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## Peter Singer, R.M. Hare, and the Trouble With Logical Consistency

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### Abstract

According to the metaethics of R. M. Hare, we determine morality objectively by making a moral judgment, committing to the moral principle underlying that judgment, and then logically extending that moral principle to all relevantly similar cases. This metaethical system called universal prescriptivism had a major impact on Peter Singer, whose arguments for radically improving animal welfare and alleviating global suffering frequently rely on Hare-ian appeals to logical consistency. Hare's work in metaethics is largely rejected now, but Singer's popularity has kept Hare's prescriptivism alive through the many animal welfarists and effective altruists who have borrowed Singer's style in their own logic-based calls for the obligation to reduce suffering impartially. In this paper, I will describe Hare's metaethics, show how this has served as Singer's own metaethics for most of his academic career, and then I will describe a problem for Hare's system that is particularly relevant to effective altruists who have been influenced by Singer's early writings and may be repeating the mistakes that Hare bequeathed to Singer.

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## Introduction: R.M. Hare's Metaethics of Logical Consistency

R. M. Hare was a metaethical philosopher who rejected intuitionism and naturalism, both of which he called forms of descriptivism—a belief that moral judgments are purely descriptions of the world. Hare believed these approaches led to relativism and relied on dubious and muddled concepts like “moral facts.” Hare was however dissatisfied with the non-descriptivist alternative that C. L. Stevenson’s emotivism offered, since emotivism did not allow for reason to play a role in moral judgments. By excluding reason, emotivism seemed to run into the same problem that Hare saw for the intuitionists: we cannot persuade someone to change their moral views when we are limited to saying, “I intuit *A* is wrong” (as the intuitionists might do) or “I disapprove of *A*, please do so as well” (as the emotivists would do). If our opponent has different intuitions or emotive attitudes, they may retort with their own intuitions or attitudes, and no one is moved. This was dissatisfying for Hare, who was interested in persuading his opponents, in part because he had been a prisoner of war in Japan during World War II and felt there had to be a way to persuade his captors they were wrong to enslave him. Furthermore, it looked to Hare as if intuitionism, naturalism and emotivism ruled out the possibility of developing objective ethics—a possibility Hare believed was in reach.

Rather than reject emotivism entirely, Hare amended it to build a rational machinery for evaluating our own positions and persuading others with conflicting views. The emotivist claimed moral judgments had descriptive and emotive meaning, and that all meaning was causal. Hare countered that moral judgments have descriptive and prescriptive meaning, and were universalizable. The descriptive meaning (“This case has features 1, 2, 3...”) led to universalizability, and the prescriptive meaning (“Do *A* in a case with features 1, 2, 3...”) made the judgments practical. This combination brought moral judgments into the realm of action (whereas in emotivism, they related to mere approval) and logic. Because the features of one case could be shared by others, there can be logical relations among imperatives; prescribing an action in a case with features 1, 2, 3 but not in a similar case that also has features 1, 2, 3 could be shown to be inconsistent. For Hare, there is no constraint on an agent’s first prescription—that can be almost whatever we like—but once we have prescribed, it becomes possible to challenge us and make us change our attitudes by pointing to other cases with those same features, forcing us on pain of inconsistency to take the same attitude toward the other cases or reject our initial prescription. However, because our prescriptions are universal, it is important for us to imagine ourselves as victims

of our own actions as we consider whether we can prescribe them.<sup>1</sup> In Hare's words:

[I]f I say that an act ought to be done, I am committed to saying that a similar act ought to be done in all circumstances resembling these, regardless of who is in which position in the situation. It is, on this view, logically inconsistent to say that, of two identically similar acts in identically similar circumstances, one is wrong and the other is not. ... It is this feature of moral judgments which prevents us making just whatever moral judgments we please. For if we make a moral judgment, we are committed to prescribing the same thing for similar situations. But we could imagine ourselves in just the same situation, but at the receiving end, in the position of the victim of the act. If we say that we ought to do this, we are committed to saying that he ought to do the same to us if the roles were reversed.<sup>2</sup>

Hare's rational machinery only roars to life when we use moral language such as right, wrong, should or ought. There need not be anything inconsistent in saying "I did not like when A was murdered," and "I did not mind when B was murdered," even if the murders of A and B can be called relevantly similar. It is when one of the murders is pronounced wrong that we can point to relevant similarities between the two cases that requires prescribing both or perhaps all murders to be wrong:

