

Islands In a Sea of Obligation *

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John Harris muses, “If we sometimes take comfort from the reflection that no man is an island, we may sometimes ponder just how, or how far, we are involved in mankind.”¹ I cite Harris's musing not as a preface to criticizing it but simply because I find it fascinating. I have tried to imagine what it would be like to take comfort from the reflection that no man is an island. I am involved in certain patterns of interdependence, and not others. The bare fact of being so involved seems neither lamentable nor comforting. To be sure, I am glad I can depend on others in the ways I do, but I equally am glad I need not depend on others in the ways I do not.

It is a near-miraculous fact that I live in a society that can support full-time intellectuals. Making a living as an intellectual means that in some ways I am not an island. So be it. I take no comfort from that. Is it only in some ways that I am not an island? I do not know why some people will find that thought disturbing, but I realize they will. I take no comfort from that either.

My main question is: if we have a duty to rescue in a local emergency—if in that sense none of us is an island—then must we also have a duty to rescue people from chronic famine in foreign countries? Here is Peter Singer's answer. In “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” after describing the famine in East Bengal circa 1971, Singer says,

I shall argue that the way people in relatively affluent countries react to a situation like that in Bengal cannot be justified; indeed, the whole way we look at moral issues—our moral conceptual scheme—needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society. . . .

I begin with the assumption that suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. . . . Those who disagree need read no further.

My next point is this: if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By “without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance” I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen, or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good, comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent. This principle seems almost as uncontroversial as the last one.²

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Here, then, is what I call the Singer Principle:

SP: If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.

SP has weaker and stronger forms. SP's weaker form lets us rewrite "anything of comparable importance" as "anything significant." SP's stronger form requires us to interpret the original phrase literally. Singer acknowledges that SP's uncontroversial appearance is deceptive. If SP were acted upon, even in its *weaker* form, our lives would be very different. SP's *strong* version, though, requires "reducing ourselves to the level of marginal disutility," by which Singer means "the level at which, by giving more, I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift. This would mean, of course, that one would reduce oneself to very near the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee." Singer adds, "I should also say that the strong version seems to me to be the correct one."³

I will end up agreeing with Singer that "our moral conceptual scheme needs to be altered," but I say the needed *conceptual* alterations are more radical than Singer was imagining. I begin with the observation that SP has an implication that a moral principle should not have.

II. SP CANNOT BE RIGHT

Here is what I have in mind. If we interpret SP from Singer's straightforwardly utilitarian perspective, it would seem to be calling on us to ship food and money to wherever people need it more than we do. Is that a problem? Not from a utilitarian perspective. It will conflict with some of our intuitions about the limits of our obligations to others, but utilitarians are accustomed to biting that bullet.

What about toxic waste? Might shipping toxic waste to wherever it will do the least harm fall into the category of preventing something bad without causing anything comparably bad? Yes, inevitably. It may even be the rule rather than the exception that our own back yards will not be the best possible place to store toxic waste.

Both exporting goods and exporting bads could prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable importance. If this leaves us realizing that SP, as seen

through a utilitarian lens, is not the whole story of morality when it comes to exporting bads, we may suspect it is not the whole story for exporting goods either. What we build into our theories to disrupt the symmetry of bads and goods—acknowledging the separateness of persons, say—will make the resulting theory something other than a version of act-utilitarianism. Any such modification is likely to limit the obligation (and perhaps the right) to export goods at the same time as it limits the right (and perhaps the obligation) to export bads.

III. BUT HOW CAN SP BE WRONG?

Yet, SP is a plausible idea about how we ought to respond to suffering (at least human suffering—I set aside whether animal suffering ought to be regarded as on a par here). I want to say SP can't be wrong as a *reason for action*. On my view, SP is telling us to do the best we can, which is uncontroversial, as Singer says. There is always reason to do the best we can.

And yet, SP hardly is a *comprehensive* account of our reasons for action. Why not? There comes a time for doing the best we can, which is to say, a time for SP or something like it. There also seem to be times, however, when the best response to value is to respect it rather than to promote it.⁴

A second concern is a distinctly *consequentialist* concern. Many of our reasons for action in this world stem from the fact that this world is not a parametric world. Ours is a strategic world: other agents *respond* to what we have done and also to what they anticipate from us. To give one of the simplest and most amply confirmed examples, players respond in one way to a strategy of unconditional cooperation, and respond quite differently to a strategy of tit-for-tat. SP must be, if not abandoned, at least interpreted in light of this fact.

