations and then say that the conclusion of utilitarianism conflict with «ordinary moral convictions». Following Hare, he says that this is not convincing for someone who has equal confidence in utilitarianism as «ordinary moral convictions» putting the onus on those with ordinary moral convictions to justify their own position and indicating that moral norms are open to review and if utilitarianism rationally leads to other conclusions he would have confidence in those¹⁷¹. Paradoxically in other places Singer will support the use of these «unusual situations» to attack ordinary morality¹⁷².

In the bulk of his writings, however, Singer does not defend act utility *per se* but a version called preference utilitarianism which seems to have been introduced by Hare who derived it from his universalisability combined with prescriptivism. He claimed he owed the foundations of utilitarianism based on preferences and interests to Hare, specifically the article which we have already considered, «Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism». He however claimed he would not take his own version of this system as far as what is proposed in that article¹⁷³.

Preference utility has been defended by several other authors. It seemed like a theory that added something more to utility accommodating other dimensions of the human person than just pleasure and pain, which is the true Benthamite position, and at the same time avoiding the introduction of values to pleasures, as J. S. Mill did, but arguing that people may want to maximise more than just pleasure or pain but also other preferences and hence should be accommodated.

John Harsanyi attempted to give a very cogent defence of preference utilitarianism claiming it was «justified by biblical –as well as Kantian– principle that we should treat other people, in the same way as we want to be treated by them», that is, «in accordance with our own wants and preferences»¹⁷⁴.

He argued that this is the only type of utilitarianism consistent with a term he would introduce which is «*preference autonomy*» arguing this is «the principle that, in deciding what is good and what is bad for a given individual, the ultimate criterion can only be his own wants and his own preferences»¹⁷⁵.

171. SINGER, Peter, «Is Act Utilitarianism Self defeating?», *The Philosophical Review*, 81 (1972), pp. 94-104.

172. JAMESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, pp. 316-318.

173. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, footnotes for Chapter 1, p. 222.

174. HARSANYI, John, «Rule utilitarianism and decision theory», *Erkenntnis*, 11 (1977), p. 27.

175. HARSANYI, J. C., «Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior», *Utilitarianism and Beyond*. A. SEN and B. WILLIAMS (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 39-62.

However, some people can have irrational preferences and Harsanyi says the only way we can make sense of this «is to interpret it as a claim to the effect that, in some appropriate sense, his own preferences at some deeper level are inconsistent with what he is now trying to achieve»¹⁷⁶.

In the next paragraph, he says directly: «Any sensible ethical theory must make a distinction between rational wants and irrational wants, or between rational preferences and irrational preferences. It would be absurd to assert that we have the same moral obligation to help other people in satisfying their utterly unreasonable wants as we have to help them in satisfying their very reasonable desires»¹⁷⁷.

The hedonistic utilitarianism of Bentham could deal with this difficulty, as can an ideal utilitarianism, by defining rational wants to those which are able to produce real pleasure or «mental states of intrinsic worth» and if not able to do this, then the wants are irrational.

This capacity may appear to not be possible in preference utility but Harsanyi denies it. «All we have to do is to distinguish between a person's manifest preferences and his true preferences. His manifest preferences are his actual preferences as manifested by his observed behaviour, including preferences possibly based on erroneous factual beliefs, or on careless logical analysis, or on strong emotions that at the moment greatly hinder rational choice. In contrast, a person's true preferences are the preferences he would have if he had all the relevant factual information, always reasoned with the greatest possible care, and were in a state of mind most conducive to rational choice. Given this distinction, a person's rational wants are those consistent with his true preferences and, therefore, consistent with all relevant factual information and with the best possible logical analysis of this information, whereas irrational wants are those that fail this test»¹⁷⁸.

Preference utilitarianism has an initial appeal, particular in the way Peter Singer employs it. It is undeniable that preferences are an important part of normal life and have some role in the ethical life. As Scanlon says: «Preferences are important when we are selecting a gift, baking a birthday cake, or deciding where to take a friend to dinner because what we are aiming at in each case is a person's happiness. Preferences are important because they show us what is likely to make someone happy, and because a person is pleased when we take the trouble to find out his wants and satisfy them»¹⁷⁹.