This is because in any 'ought'-statement there is implicit a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. This means that if I say 'That is what ought to be done; but there could be a situation exactly like this one in its non-moral properties, but in which the corresponding person, who was exactly like the person who ought to do it in this situation, ought not to do it, I contradict myself.'<sup>3</sup>

If we accept this metaethical machinery, which Hare called universal prescriptivism, we acknowledge that moral judgments do not follow from non-moral facts. Instead, non-moral facts serve as reasons, with the agent making a moral judgment on the basis of reasons that point to a principle<sup>4</sup> which can be tested as consistent or incon-

<sup>1</sup> R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 222

<sup>2</sup> R. M. Hare, *Objective Prescriptions and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13-14

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 456

<sup>4</sup> R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 30

sistent with the agent's other moral judgments.<sup>5</sup> If found inconsistent, the agent must abandon or accept some combination of new judgments, old judgments, new principles and old principles to arrive at a fully consistent position.

Effective altruists who have not read any of Hare's work may nevertheless find this sounds eerily familiar. I will show that this familiarity is at least partially due to the lasting impact that Hare had on the rhetoric and metaethics of Peter Singer, the utilitarian philosopher credited with initiating the animal welfare movement with his book *Animal Liberation*, and with planting the seed for effective altruism with his article "Famine, Affluence and Morality" and his later elaborations in *Practical Ethics* and *The Life You Can Save*.

In the next section of this paper, I will look at the extent of Hare's influence on Singer, and where this influence reveals itself in Singer's writings on speciesism and global poverty reduction. The two sections that follow provide an evaluative look at what I believe is a problem for Hare's theory, which makes it an issue for some of Singer's most famous arguments as well. The basic problem is that we cannot demand logical consistency in moral judgments and actions if it is unclear what there is to be logically consistent with. No situation in which a moral decision must be made is identical in every detail. Universal prescriptivism therefore requires that we connect relevantly similar cases through moral principles, so that we can speak sensibly about our moral judgments in different cases being consistent or inconsistent. But, as I will argue, Hare's system and Singer's use of it leaves room for an unresolvable debate over what the principles underlying our moral judgments actually are—or whether principles even underlie them at all.

### **Hare's Influence on Singer**

Hare was Singer's thesis supervisor at The University of Oxford, and Singer has cited Hare as one of the major influences on his philosophical views. He has called Hare "perhaps the greatest" moral philosopher of the twentieth century,<sup>6</sup> and acknowledged Hare's "clear and logical prose style that was soon to become so familiar to me, and a

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<sup>5</sup> R.M. Hare, "Universal Prescriptivism," in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Malden Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 459-460

<sup>6</sup> Peter Singer, "R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy," *Utilitas* Vol. 14, No. 3, (November 2002): 317

model for my own writing.”<sup>7</sup> Of Hare’s notion that moral judgments are universalizable, Singer said, “Hare gave it a logical precision that earlier forms [such as Kant’s] had lacked. Then he showed how in this more precise form it was immune from objections that had plagued some other versions.”<sup>8</sup> In the preface to *Practical Ethics*, Singer wrote, “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.”<sup>9</sup> As late as 2011, Singer seemed to endorse all the major points in Hare’s universal prescriptivism, writing:

I am inclined to agree with R.M. Hare’s view, according to which a moral judgment is a special form of prescription. As I have argued in several places—for example, in the first chapter of *Practical Ethics*—there is plenty of scope for argument about moral judgments. First, our judgments must be coherent and consistent. We can’t, for example, simultaneously hold that all human life is of equal value, that human life begins at conception, and that it is acceptable to kill a fetus for reasons that do not justify killing an adult. If we find that we hold all of these views, then we have a problem that can only be overcome by giving up at least one of the trio. . . . In addition to being coherent and consistent, moral judgments must be universalizable, and indeed universalizable in a special sense that means that we must be prepared to hold them after putting ourselves in the position of—and taking on the preferences of—all those affected by our actions.<sup>10</sup>

While preparing to speak at a memorial service for Hare in 2002, Singer re-read *Freedom and Reason* and realized Hare had summed up the main argument behind *Animal Liberation* a decade before Singer wrote it.<sup>11</sup> In the final pages of *Freedom and Reason*, Hare wrote:

Nobody would be thought to be oppressing animals because he did not allow them self-government; but, on the other hand, it is generally thought to be wrong to torture animals for fun. Now why is it that we do not acknowledge a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 309-310

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 311

<sup>9</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, third edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011),

<sup>10</sup> Peter Singer, *Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces His Critics*, Jeffrey A Schaler (ed.) (Chicago: Open Court, 2011), 513

<sup>11</sup> Peter Singer, “R. M. Hare’s Achievements in Moral Philosophy,” *Utilitas* Vol. 14, No. 3 (November 2002)

duty to accord animals self-government? It is simply because we think there is a real and relevant difference between men and animals in this respect. We can say ‘If I were turned into an animal, I should stop having any desire for political liberty, and therefore the lack of it would be no hardship to me.’ ... So this mode of reasoning allows us to make the many distinctions that are necessary in assessing our obligations towards different kinds of people, and indeed of sentient beings. 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, &c., of him or it?<sup>12</sup>

This passage highlights at least three of Hare’s key notions that later appeared in Singer’s writings—the importance of relevant similarities and differences between various cases when making moral judgments, the need for equal treatment when there are relevant similarities and no relevant differences, and the universalizing of principles. Recognizing that Hare here “anticipates the extension of the argument against racism to what Richard Ryder and I have subsequently called ‘speciesism’” was “a humbling experience”<sup>13</sup> for Singer, but Hare’s influence is obvious throughout Singer’s writing. The title of *Animal Liberation*’s first chapter—“All Animals Are Equal...’ or why the ethical principle on which human equality rests requires us to extend equal consideration to animals too”—sounds straight out of Hare, and the debt Singer owes to Hare only becomes more obvious as he continues:

Equality is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact. There is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to their needs and interests. The principle of the equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among humans: it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings. ...

[T]he basic element—the taking into account of the interests of the being, whatever those interests may be—must, according to the principle of equality, be extended to all beings, black or white, masculine or feminine, human or nonhuman.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 222-223

<sup>13</sup> Peter Singer, “R. M. Hare’s Achievements in Moral Philosophy,” *Utilitas* Vol. 14, No. 3 (November 2002): 312

<sup>14</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, second edition (New York: Random House, 1990), 4-5

There are no moral facts to be found, as Hare taught,<sup>15</sup> and Singer makes his case for animal liberation through appeals to logical consistency. Following Hare, Singer has us consider a particular case and prescribe a course of action relating to that case. The prescription we choose relates to a principle, which we then must apply to all cases with relevantly similar features. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer assumes most of his readers oppose racism and sexism. That becomes the reader's initial prescription—a prescription that Singer says is a commitment to the principle of equal consideration of interests:

The first chapter of this book sets out a clear ethical principle—of equal consideration of the interests of all animals—by which we can determine which of our practices affecting non-human animals are justifiable and which are not. By applying this principle to our own lives we can make our actions fully consistent. Thus we can deny to those who ignore the interests of animals the opportunity to charge us with inconsistency.

For all practical purposes as far as urban and suburban inhabitants of the industrialized nations are concerned, following the principle of equal consideration of interests requires us to be vegetarians.<sup>16</sup>

The principle of equal consideration leads us to vegetarianism because there is nothing distinct about the suffering of non-human animals compared to that of humans that allows us to say our suffering deserves to outweigh theirs in importance even when the

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<sup>15</sup> “[I]t might be, as R. M. Hare has urged, that ethical judgments are prescriptions and therefore more closely related to commands than to statements of fact. On this view we disagree because we care about what people do. Those features that imply the existence of objective moral standards can be explained away by maintaining that this is some kind of error—perhaps the legacy of the belief that ethics is a God-given system of law, or perhaps just another example of our tendency to objectify our personal wants and preferences. J. L. Mackie has defended this view.