In particular, SP calls for simply giving to a point of marginal disutility only in a parametric game. In a strategic world, a player who wants good consequences has to play a smarter game than that. When suitably interpreted, that is, when interpreted as a strategy whose consequences will be a result of what happens when it is implemented in a strategic world, SP will not have the implications Singer says it has regarding how much we should contribute, when, or even why.⁵

IV. RESPECTING VERSUS PROMOTING

Regarding the Economics

TRAGIC COMMONS: A baby is drowning in the pool beside you. You can save the baby by a process that involves giving the baby's family a hundred dollars. The baby will die unless you save it. You save the baby. A crowd begins to gather. Seeing what you have done, two families throw their babies into the pool. The babies will drown unless you give each of their families a hundred dollars. More families begin to gather, waiting to see what you do.

I am not saying our world is like TRAGIC COMMONS. I would say, though, that TRAGIC COMMONS is not a world we have any good reason to want to live in. And one way to make our world *more* like TRAGIC COMMONS is to embrace SP. Anyone who actually cares about consequences, rather than merely about proving that his or her heart is in the right place, will care about the following obvious fact: People react to opportunities, including opportunities presented by the predictable actions and/or commitments of other people. Which is to say, our world is a strategic world. We might be willing to hand over a hundred dollar bill to a partner so long as we reasonably hope that eighty percent of it will actually find its way to the cause of famine relief. But what if we try to hand over a million hundred dollar bills at a time, with no more than a hope that our partner will use it as we intend? How long can it be before our partner consists of organized crime? (Substitute "dictator" for "family" in TRAGIC COMMONS, and ask yourself what dictators tend to do when presented with the opportunity to collect hundred dollar bills by the millions, so long as famine headlines keep aid dollars gushing in. May we assume our world is nothing like that? Anyone committed to getting good results assumes no such thing but instead *investigates*, one case at a time, how dictators and the rest of us react to incentives.)

TRAGIC COMMONS illustrates one kind of type-token issue.⁶ In TRAGIC COMMONS, the token-benefit is a saved life, but this token-benefit is wildly misleading as a characterization of your action's real consequences. The token-result of your action is a saved life, but the type-result is an escalating catastrophe. Knowing that foreign aid has a history of driving such wedges between token-benefits and type-disasters, I now get a letter asking me to participate in what may or may not be another commons tragedy in the making. I have to make a decision. Does morality require me to accept a theorist's or professional fund-raiser's all-too-predictable assurance that if we turn on the spigots in response to problems and turn them off in response to

solutions, we'll eventually have fewer problems and more solutions?⁷

To whatever extent we take responsibility for other people as well as ourselves, our actions are encouraging people to depend on us rather than on themselves. Act-utilitarianism usually would not permit people opportunistically to arrange circumstances so that our act-utilitarian commitments require us to support them, but unless they too are committed act-utilitarians, that will not stop them from doing it. Theories often have implications other than ones they formally acknowledge. A theory can stipulate an action guide and an intended result. But a theory cannot stipulate that following its action guide will have its intended result, for that is an empirical matter. So it is with maximizing utility.

One can say that trying to maximize utility actually tends to maximize utility, but saying it does not make it so. A simple, parametric maximizing program may lead to the best outcome for beings like us in situations like ours. Then again, it may not. It has no history of doing so.

Regarding the Ethics

SP is a suggestion about how to go about *promoting* value. However, promoting value is not the only concern if either (a) value itself is not the only concern, or (b) being moral sometimes is a matter of *respecting* rather than promoting value. Under what conditions might respecting value conflict with promoting it? Here are two notorious philosophical thought experiments.

TROLLEY: A trolley is rolling down a track on its way to killing five people. If you switch to another track on which there is only one person, you will save five and kill one.

Most people say you ought to switch tracks and kill one to save five. Compare this to:

HOSPITAL: Five patients are dying for lack of suitable organ donors. A UPS delivery person walks into the hospital. You know she is a suitable donor for all five patients. If you kidnap her and harvest her organs, you save five and kill one.

People have a different intuition here. Among students (and U.S. Congressional staffers, at whose workshops I sometimes lecture) that I informally poll, almost everyone responds to HOSPITAL by saying you cannot kidnap and murder people, period. Not even to save lives. On a trip to Kazakhstan, I presented the cases to an audience of twenty-one professors from nine post-

Soviet republics. They said the same. Why? Are the cases really so different? How?

TROLLEY tells us numbers matter. Although HOSPITAL seems to have TROLLEY's logical structure, it leads us to a different conclusion. Why? The literature discusses several differences, but one difference I have not heard mentioned is this: HOSPITAL tells us that sometimes what matters is being able to trust others to respect us as separate persons. Hospitals cannot exist, and more generally we cannot live well together, unless we can trust each other to acknowledge that we all have lives of our own. HOSPITAL shows we sometimes get the best result—a community of people living well together—not by aiming at a result so much as by being trustworthy, so people can plan to deal with us in mutually beneficial ways.