It seems that we cannot go wrong if we aim to maximise the preferences of all humans. It seems like an ideal goal for all of us. Preference

176. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

177. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

178. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

179. SCANLON, T. M., «Value, desire and quality of life», *The Quality of Life*, Martha NUSSBAUM and Amartya SEN (eds.), Clarendon, Oxford, 1993, p. 194.

utility appears as a much more mature goal than standard hedonistic utilitarianism where the aim is to make everyone have maximum pleasure possible or maximally happy. We are going to please the preference and desires of all. At the same time, realising that suffering is an evil to be minimised, we need to consider the preferences of animals in so far as they experience pain and pleasure.

Although, such simplistic feel good statements can be appealing they are problematic as foundations of ethics. The real ethical dimension of human life is much more complex and people are not just machines made to run smoothly. What of the person who is able to maximise preferences by lying for example. Lying has always been a common test case for utilitarians as it is an action which in some cases can have good benefits. Utilitarians always put the case in a way to please them. What about the case of a man who cheats on his wife lying to her whenever needed and maintains a relationship with his secretary. He can be extremely caring to his wife while maintaining the relationship with the secretary. This is definitely *maximising preferences* as considered by utilitarians. The preference utilitarian may argue against this by saying this is not maximising preferences because his wife has a preference to being treated «uniquely» or «honestly». However, here the utilitarian has introduced other values into the ethical which is what utilitarianism often does. Utilitarianism argues from understood moral values and tries to justify changes within that value system. It was what J. S. Mill did in trying to make utilitarianism compatible with other moral principles as Singer stated in his Britannica article «Ethics» in the section on Mill. Preferences have the implicit dimension of values and values are an ethical system outside the utilitarian scope yet utilitarianism will try to incorporate them.

Critics to preference utilitarianism have come from different areas. Among them has been the utilitarian philosopher Richard Brandt, who has said it is a confusing idea, as we would need to consider the maximisation of a variety of preferences, such as proximate and distant preferences, which make it impracticable and not intelligible¹⁸⁰. Brandt gives an unusual but illustrative analogy, especially considering Singers antagonism to religion. He gives a hypothetical of a person who has disliked priests all his life and specifically requested that they not be called to his deathbed and then at his deathbed he has a conversion and wants it. Following Harsanyi, we might argue this is not rational preference. However, how can we really decide which preference is worth more, especially considering he has had the latter all his life¹⁸¹. Similarly Brandt would argue how can we judge the

180. BRANDT, *A theory of the good and right*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, p. 249.

181. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

intensity of the wants, or if some want more than others, or some who are phlegmatic and who want things less.

Singer never addressed any of the criticisms against preference utilitarianism but has adopted an approach of «push ahead». In a society where we say we should try to satisfy everyone's preferences meets the desires of a consumerist society where satisfaction is important and appealing. However, Singer would not be in accord with this, and although he has avoided putting it as clearly as Harsanyi, he considers some preferences more rational than others and he would not want some preferences satisfied. Some of these ideas come through in some of his writings¹⁸². We need to have rational preferences and if people do not have such rational preferences they should not be fulfilled. Hence others would need to arbitrate on the rationality of our preferences and thus an external arbitrator enters into the consideration of ethics with their own view of the good.

Singer avoided rational discussion of his systems and wanted to focus more on practical issues. By ignoring inconsistencies in his system, which through discussion may have been improved or abandoned and which would have been a more rational approach for Singer to adopt.

A critique of Singer's rejection of Intuition

Sidgwick, as we have seen in chapter seven, would base his ethics on his «axioms of practical reason» which were self evident, intuitive principles. These allowed him to be a utilitarian but with intuitive foundational principles. Singer would claim the point of view of the universe –universalizability– as a self evident principle.

In his introduction to an anthology of ethical essays titled *Ethics* Singer says: «...can we really know anything through intuition? The defenders of ethical intuitionism argued that there was a parallel in the way we know or could immediately grasp the basic truths of mathematics: that one plus one equals two, for instance. This argument suffered a blow when it was shown that the self evidence of the basic truths of mathematics could be explained in a different and more parsimonious way, by seeing mathematics as a system of tautologies, the basic elements of which are true by virtue of the meanings of the terms used. On this view, now widely, if not universally, accepted, no special intuition is required to establish that one plus one equals two, this is a logical truth, true by virtue of the meanings given to the integers “one” and “two”, as well as “plus” and “equals”,

182. SINGER, Peter, *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self interest*, The Text Publishing Company Pty Ltd. Melbourne, Australia 1993.