Provided they are carefully distinguished from the crude form of subjectivism that sees ethical judgments as descriptions of the speaker's attitudes, these are plausible accounts of ethics. In their denial of a realm of ethical facts that is part of the real world, existing quite independently of us, they are no doubt correct; but does it follow from this that ethical judgments are immune from criticism, that there is no role for reason or argument in ethics, and that, from the standpoint of reason, any ethical judgment is as good as any other? I do not think it does, and none of the three philosophers referred to in the previous paragraph denies reason and argument a role in ethics, though they disagree as to the significance of this role. ... [T]he nonexistence of a mysterious realm of objective ethical facts does not imply the nonexistence of ethical reasoning. It may even help, since if we could arrive at ethical judgments only by intuiting these strange ethical facts, ethical argument would be more difficult still.” Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: Open Road Media, 2015)

<sup>16</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, second edition (New York: Random House, 1990), 231

suffering itself appears identical. The principle dictates that we grant equal consideration to equal interests and treat this like suffering alike; if we persist in unequal consideration and use our elevated species membership as our excuse, we are guilty of discriminating based on a characteristic that is just as arbitrary as skin color<sup>17</sup>—a crude and vicious discrimination that Singer assumes we disavow:

Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of their own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favoring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case.<sup>18</sup>

The pattern being identical tells us that we would be inconsistent to oppose racism and sexism but not speciesism, and so we are obligated to call all three wrong... or none of them wrong. Since we do not want to deem racism and sexism permissible, it is our speciesism that will have to go. Before Singer made use of the concept, Hare promoted the equal consideration of interests in a similar way, writing:

The principle often accepted by utilitarians, “Everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one” can...be justified by the appeal to the demand for universalizability. ... For what this principle means is that everyone is entitled to equal consideration, and that if it is said that two people ought to be treated differently, some difference must be cited as the ground for these different moral judgments.<sup>19</sup>

Singer and Hare agree that a difference cited as grounds for discrepant treatment cannot be just any difference—it must be a morally relevant difference. Hare writes that we must “count as morally relevant only those properties which [we are] prepared to allow to be relevant even when [those other than ourselves] have them.”<sup>20</sup> He elaborates:<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 8-9 & 18

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 9

<sup>19</sup> R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 118

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 107

<sup>21</sup> While this elaboration is from one of Hare’s later works, it is consistent with the lengthier explanation in his 1978 essay “Relevance.” R. M. Hare, “Relevance,” in *Values and Morals*, A. L. Goldman and J. Kim (eds.) (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), 75

The consequences that we think morally relevant are going to be those which are mentioned in whatever moral principles we apply to the situation. For example, if we think that one ought not to kill any human being after conception, then we shall think it morally relevant that to administer a certain drug would kill an embryo. But if we do not accept such a principle, we shall not think it relevant. So the question of relevance boils down to the question of what moral principles we should accept.<sup>22</sup>

Singer is less upfront about his own moral relevance standards. Rather than offer an independent criterion for discovering morally relevant characteristics, he tends to assert that there are or are not morally relevant factors in certain cases, as when he writes, “there are no morally relevant differences between [throwing the switch in the standard trolley case and pushing the stranger off the footbridge].”<sup>23</sup> Sometimes Singer offers a partial list of what the morally relevant or irrelevant characteristics are—such as species membership (irrelevant),<sup>24</sup> pleasure and pain (relevant),<sup>25</sup> rationality (relevant), the use of language (relevant), and autonomy (relevant).<sup>26</sup> In regards to addressing global poverty, the morally irrelevant differences Singer most blames for causing moral confusion include proximity and community membership. In his article, “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” as well as his books *Practical Ethics* and *The Life You Can Save*, Singer’s discussion of global poverty mostly stays true to Hare’s formula of compelling us to prescribe an action within a specific scenario, revealing which principle underlies that prescription, and then insisting we logically extend that principle to avoid inconsistency. Here is Singer in *Practical Ethics*:

On my way to give a lecture, I pass a shallow ornamental pond and notice that a small child has fallen in and is in danger of drowning. . . . It seems that it is up to me to make sure that the child doesn’t drown. Would anyone deny that I ought to wade in and pull the child out? This will mean getting my clothes muddy, ruining my shoes and either cancelling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into; but compared with the avoidable death of a child none of these things are significant.

<sup>22</sup> R. M. Hare, *Essays on Religion and Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 68

<sup>23</sup> Peter Singer, “Ethics and Intuitions,” *The Journal of Ethics* (2005) 9: 350

<sup>24</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, second edition (New York: Random House, 1990), 19

<sup>25</sup> Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: Open Road, 2015)

<sup>26</sup> Peter Singer, “Ethics and the Handicapped Newborn Infant,” *Social Research*, Vol. 52, No. 3, Bioethics (Autumn 1985): 527

A plausible principle that would support the judgment that I ought to pull the child out is this: if it is in our power to prevent something very bad happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it. ...