To a cartoon utilitarian thinking about TROLLEY, all that matters is numbers. But in a more realistic institutional context like HOSPITAL, we intuitively grasp a more fundamental point. Namely, if we don't take seriously rights and separate personhood, we won't get justice; in fact, *we won't even get good numbers*. This is why I said morality sometimes is about *respecting* value, not because value does not matter, but precisely because it does.

Acts versus Practices

A consequentialist theory needs to treat some topics as beyond the reach of utilitarian calculation. Rights can trump (not merely outweigh) utilitarian calculation even from a broadly consequentialist perspective. Why? Because, from a consequentialist perspective, results matter, and because, as an empirical matter, there is enormous utility in being able to treat certain parameters as settled, as not even permitting case by case utilitarian reasoning.

Unconstrained maximizers, by definition, optimally use any resources to which they have access, including their neighbors' vital organs. To get good results in the real world, though, we need to be surrounded not by unconstrained maximizers but by people who respect rights, thereby enabling us to have a system of expectations and trust, which allows us together to transform our world into a world with greater *potential* (a world where delivery companies are willing to serve the hospital). When we cannot count on others to treat us as rights-bearers with separate lives, we are living in a world of lesser potential.

John Stuart Mill famously observed that it is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than to be a satisfied pig.⁸ Necessarily, it is better to hit an optimum than not, other things equal. On the

other hand, Mill's insight is that other things are not equal. If our choice is between making the best of a low-potential situation versus falling short of making the best of a high-potential situation, we may prefer to fall short, and be a dissatisfied Socrates. Mill, wanting his society to operate as high as possible in utility space, considered it more important to live in a world with a higher ceiling than to make sure every action hits the ceiling. Mill was right.

All optimizing is done with respect to a set of constraints and opportunities. Some of our constraints are brute facts about the external world, but most are to some extent self-imposed; some will reflect our beliefs about what morality requires. (We choose to limit how much time we spend looking for an apartment, we choose to limit how much we spend on dinner, and there are things we will not do for money.)⁹ We may be constrained not to murder—constrained both by choice and by external factors such as the presence of Joe's bodyguard. If other people can count on us not to murder them, new possibilities open up. By contrast, if people *cannot* rely on us not to murder them, then even if our murderous act is optimal—even if it hits the utility ceiling—the ceiling will be lower than if murder had been ruled out. (Someone who says a true utilitarian takes all that into account is saying a true utilitarian cares not so much about consequences of acts as about consequences of practices that permit some acts and not others. I agree. My point is only that a true utilitarian in that sense is not an act-utilitarian.)

When doctors embrace a prohibition against assaulting healthy patients, doctors give up opportunities to optimize—to hit the ceiling—but *patients* gain opportunities to visit doctors safely. They gain a world with a higher ceiling. Such utility comes from doctors refusing even to ask whether murdering a patient would be optimal.

But what if your doctor really could save five patients by murdering one? Would not a rule letting your doctor do it, just this once, be the rule with the best consequences? Compare this to a question asked by Rawls: in baseball, batters get three strikes, but what if there were a case where, just this once, it would be better if a batter had four?¹⁰ Rawls's crucial and neglected insight is that this question presumes to treat "three strikes" as a rule of thumb, to be assessed case by case. Rules of thumb are rules made to be broken. But in baseball, "three strikes" is a rule of practice, not a rule of thumb. If an umpire were to allow a fourth strike in an exceptional circumstance, baseball would not be able to go on as before.

"Rule of thumb" utilitarians may say, and even believe, they respect the rule against murder, yet they treat whether to obey as a case by case decision. By contrast, "rule of practice"

utilitarians decline even to *ask* about the utility of particular actions in particular cases. Facing a case where violating a rule would have more utility, rule of practice utilitarians say, “Our theory sorts out alternative practices, like three strikes versus four, by asking which has more utility as the kind of practice that even *umpires* have no right to evaluate case by case. Our theory *forbids* us to consider consequences in a more case-specific way. We need not say why—the theory says what it says and letting that be the end of it would be fine—but if we wanted to defend the theory, not merely specify it, we would say our being forbidden to consider case-specific consequences has better consequences. For one thing, it gives others the option of rationally trusting us.”

What do we think about a HOSPITAL-like case where we are certain no one will ever know what we’ve done, therefore certain that our action will not undermine trust? Perhaps it does not matter, since I am not speaking of a world where we can be certain it will never occur to UPS Inc. to wonder what is happening to all the delivery personnel they keep sending to our hospital. Suffice it to say, real world morality takes a particular shape partly because real world uncertainty takes a particular shape.