So the idea that intuition provides some substantive kind of knowledge of right and wrong lost its only analogue»¹⁸³.

Singer's broad and very loose statement denying intuitionism as a valid form of knowledge in mathematics is difficult to understand and very contradictory. Bertrand Russell a hundred years ago attempted to reduce mathematics to «tautologies» (logical truths) but it proved impossible. Singer seems to be still with Russell at the beginning of the 20th century while mathematics has progressed much further in one century. To say that it is «widely, if not universally accepted» among the majority of practicing mathematicians is incorrect and very difficult to explain. No working mathematician believes this statement. For example, the standard presentation of the foundations of mathematics includes the «axiom of infinity», which says «There exists an infinite set». You just have to take it (by intuition) or leave it. In no way is it a logical truth and no-one the least bit informed maintains it is¹⁸⁴.

Singer will also be at odds to explain how mathematical modelling of the physical universe has led to the enormous scientific knowledge and technological advances if mathematics was just a sophisticated game of chess. Mathematical notation for instance is a shorthand symbolism and a tool of thought. Thus the relationship between powers and subscripts within the umbral calculus reveals ideas latent in the original mathematical language.

The reality is that the position Singer expresses is defended by few mathematicians. Yet he quotes his opinion (wrong opinion) in a very authoritative manner enough to confuse the non scientific audience reading his anthology. While once again we may make an allowance for Singer not being a mathematician, how much allowance must be given to someone who claimed he wanted to use the latest advances of science to develop his ethics? This strongly suggests a sophistic argumentative style making authoritative statements with a clever veneer of truth, which on closer inspection are found deficient.

In his reply to the article by Peter Unger, «Living High and Letting Die» in *Singer and his Critics*, Singer says: «Even though it has always seemed to me so evidently erroneous, the view that we must test our normative theories against our intuitions has continued to have many adherents [...]»¹⁸⁵.

Singer even disagreed with the notion of rights and human rights (although he was never explicit in this rejection) as from his point of view the

183. SINGER, Peter, *Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, Introduction.

184. Private correspondence Professor Tony Shannon, 2005, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

185. JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 316.

system of rights was not a utilitarianism system of ethics and more akin to intuitionism and hence non valid. He would say in *Practical Ethics*: «I am not convinced that the notion of a moral right is a helpful or meaningful one, except when it is used as a shorthand way of referring to more fundamental moral considerations»¹⁸⁶. The problem with rights language was that it was prior to consequences and independent of consequences. Speaking in regard to Judith Jarvis Thomson and her theory of rights and obligations, especially with regard to her arguments on abortion¹⁸⁷ he would argue a utilitarian would reject such a theory as «... a system of rights and obligations which allow us to justify our actions independently of their consequences»¹⁸⁸. Elsewhere he would argue: «The language of rights is a convenient political shorthand. It is even more valuable in the era of thirty-second TV news clips...»¹⁸⁹.

With regards to intuition, the influence of Hare is evident. Hare continuously ridiculed the merit of intuition. We have already seen how he tried to explain it as irrationality (and would often name it as such) being only acceptable as a level one type of reasoning in his system. Singer follows suit whenever he can.

Surprisingly and in marked contradiction to what he says above, in a review he wrote in the journal *Ethics* regarding a newly released «Encyclopaedia of Ethics» he says with reference to one of the entries on intuitionism in this encyclopaedia: «The article on intuitionism discusses the objection that we disagree in our moral intuitions but omits the philosophically more interesting issue of how intuiting any kind of fact about the universe could in itself provide us with a reason for action»¹⁹⁰.

It is obvious Singer is referring here to his «point of view of the universe» which he called *self evident* elsewhere. This is an indirect acknowledgment that his own attacks on intuitionism was exaggerated and erroneous. Singer is admitting that one his own principles were based on intuitionism.

Singer had mentined elsewhere his conviction about the «point of view of the universe», which he considered a common element in many developed ethical traditions, and that it is «something that we come to understand through our capacity to reason»¹⁹¹.

After criticising intuitionism, aggressively and sometimes with rash and faulty argumentation, the very pillar of his own ethical system, from

186. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, p. 81.