[T]he principle applies, not just to rare situations in which one can save a child from a pond, but to the everyday situation in which we can assist those living in absolute poverty.<sup>27</sup>

Singer writes in “Famine, Affluence and Morality” that by extending this principle, “it follows that I and everyone else in similar circumstances ought to give as much as possible [to help the world’s most impoverished], that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one’s dependents—perhaps even beyond this point to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one’s dependents as much suffering as one would prevent.”<sup>28</sup> When we refuse to extend the principle of badness prevention to those who are suffering outside our line of vision or personal relations, we are either inconsistent, or we have unjustifiably given weight to what Singer says are morally irrelevant differences such as proximity and community—in which case, Singer says we are guilty of arbitrary discrimination.<sup>29</sup>

In *The Life You Can Save*, Singer applies Hare’s universalizing criteria to the hypothetical of the drowning child; if we put ourselves in the place of the child who is drowning, or of the parents of the child, we realize their strong interest in the child’s survival outweighs our own minor interest in preserving our nice shoes or convenience.<sup>30</sup> Consistency then requires that we take account of all similarly overriding interests, and these will include the interests of impoverished people we will never meet.

Hare came to believe that universalizing led to preference utilitarianism. Singer and Katarzyna Lazari-Radek explain:

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, third edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 199-200

<sup>28</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972): 234

<sup>29</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, third edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 202-203

<sup>30</sup> Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2009), 16-17

Although in his early work Hare treats [universalization] as a formal requirement that cannot bind anyone to any particular ethical conclusion, by 1976, when he wrote ‘Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism,’ he had decided that putting yourself in the position of others affected by your actions means giving their desires and preferences as much weight as your own, and therefore a proper understanding of the implications of the moral terms leads us to the conclusion that the only moral judgments we can prescribe universally are those that do the most to satisfy the interests and desires of all those affected by our actions. Thus universalizability leads to a form of utilitarianism based on the maximal satisfaction of interests or desires—commonly known as preference utilitarianism.<sup>31</sup>

While Singer no longer accepted Hare’s route to preference utilitarianism via universalization by the time he co-wrote this passage—having recently swapped out preference utilitarianism for a hedonic utilitarianism in the tradition of Henry Sidgwick—Singer and Lazari-Radek write elsewhere in *The Point of View of the Universe* that Singer was for many years “sufficiently persuaded by [Hare’s] reasoning to accept preference utilitarianism as, at least, ‘a first base that we reach by universalizing self-interested decision making’ and hence a view that requires minimal presuppositions. To go beyond preference utilitarianism, he claimed, ‘we need to be provided with good reasons for taking this further step.’”<sup>32</sup>

Hare’s attempt to assure rationality’s place in morality influenced Singer’s academic career from the beginning. At the end of *Animal Liberation*, Singer explains why his arguments target our rationality rather than our emotions:

The core of this book is the claim that to discriminate against beings solely on account of their species is a form of prejudice, immoral and indefensible in the same way that discrimination on the basis of race is immoral and indefensible. I have not been content to put forward this claim as a bare assertion, or as a statement of my own personal view, which others may or may not choose to accept. I have argued for it, appealing to reason rather than to emotion or sentiment. I have chosen this path, not because I am unaware of the importance of kind feelings and sentiments of respect toward other creatures, but because reason is more universal and more compelling in its appeal. Greatly as I admire those who have eliminated speciesism from

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<sup>31</sup> Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 123

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-217

their lives purely because their sympathetic concern for others reaches out to all sentient creatures, I do not think that an appeal to sympathy and good-heartedness alone will convince most people of the wrongness of speciesism. Even where other human beings are concerned, people are surprisingly adept at limiting their sympathies to those of their own nation or race. Almost everyone, however, is at least nominally prepared to listen to reason. ...

So throughout this book I have relied on rational argument. Unless you can refute the central argument of this book, you should now recognize that speciesism is wrong, and this means that, if you take morality seriously, you should try to eliminate speciesist practices from your own life, and oppose them elsewhere. Otherwise no basis remains from which you can, without hypocrisy, criticize racism or sexism. ...