Some utilitarians find it a mystery why morality would incorporate any constraints beyond a requirement to do whatever maximizes the good.¹¹ But from an institutional perspective, there is no mystery. Moral institutions constrain the good’s pursuit because the good is pursued by individuals. Moral institutions get the best result not so much by aiming at the best result as by imposing constraints on individual pursuits so as to bring individual pursuits into better harmony with each other. Institutions (hospitals, for example) serve the common good *by leaving well enough alone*—creating opportunities for mutual benefit, then trusting individuals to take advantage of them. That is how (even from a utilitarian perspective) institutions have a moral mandate to serve the common good that does not collapse into a mandate for ordinary moral agents to maximize utility.

In effect, there are two ways in which institutional utility is based on trust. First, people have to be able to trust their society to treat them as rights-bearers. Second, society must in turn trust people to use the opportunities they have as rights-bearers within society.

A reflective consequentialist morality is not about one versus five, nor even about costs versus benefits. It is about how we need to live in order to be glad we are neighbors. It’s about getting on with our lives in a way that complements rather than hinders our neighbors’ efforts to

get on with theirs. It accepts constraints on optimizing in order to have a higher ceiling.

Acts aren't the important thing in the long run. They are not the main variable on which long-run prosperity depends. The ceiling itself is the main variable. An optimizer on the ground in Bangladesh can do only so much. What Bengalis need is not to optimize or be surrounded by optimizers so much as to live in a society with a western-style ceiling: a society where people (men *and* women, people of all religions, all castes, and so on) have the opportunity and the responsibility to do what meets needs: that is, to produce. If we care about people meeting needs on a global scale, our task is to throw ourselves not into meeting needs but into encouraging processes by which people meet needs. Such encouragement, I surmise, would never involve or even be compatible with reducing ourselves to the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee.¹²

Postscript on Trolley Problems

Experimental psychologists have demonstrated repeatedly that their subjects' intuitions regarding such things as probability and logical implication become more unreliable as the experimental context becomes more abstract or unworldly. In the face of such findings, why would moral philosophers continue to treat intuitive moral reactions to bizarre thought experiments as if such intuitions were reliable? I doubt there is any good reason; their teachers did it, so they do it. I am glad Singer seldom partakes of this tradition. (I wonder how he feels about SHALLOW POND; authors today are still writing on it, without even knowing it began life in an article of Singer's.) I seldom do as much thought-experimenting as I am doing here. It is not my style. I am glad I did it in Kazakhstan, though. Here's why.

Wherever I go, whether my audience consists of local students, congressional staffers, or post-Soviet professors, when I present the TROLLEY case and ask them whether they would switch tracks, about ninety percent will say, "there has to be another way!" A philosophy professor's first reaction is to say, "Please, stay on topic. I'm trying to illustrate a point here! To see the point, you need to decide what to do when there is no other way." When I said this to my class of post-Soviet professors, though, they called a time-out and spoke briefly among themselves in Russian. Then two of them quietly said (as others nodded, every one of them looking me straight in the eye), "Yes, we understand. We have heard this before. All our lives we were told the few must be sacrificed for the sake of many. We were told there is no other

way. What we were told was a lie. There was always another way.”

V. ETHICAL THEORY IN AN ETHICAL LIFE

FAST PAIN RELIEF: There is a button you could push. If you push it, all sentient life will painlessly vanish from existence. You will, of course, minimize suffering in the process.

FAST PAIN RELIEF shows that minimizing suffering is not the only thing that matters. Neither is it always what matters most.

What FAST PAIN RELIEF leaves open is whether minimizing suffering matters a lot, or relatively little, in the cosmic scheme of things. We need not settle this, because suffering could matter quite a lot without implying that we ought to spend quite a lot of our lives working to put an end to it.

The point is important, so let me illustrate it with a story. Environmental activist Paul Watson, founder of the Sea Shepherd Society, confronted a Japanese fishing fleet in 1982 and negotiated a halt to a netting process that was killing dolphins. During the discussion, a fisherman asked Watson which is of more value, the life of a dolphin or a life of a human?

I answered that, in my opinion, the life of a dolphin was equal in value to the life of a human. The fisherman then asked, “If a Japanese fisherman and a dolphin were both caught in a net and you could save the life of one, which would you save?”

All the fishermen in the room smirked. They had me pegged for a liberal and felt confident that I would say I would save the fisherman, thus making a mockery of my declaration that humans and dolphins are equal. I looked about the room and smiled. “I did not come to Japan to save fishermen; I am here to save dolphins.”¹³

We can learn from Watson’s response. It is a pivotal feature of our moral psychology that when we focus on something, it takes on added moral significance to us. We can call it *focus*.