187. THOMSON, Judith Jarvis, «A Defense of Abortion», *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1971).

188. SINGER, Peter, *Practical Ethics...*, p. 115.

189. SINGER, Peter, *Animal Liberation*, Random House, London, 1990, 2nd ed. p. 8.

190. SINGER, Peter, «Review of Encyclopedia of Ethics by Becker, Lawrence, C and Becker, Charlotte, B.», *Ethics*, 103, No. 4 (1993), p. 810.

191. JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 270.

which he tries to construct everything, even his justification for utilitarianism, is a principle that on all accounts appears to be intuitive.

The form of knowledge which he is critical of in other systems, is essential to defend his own fundamental principle to which he will return repeatedly.

The rejection of intuitionism is not so much based on epistemological motives as pragmatic ones. Rejecting intuitionism allows, in an indirect manner, the rejection of so called «traditional» morality which may be based on intuitive principles. «The account of ethics sociobiologists offers is incomplete and therefore misleading. Nevertheless, socio-biology provides the basis of a new understanding of ethics. It enables us to see ethics as a mode of human reasoning which develops in a group context, building on more limited, biologically based altruism. So ethics loses its air of mystery. Its principles are not laws written up in heaven. Nor are they absolute truths about the universe, *known by intuition*. The principles of ethics come from our own nature as social, reasoning beings»¹⁹².

After addressing variations of Peter Unger's trolley problem in the article cited above («Living High and Letting Die»), which test case pushing the limits of traditional moral values in the same type of rare cases that he and Hare objected utilitarianism being subjected to, he says: «Clearly, if Unger is right, the method of doing moral philosophy that relies on our intuitive judgments of particular cases is in tatters. These factors just *cannot* be morally significant. If our intuitions really are based on them, then our intuitions are systematically unreliable»¹⁹³.

Yet, by denying intuition as a valid form of knowledge, Singer is left with no foundations for his ethical principle of universalizability and disinterestedness. He realised this and hence in some places as I have cited above he tries to leave the door open a bit. His frequent reference to Sidgwick and the vague term of «self evident» principles was an attempt at justification. Yet Singer, by his own argumentation, leaves his fundamental principles which are necessary to construct his simplistic ethical system with little epistemological support, or more correctly, in an epistemological schizophrenia.

Summary

In this chapter I have analysed and highlighted the influence of Richard Hare and his linguistic moral philosophy of prescriptivism in moral language on Peter Singer. The influence of other Brandt and Smart has also been argued.

192. SINGER, Peter, *The Expanding Circle...*, p. 149. Italics not in original.

193. JAMESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and His Critics...*, p. 317. Italics in original.

Together with that I have shown the relevance and justification of his concept of «point of view of the universe in ethics and its problems epistemologically». I have also explained his version of utilitarianism, its possible logical foundations and origins both in Hare and elsewhere.

This chapter and the two previous ones have critiqued the basis of Singer's moral reasoning, his fundamental moral principles on which he would build his *practical ethics*. This moral reasoning, with its limitations, was in Singer's case always aimed at practical ethical action. In the next chapter I present Singer's view of human dignity from a fundamental perspective as this would be the basis for some of his most radical decisions in bioethics.

CONCLUSIONS

Singer is, without any doubt, the most effective and influential modern utilitarian philosopher. During the writing of this thesis repeatedly his entry into public discussion on topics of relevance was drawn to my attention. He directs himself to a more general audience than the average university philosopher, often times preferring the mainstream media to a philosophy journal in disseminating his ideas. In many senses this is wise, as ethics is about practical action and the teaching of what constitutes wise practical action.

The Singerian project is practical ethics, to influence and change action. More broadly speaking, he aimed to construct an ethical system which is secular, suitable in his opinion for a modern world. He attempted an energetic critique of traditional (Judeo-Christian) ethics.

To overturn the pre-existing ethical systems, Singer would need to offer a reasonable and credible philosophical system which could replace the former. Singer is often called an extremely logical and lucid thinker. Part of his popularity stems not from the appeal the normative positions he defends—many times people find them hard to accept—but the appearance of rigour and consistency in his position.

The aim of this thesis was to examine the credibility of his philosophical system. Is Singer's moral philosophy logical and consistent? It may be easy to object to his conclusions about infanticide or cloning, but if they are well founded on a sound moral philosophy, he is entitled to hold them. If his system is erratic and inconsistent, then his conclusions will also be erroneous or at best just opinion.

In trying to resolve the Humean difficulties and the naturalistic fallacy, for Singer, moral reasoning will not be about objective moral truth, but about consistency and relevance in moral thinking. A pondered argument is what is important, a *sound* argument, even though it may not be objectively true. Singer's appeal will be this appearance of consistency.