I believe that the case for Animal Liberation is logically cogent, and cannot be refuted...<sup>33</sup>

Hare's stamp is revealed here in Singer's respect for rationality, and especially the importance Singer places on logical consistency. We must reject speciesism, because if we do not, we cannot logically justify rejecting racism or sexism.

Yet there is also a hint of deviation from Hare's metaethics in that Singer claims to have relied on rationality, not because this is how we arrive at objective moral judgments, but because this is the most effective way to convince people. If Singer believed that "I disapprove of factory farming, please do so as well" would have been more persuasive than consistency appeals, perhaps he would have embraced emotivism instead.

### **The Problem of Principles for Global Poverty Relief**

Universal prescriptivism is no longer widely accepted, and to the extent that Singer has embraced Hare's system, he is open to the same critiques that many philosophers believe have discredited Hare's views. I will now look at a problem with universal prescriptivism which I believe is particularly troubling for some of the major arguments Singer made as a follower of Hare. This problem is that the principles underlying our individual moral judgments can be endlessly interpreted, if there are even principles involved at all.

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, second edition (New York: Random House, 1990), 243-244

In *Animal Liberation*, Singer wrote, “[P]eople whose conduct is inconsistent with their professed beliefs will find it difficult to persuade others that their beliefs are right; and they will find it even more difficult to persuade others to act on those beliefs.”<sup>34</sup> One of Singer’s professed beliefs was that we all have a logically entailed obligation to donate to the poor “until we reach the point of marginal utility—that is, the point at which by giving more, one would cause oneself and one’s family to lose as much as the recipients of one’s aid would gain.” Yet in *The Most Good You Can Do* (2015), Singer confessed:

[E]ven though I argued that this is what we ought to do, I did not do it myself. When I wrote the article [“Famine, Affluence and Morality”], my wife and I were giving away about 10 percent of our modest income (she was working as a high school teacher, earning a little more than I was). That percentage increased over the years. We are now giving away about one-third of what we earn and aiming to get to half, but that still isn’t anywhere near the point of marginal utility. One of the things that made it psychologically difficult to increase our giving was that for many years we were giving away a bigger slice of our income than anyone we knew. No one, not even the megarich, seemed to be giving a higher proportion.<sup>35</sup>

This significant discrepancy between professed moral judgment and moral action is difficult to understand if we accept Hare’s metaethics. For Hare, evaluative judgments guide conduct; to make a moral judgment is to sincerely assent to it and act on it when the occasion to do so arises—and sincerity requires action when the time comes. Making a moral judgment is to think or say, “In a situation with these features, let the agent do *a*.” If Hare is correct that to make a sincere moral judgment is to act in accordance with it when the occasion arises, and if Singer is correct that to commit to the rightness of saving a nearby child from drowning logically entails a commitment to donating to the point of marginal utility, then anyone committed to the rightness of saving the drowning child would donate to the point of marginal utility once they accepted that connection. However, there are people who think it is obligatory to save the drowning child but who do not donate most of their money to charity, even after hearing Singer’s argument. Singer has to count himself amongst them. Hare claimed that if someone does not act on their own prescriptions, this must either be due to physical limitations

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 231

<sup>35</sup> Peter Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 13-14

or psychological compulsions that limit their ability to act,<sup>36</sup> or they must not have sincerely assented to their own prescriptions.<sup>37</sup> The former seems unlikely in Singer's case. The latter might be close to the truth.

I do not doubt Singer's sincerity in saying we ought to donate to the point of marginal utility. But his failure to do this himself, even now, suggests he has not truly and fully committed to the principle that entails that. This could be because he has competing inclinations, considerations or even principles that defeat his command that we all donate to the point of marginal utility. Looking more closely at the reliance on principles to logically connect separate cases, which characterizes Hare's system, helps to explain how this might happen.