Human beings including Peter Singer are what Elijah Millgram has called serial hyperspecializers.¹⁴ What Millgram has in mind is that humans adapt to ecological niches by adapting software, not hardware, and the flexibility of human software permits exquisitely refined adaptation: to niches for such organisms as Antarctic nature photographer, corporate merger lawyer, or animal rights activist. Moreover, that flexibility persists to some extent, such that humans retain the capacity to colonize new niches. Individual humans do not pursue only one project, although they may be gripped by one main project at any given time. One of the

problems with a project such as that suggested by SP—the project of making sure that no one in the world is worse off than oneself—is that the project cannot be brought to a state of satisfactory completion. There never comes a time to move on to the next project. Therefore, serial hyperspecializers (including Singer) cannot possibly take SP as seriously as Singer says they should, and their lives would be grossly unlivable if they were seriously to try.

Sometimes, what fires Singer's imagination is information that there are laboratories where animal experiments are being conducted that have little point and where, even if the research were important, the animals are suffering unnecessarily. Sometimes Singer is gripped by reports of human famine. Sometimes what grips Singer is how animals are treated on factory farms. Singer is normal. He does one thing for a while, then moves on. Moving on is human. It is not a mistake. It is not immoral. Singer is not obliged to commensurate his projects—to show that a moral imperative to spend his days exactly as he does is derivable from SP. He does not need to show that his positions on the equality of all animals and on SP fit nicely together. (They manifestly do not, but that is okay.) In Singer's mind, animal liberation and famine relief are different projects. Moreover, not everything that matters to Singer is a *project*. Singer has friends, and his friends matter, but they are not projects. *Friend* is something to be rather than something to do.

A lot of people are consumed by one burning issue or another, at any given moment, and sometimes make the mistake of thinking everyone ought to be consumed by the same issue. In fact, we freely choose to be consumed by one issue rather than another. Singer may think what he chose to focus on is what all of us are obliged to focus on, but it only looks that way to someone already focusing on the same thing. Paul Watson was telling the fishermen that although he may be committed to seeing humans and dolphins as equals, he is not obliged to be preoccupied by that particular commitment. He is committed to *respecting* humans and dolphins alike, but not to giving them equal time when deciding how to plan his life.

Paul Watson believes in fighting injustice. Does that commit him to fighting injustice wherever he finds it? Absolutely not. Does it commit him to fighting whichever injustice currently is firing Peter Singer's imagination? Absolutely not. That's not what Watson is here for. Like Singer, Watson decides for himself where to make his stand, as do we all.¹⁵

In that respect, being moral has nothing to do with being on the same page as everyone else. Being moral has nothing to do with being anxious about whether we all abide by the

correct religion, or even the correct morality. Any serious consequentialist should agree, because that kind of respect is the foundation of any society that a moral person would aspire to live in.

Western Civilization: What Makes It Work

Distant problems are types of which there are innumerable tokens. Local emergencies are simply tokens. If one falls in your lap today, you can be fairly sure there won't be another in your lap tomorrow. In any case, you can help without increasing the probability of finding another in your lap tomorrow. You are in a parametric rather than strategic game, so you help and that's the end of it. Life goes on.¹⁶

When professional fund-raisers exhort us to help relieve famine, they talk about token-cost (without using that name), going into some detail explaining how a hundred dollar donation can change a recipient's life. Yet, it is no particular token of the type "starving person" they have in mind. It is the type itself, and famine relief's type-cost is not small. If we embrace the duty to relieve famine in the way Singer says we should, life does not just go on.

Singer gives the impression he is not keen on western civilization. Having endorsed SP in its strong form, Singer adds, "Even if we accepted the principle only in its moderate form, however, it should be clear that we would have to give away enough to ensure that the consumer society, dependent as it is on people spending on trivia rather than giving to famine relief, would slow down and perhaps disappear entirely. There are several reasons why this would be desirable in itself."¹⁷

Desirable. Desirable *in itself*. We might have expected that Singer would classify the collapse of western society as a cost, albeit an acceptable one. Evidently not. Singer calls it desirable in itself, and seems to find it so obviously desirable that the "several reasons why" need not be mentioned. And if this is the moderate principle's predictable result, what happens if we follow the strong principle Singer favors? What else disappears along with consumer society? Books? Art? By the lights of SP, spending *time* on "trivia" is no more allowable than spending money on it.

Peter Unger, inspired by Singer, imagines a world in which "whenever well-off folks learn of people in great need, they promptly move to meet the need, almost no matter what the financial cost. So, at this later date, the basic needs of almost all the world's people will be met

almost all the time. . . . What's more, should any of these descendants find herself facing such preventable suffering as now actually obtains, she'd devote almost all her energy and resources toward lessening the suffering."¹⁸

I doubt that Unger's vision is even coherent. It has the following logic. The productive output of the western world is put up for grabs. A world-wide competition ensues. And the way for a country's leaders to win the competition for that output is to have a population that seems to need it more than anyone else. But if we devote almost all our energy and resources to meeting such need, *then how do we get to be so well off?* Where does Unger think prosperity comes from in the first place?