Yet his own argumentation will not be consistent. He will reject intuitionism but deduce some principles by intuitionism. He will be a non-cognitivist and he yet will also be cognitivist. He will reject subjectivism and yet he was subjectivist. He will say that moral philosophy needs to be more scientific, and yet unscientifically he will persist with theories regarding sociobiology presumably based on empirical data and not modify these theories as the data changes.

As I have explained, Singer wanted to imitate Euclid, as Hobbes had desired many centuries earlier. To begin a process of deduction one needs some primary propositions. Hare had ridiculed intuitionism as a valid form of knowledge predominantly as a rejection of traditional moral values which he considered intuitive. Singer concurred with this. On the other hand he could see that Sidgwick's «point of view of the universe» (universalizability) was a necessary part of ethics. Hare had been able to *discover* universalizability in his prescriptivism. This was not very convincing as it limited universalizability as a linguistic construct, not an essential feature of ethics.

For many years, Singer would reject intuitionism but at the same time talk about self evident principles. Sidgwick, the most cogent utilitarian in Singer's opinion, was clear enough to admit this principle was intuitive. With time, as I have noted, Singer would change his position, surreptitiously introducing the validity of intuitionism as a way to discover some foundational principles in ethics.

With regard to Singer's argument for an evolutionary origin in our ethics, it is clear that at present, if not at the time he wrote *The Expanding Circle*, his arguments are based on antiquated if not erroneous scientific data. E. O. Wilson in his article «Kin selection as the key to altruism: Its rise and fall» demonstrates a sincere candidness regarding the present state of research and the need to modify his arguments. While Singer's position was distinct to Wilson's, his arguments for the evolutionary origin of our pre-existing ethical beliefs were based on the same scientific evidence. The evidence clearly has contradicted Singer, but he has not changed his position. Such a reluctance to modify his conclusions, shows aspects of an «antiscientific» approach in Singer.

I have highlighted the philosophical inadequacy of his rejection of the dilemmas presented by Hume and Moore. I highlighted that among moral philosophers the interpretation of Singer's rejection was not well received. Smith quite lucidly concluded that with Singer's approach although it appears «we are engaged in a rational argument, we would in fact have to use rhetoric, or association, or manipulation of some other kind, in order to get them to acquire desires for suitable ends»¹⁹⁴.

194. SMITH, Michael, «The Definition of Moral», in *Singer and His Critics...*, pp. 43-44.

Singer struggled to avoid subjectivism in ethics and the label of subjectivism. I have shown that the only way he could do this was by re-defining subjectivism. More specifically, he would be subjectivist in a number of aspects of his own theory. As to egoism, like all utilitarians, his rejection of it as a system is equally inconclusive.

Singer is an intelligent person. But I have tried to demonstrate that he is illogical and inconsistent in the argumentation and defence of his fundamental principles. I have not in this thesis addressed any of his normative conclusions. These must be consequent to a fundamental moral philosophical system. If the system is sound the conclusions will also be sound. I argue that the basis of Singer's moral philosophy is seriously flawed and so his conclusions are flawed.

But why is Singer so successful?... Either my assessment is grossly erroneous or there is more to Peter Singer.

I believe Singer is the best example of modern day Sophism.

In his own article on ethics in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* Singer claims that many of the issues that philosophically divided Plato and the Sophists remain the same today. He says Plato's position that good is some objective property has fewer supporters today and that the «Sophists appear to have won at last». Disagreement, in his opinion, still remains whether moral judgements are true or false and whether morality and self interest can be reconciled, especially if you do not believe in a reward in another life¹⁹⁵.

This is how Singer would summarise the state of moral philosophy at the turn of the twenty first century. The *Sophists have won at last* and Singer, the modern Sophist, among them.

Sophists were considered by Plato and Aristotle as teachers that did not pursue truth but only victory in debate. They were fallacious reasoners. Aristotle explained that Protagoras, a sophist of his time, claimed to teach how to make the weaker argument the stronger. Logical and consistent argumentation is unimportant, only the final judgement of the audience is what makes something true or not¹⁹⁶. By appealing to emotions and prejudices, a position that is false may be considered as true.