Imagine what our community would be like if a lot of us did as Unger asks. There were about five thousand people in Humboldt, the nearest town when I was growing up on a small (160-acre) farm in Saskatchewan. Suppose we farmers gave up that part of our crop that we would have cashed in to buy movie tickets. If we do that, the Towne Theater goes out of business. No big deal, perhaps. The handful of employees seek work elsewhere. Maybe they find work at the Princess or Lucky Cafes. Fine, but we also stop exchanging grain for burgers at the café, instead sending that part of our crop abroad. The cafes close, a dozen people are out of work, and we exceed Humboldt's ability to find work for them.

Unger says we would not have nice cars and homes.¹⁹ We sacrifice that part of our crop that would have bought new cars. Fine. Car dealers and their employees are out of work. *They* no longer send money to Bangladesh; neither do they buy trivia from local shops, so furniture and clothing shops close, defaulting on their business loans. Their employees stop making mortgage payments, and of course, they stop sending money to Bangladesh. Banks start foreclosing on houses, relieving occupants of the obligation to liquidate their houses in service of famine relief. There is no one to buy the houses, though, so the banks close too.

Those able to leave Humboldt do so, becoming refugees themselves, searching for a community that has not yet crumbled under the weight of Unger's call to prevent suffering. So, Singer was right that obeying SP would result in our reducing ourselves to the circumstances of a Bengali refugee. It would do little for Bangladesh, but it would have the result for western civilization that Singer calls desirable in itself.

Singer would allow that we have to keep doing our part to maintain our incomes so that we remain able to send money overseas. But that misses the point. In the above thought

experiment, the problem isn't that we aren't working but that we aren't *consuming*, which is to say, we aren't sustaining other people's work. We aren't *doing* business, so we aren't *sustaining* business. It is lack of business—our declining to spend money on trivia—that shuts down the theater and the coffee shop. Moreover, the experiment is not merely a thought experiment. Historically, with few exceptions, this is how communal societies crash, unless they switch to some other way of doing business first.²⁰

Singer says we need a “Darwinism of the left.”²¹ I agree. No doubt we would disagree on what such a view would imply. We might agree, though, with an observation recently made by David Miller. Miller reflects that if someone in France were getting far better health care than Miller was getting in England, Miller's first instinct would be to suspect that France has a better system and England ought to consider adopting it, not that resources ought to be transferred from France to England so as to reduce inequality.²² Why? Because the aim of Miller's egalitarianism is to improve life prospects, not to equalize them. Miller's credentials as a spokesperson for the left are beyond question, and the point he makes here is more or less Darwinian. That is, when a social system fails, the right response is not to *subsidize* it but to *replace* it with something having a history of working.

We must of course remain (or become) humbly aware that revolutions imposed by alien cultures and philosophies have no history of working. Nothing we do will have only the effects we intend. The only course with a history of helping people long term is whatever enables them to take responsibility for their own futures (and even that is not a guarantee).

VI. THE NATURE OF MORAL THEORY

Perhaps we need not reject SP. It may suffice to understand what SP is: it is a piece of a theory, nothing more. Theories are maps, not attempts to specify necessary and sufficient conditions.²³ We begin with a terrain (a subject matter), and with questions about that terrain. Our questions spur us to build theories—maps of the terrain—that articulate and systematize our answers. To know how to reach Detroit, we need one kind of map. To know how to be a good person, we need another map. Note: *maps* do not tell us where we want to go. (This is equally true of scientific theorizing. For example, to those who want to understand nature in secular terms, Darwinism is a serviceable map. It does not explain everything, but it explains a lot. Darwinism

is rejected by Creationists, though. Why? Not because it *fails* to help them understand the origin of species in secular terms, but precisely because it succeeds. They have a different destination; understanding themselves in secular terms is not what they want.) Our questions predate our theorizing, and constitute our reasons to theorize in the first place. In different words, moral theorizing primarily is for those who aim to be moral. It is by aiming to be moral that we make moral theory the kind of map we have reason to consult.²⁴

Theories Are Compromises

When we theorize, we seek to render what we know simple enough to be understood, stated, and applied. If we try to describe verbally every nuance of morality's complexity, we get something so unwieldy that it may not appear to be a theory at all. If instead we try to simplify, homing in on justice's essence, we get incompleteness or inaccuracy. The task is like trying to represent three-dimensional terrain in two dimensions. Mapmakers projecting from three dimensions onto two can accurately represent size or shape, but not both. Mercator projections depict lines of longitude as parallel, representing shapes more or less accurately at a cost of distorting relative size. Greenland looks as big as Africa but in fact is one fourteenth as large. Goode's Homolosine is better at representing individual continents, at a cost of depicting the world as a globe whose surface has been peeled like an orange.

Like other theories, utilitarianism is rather like a Mercator projection. It has an equator around which its implications seem intuitively accurate, and it has poles around which its exclusive emphasis on consequences seems wildly distorted.

In short, mapmaking, like theorizing, is a messy activity. Mapmakers choose how to represent worlds, and there is no perfect way of representing three-dimensional truth in two dimensions. Moral theorists choose how to represent complex truths in simple words, and there is no perfect way of representing in words everything we believe.

Yet, this is not a skeptical view! There remains an objective truth that the map can represent (or fail to represent) in a helpful way. Regardless of whether partisans of Mercator and Peters projections ever settle which representation best serves a particular user's purposes, there will remain a three-dimensional truth of the matter.

Articulating the Code

When hiking in the Tucson mountains, I can tell the difference between a pincushion cactus and a hedgehog cactus. I *see* the difference even while doubting I can *state* the difference. If I try to state the difference, my statement will be incomplete, or will have counterexamples. Our ability to track ethical norms similarly exceeds and precedes our ability to articulate the norms being tracked. Indeed, if being able to track X presupposed verbal skills we develop only in graduate school, then X could not function in society as moral norms must.

Any code we can articulate is no more than a rough summary of wisdom gleaned from experience, that is, wisdom about where we have been. Our articulated wisdom will be useful going forward, since the future will be somewhat like the past. Yet, the future will be novel, too. No code is guaranteed to anticipate every contingency, which is to say, no formula (so far) unerringly prescribes choices for all situations. (The theorists I know do not expect their theories to tell them what grade to assign, how to vote when the hiring committee meets, whether to cancel class, or whether to send a hundred dollars to a particular NGO.)

Knowing which principle to apply requires judgment. Judgment is codifiable in a way, yet exercising judgment is not like following a code. Consider a simpler issue: can a code tell investors when to buy and sell stocks? Market analysts look at histories of price fluctuations and see patterns. Patterns suggest formulas. Occasionally someone markets a formula, offering proof that the formula would have predicted every major price movement of the last fifty years. Investors buy the formula, which promptly fails to predict the next major move. My point: many phenomena are codifiable—exhibiting a pattern that, after the fact, can be expressed as a formula—but that does not mean the formula will help us make the next decision.

So, when business majors in ethics courses ask for “the code” the following of which is guaranteed to render all their future business decisions beyond reproach, we may have little to say, even if we think such a code is, in principle, out there awaiting discovery. Business majors tend to understand stock markets well enough to know they can expect only so much from a stock-picking code. Responsibility for exercising judgment ultimately lies with them, not with any code. Some of them have not done enough moral philosophy to know they likewise can expect only so much from a moral code. But we can tell them the truth: philosophers are in the business of articulating principles, not rules and not codes. Moral wisdom is less like knowing

answers to test questions and more like simply being aware that the test is in progress right now.

VII. CONCLUSION

I said SP can't be right, then asked, "but how can it be wrong?" SP is not quite right, but rejecting it does not seem quite right either. I suggest the apparent dilemma is an artifact of a mistaken assumption about the nature of moral theorizing. The mistaken assumption is that the point of moral theorizing is to identify necessary and/or sufficient conditions for being moral, when in fact the point of moral theorizing is the same as the point of any other kind of theorizing, namely to draw a map. SP is a suggestion about how we might find our way around the terrain of morality. It has counterexamples, but that is not a problem. The only problem comes when we treat SP as something more than a way of articulating an understanding about one facet of morality. SP is a piece of a map. It can't be more than that.

Singer himself rightly stresses that pious talk is not enough. "What is the point of relating philosophy to public (and personal) affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously? In this instance, taking our conclusion seriously means acting upon it."²⁵ Indeed. So, how much should we give? Singer's theory gives a simple answer: more. To get something we can take seriously in Singer's sense, we must do better. Theorists need to realize that moral theorizing isn't a game you win by having the most demanding theory.

Morality is about what should guide us given that our focus (yours, mine, Paul Watson's, Peter Singer's, everyone's) inevitably is a *focus*—something that does not cover everything. A humanly rational morality is one that can help people live well together, given that neither we nor the people around us are going to consider everything. A conception of morality that induces us to internalize negative externalities is both psychologically realistic and empirically effective: something we reasonably expect from anyone with some real degree of moral motivation. Internalizing negative externalities isn't everything, but it is an excellent foundation for our efforts to live in such a way that the people around us are better off with us than without us.