The really effective sophists are also quite intelligent, knowing which arguments to avoid and which to fight. Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated how Singer, negotiated difficult questions *without really* addressing them, or often spoke so little about *fundamental* questions, thus

195. SINGER, Peter, «Ethics-Recent developments in metaethics», *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2004 edition.

196. Efforts have been made to rehabilitate this view of the Sophists. While this historical effort is interesting, it is not essential to this work and I will limit myself to how Plato and Aristotle considered sophists and the definition of sophism as it has come down to us.

not exposing himself to criticism. One of the few times he articulated clearly his position on fundamental moral philosophy (not practical ethical questions) was in *The Expanding Circle*, and, as I demonstrated, he was universally criticised.

The classic sophistic technique is the logical fallacy of the straw man argument. Those who employ this fallacy refute the weakest argument of the opponent rather than the argument the opponent actually offers. A straw-man argument is used to position your opponent in a way that is easy to refute¹⁹⁷. As emerged in these pages, Singer would often resort to these arguments.

Singer's philosophy is in some ways reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham. David Hume represented the culmination of classical British empiricism. The continuation of British empiricism, specifically in the form of utilitarianism in the 19th century was undertaken by Bentham and later J.S. Mill. Frederick Copleston would sum up Bentham in the following way: «Hume was a greater philosopher. Bentham had the gift of seizing on certain ideas and welding them into a weapon or instrument of social reform. Benthamism in a narrow sense, and utilitarianism in general, expressed the attitude of liberal and radical elements in the middle class to the weight of tradition and to the vested interests of what is now often called the Establishment»¹⁹⁸.

Copleston noted that Bentham «skates lightly over difficulties and treats what is complicated as though it were simple»¹⁹⁹. Mill said Bentham «was not a great philosopher, but he was a great reformer in philosophy»²⁰⁰.

Many of Bentham's qualities are to be found in Singer. Based on what I have demonstrated, Singer is an inadequate moral philosopher despite taking pride in the title. He is anti establishment, seeking radical reform by taking advantage, like Bentham, of a willing modern day middle class who pursued his practical conclusions about ethics (abortion, euthanasia, cloning, embryo experimentation, bestiality etc.) regardless of the consistency of the underlying philosophy. In pursuing the final judgement of the audience, Singer, more than any other moral philosopher in the last 100 years, has used the media as his podium more than the university hall or the scientific journal.

Dale Jamieson and Keith Burgess claim Singer is a moral revisionist not a constructivist²⁰¹. If revisionism is understood here in terms of

197. DAMER, T. Edward, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning: A Practical Guide to Fallacy-Free Argument*, 3rd Edition Wadsworth 1995, pp. 157-159.

198. COPLESTON, F., *A History of Modern Philosophy*, Vol. VIII, Part I, Image Books, Edition 1967, p. 19.

199. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

200. MILL, J. S., *Dissertations and Discussions I*, 2nd Edition, 1867, p. 339.

201. BURGESS-JACKSON, Keith, «Book review of "Singer and His Critics"», *Ethics*, July 2000, p. 843; JAMIESON, Dale (ed.), *Singer and his Critiques...*, p. 6.

changing behaviour, Singer does aspire to that goal. He will do it by becoming one of a breed of new «high priest» of moral life –moral philosophers– who with a series of arguments that are quasi «scientific», combined with a knowledge of philosophical argumentation, urge for change in behaviour.

To his credit, Singer notes hypocrisy in parts of modern society and the evident lack of concern for suffering of other human beings. He has strongly advocated for compassion for the poor in third world countries. This is laudable and merits acknowledgment. But, as I have argued in chapter twelve, the very basis of such an appeal by Singer is not on genuine compassion as we understand it, but on maximising an abstract equation of preferences in the world.

The Singerian project reflects the modern ethical debate in a number of ways. Firstly, it is founded on utilitarian moral philosophy, a simplistic philosophy which skirts over the difficulties presented to it. Secondly, it is imbued by a profoundly empirical and materialistic view of the human person and hence human dignity. While aiming to be «scientific» in the end it is far from scientifically rigorous. It is imbued with a deep antagonism to metaphysics. Finally, it has the aim is to create a «new ethic» independent of any necessary relation with the preceding millennia of ethical discussion.

I hope this study will assist in understanding the fundamental moral philosophy of Peter Singer. I hope it will also help to reject Sophism in moral reasoning and moral life as presented by the best modern day Sophist, Peter Singer.

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