The only plausible elaboration of SP is Singer's weaker version, which bids us to do what we can to make the world a better place when we can do so without morally significant sacrifice. What to count as "morally significant" is by no means clear, but neither is it merely a subjective matter. In fact, it is objectively true that society operates with a higher ceiling when it treats the

matter as a personal decision. The right way to settle the question is analogous to the right way to manage traffic; that is, the question is not whose destination has the most utility, but simply whose turn it is. That is the way to expedite traffic and thereby facilitate projects that raise the ceiling on human possibility.

Of course, the weak interpretation implicitly acknowledges that act-utilitarianism does not work. The reason to promulgate SP in its strong act-utilitarian form is to lay down the law about what other people need to do in order to prove that their hearts are in the right place.²⁶ But no one who sincerely cares about consequences would do that.

¹ John Harris, "The Marxist Conception of Violence," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 3 (1974), pp. 192-220, herep. 211.

² Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972) 229-43, at 230-31.

³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴ John Stuart Mill seemed to think SP, or something like it, is required in but one case in a thousand. To be sure, it is hard to see any resources in Mill's utilitarianism to so limit the scope of SP's application. Many readers in the aftermath of 20th century utilitarianism dismiss Mill's claims as pandering to common opinion, an unconvincing disavowal of his theory's patently radical nature. But Mill was neither stupid nor overly concerned to ally himself with the prejudices of his day. Perhaps he saw something that got lost in the shuffle of 20th century utilitarianism's development as a simple-minded decision procedure. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Indianapolis: Hackett (1979/1861).

⁵ Singer circa 1998 is alive to such complications. See his thoughtful "Darwin For the Left," reprinted in Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life*, New York: HarperCollins (2000).

⁶ As analytic philosophers use these terms, a *type* is a general category, whereas a *token* is a particular instance of the more general category. For example, there are many blue shirts in the world. The one I am wearing is a token of the general type.

⁷ One need not be anti-government to be a skeptic about foreign aid. Foreign aid's actual history appalls radical socialist Brian Barry as much as it does me. See Barry, *Why Social Justice Matters*, Cambridge: Polity (2005) Chapter 3.

⁸ *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2.

⁹ See Schmidtz "Rationality Within Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1992) 445-66, or Schmidtz, *Rational Choice and Moral Agency*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1995).

¹⁰ See "Two Concepts of Rules," reprinted in John Rawls, *Collected Papers*. Cambridge: Harvard Press (1999).

¹¹ See Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1989) 121-27. Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 129, expresses similar skepticism, despite departing from utilitarianism in other respects.

¹² Jean Hampton argues that the moral argument against sacrificing one person for the sake of another applies to self-sacrifice as well. See "Selflessness and the Loss of Self," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 10 (1993) 135-65.

¹³ Paul Watson, "Tora! Tora! Tora!" *Earth Ethics*, edited by James Sterba (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995) 341-46, here p. 341.

¹⁴ Elijah Millgram (in personal correspondence, June 2005).

¹⁵ I have argued that we can and do deliberate about our ends, even our final ends, and that having to grapple with the potentials and perils of human psychology can make a choice of final ends straightforwardly rational. See David Schmidtz, "Choosing Ends," *Ethics*, 104 (1994) 226-51. I put these arguments in context in *Rational Choice and Moral Agency*.

¹⁶ When people choose to build beach houses, counting on faceless taxpayers to pay for the damage periodically done by predictable storms, the game is no longer a local emergency but simply people planning their lives around an opportunity to free ride. This game is strategic rather than parametric, with all the worries that difference implies.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁸ Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 20.

¹⁹ Ibid, 145.

²⁰ See David Schmitz, "The Institution of Property," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 11 (1994) 42-62 for some exceptions to this historical rule and also for some explanation of why it is the rule.

²¹ See note #4.

²² David Miller, "Justice and Global Inequality," in Hurrell & Woods, *Inequality, Globalization, and World Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999) 187-210.

²³ I thank Jenann Ismael and quite a few other people over the years for helpful and enjoyable conversations about theories as maps. This section distills portions of Part 1 of David Schmitz, *Elements of Justice*, New York: Cambridge University Press (2006).

²⁴ Lest it be thought that I am a subjectivist about the choice of ends, thinking there is no reason for choosing the end of being moral, see "Choosing Ends" or *Rational Choice and Moral Agency*.

²⁵ "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," 242.

²⁶ Zell Kravinsky takes SP seriously. He gave away nearly everything he owned, including a kidney, and feels unquenchable guilt over not yet having given away the other one. See Ian Parker, "The Gift," *The New Yorker* (August 2, 2004) 54-63.