Jonathan Dancy describes the role that principles play in universal prescriptivism:

Rationality requires consistency in judgment and practice; this we can all agree. But what is contentious is the specific form that Hare imposes on the abstract requirement of consistency. For him, to be consistent just is to subsume particular cases under general principles in the same way. (In fact, this is all that rationality *can* amount to within the constraints of his approach.) This is what 'going on in the same way' is here.<sup>38</sup>

Or, as Hare puts it,<sup>39</sup> "We have to consider the particular case and make up our minds what are its morally relevant features, and what, taking these features into account, ought to be done in such a case. Nevertheless, when we do make up our minds, it is about a matter of principle which has a bearing outside the particular case."<sup>40</sup> For Hare, principles function as the bridge that connects cases which are not identical in every detail. Principles play the same role for Singer in *Animal Liberation* (as we saw with

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<sup>36</sup> C. C. W. Taylor, *Mind*, Oxford University Press, New Series, Vol. 74, No. 294 (Apr., 1965): 287

<sup>37</sup> R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 170

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1993), 82

<sup>39</sup> Also: "Just as science, seriously pursued, is the search for hypotheses and the testing of them by the attempt to falsify their particular consequences, so morals, as a serious endeavour, consists in the search for principles and the testing of them against particular cases. Any rational activity has its discipline, and this is the discipline of moral thought: to test the moral principles that suggest themselves to us by following out their consequences and seeing whether we can accept them." R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 92

<sup>40</sup> R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 38

the principle of equal consideration) and in his writings about global poverty. Garrett Cullity notes this feature of “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” and writes that Singer’s analogy arguments for radical philanthropy are “subsumptive: they treat the task of justifying moral judgments about particular actions as the task of identifying general moral principles under which those judgments can be subsumed as instances.”<sup>41</sup> Specifically, Singer writes that when we prescribe the rightness of saving the drowning child, a plausible principle we could be assenting to is, “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it.”<sup>42</sup> What we may not realize, Singer adds, is that taking this “uncontroversial”<sup>43</sup> principle seriously has radical repercussions, requiring that we devote most of our resources to minimizing badness throughout the world. This is his key move in getting us from a popular intuition—that we ought to save a drowning child we can see—to something that looks a lot like utilitarianism, or at least to what is now called effective altruism.

In the same paper, Singer proposes another principle that he says is more moderate, but still drives us to the same general conclusion: “if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it.” What we categorize as morally significant will depend on other assumptions that Singer does not clearly address here. If moral significance reduces to pleasure and pain, the pleasure we derive from a favorite outfit could be morally significant, as could the pain of losing that outfit. Interpreted this way, Singer’s weaker principle would not necessarily require that we save the drowning child at the expense of our clothes. But Singer seems to assume something more like a view under which goods not necessary for our survival are not morally significant. Granting that, the qualified principle may or may not compel us to donate to the point of marginal utility, Singer says, but it would likely spell the end of consumer society, since people would only purchase whatever is absolutely necessary and then donate the rest.

Singer was hoping to convert more people to radical philanthropy with this qualified principle, even though he sees no reason for anyone to accept it over the stronger version. However, proposing two principles to describe our reaction to the same case hints at an instability of this subsumptive style of argument that Singer uses here and in “All

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<sup>41</sup> Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 12

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972): 231

Animals Are Equal.” Singer writes, “A plausible principle that would support the judgment that I ought to pull the child out is this...” before giving us the stronger principle of minimizing badness impartially. Plausible or not, this is just one of many conceivable principles that could support a judgment that we ought to pull the child out of the pond. Singer himself hints at a third. Saying we ought to save the child does not commit us to something more like positive utilitarianism, Singer writes, because the principle he described “requires us only to prevent what is bad, and not to promote what is good.”<sup>44</sup> But that is pure contingency. Singer could have phrased the principle another way. Saving a drowning child prevents a bad, but it also promotes a good. When we see a child drowning, it is likely that the very best thing we could do in that moment is save the drowning child. Thus we might think the principle we assent to when we say one ought to save a drowning child is, “if it is in our power to do something good, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought to do it.” If this is the principle that underlies our saving the drowning child, those of us who think it wrong to let the child drown are committed to maximizing the good to the extent we can do so without sacrificing what we need to survive and without violating deontological constraints (or however else we define “morally significant”). But this raises a question: how did Singer decide that the principle explaining the wrongness of letting children drown entailed preventing badness rather than promoting goodness, since it could be framed either way? The answer seems to be that Singer is using the shallow pond as a pretense to give us the principle he wants us to accept.

We could certainly come up with others. Additional principles derivable from the common moral judgment that we ought to save the drowning child include:

- “Obey the ethical expectations of the society in which you live.”
- “Prevent as many avoidable deaths as possible.”
- “Always do what is best.”
- “If we can prevent something (very) bad from happening at minimal cost to ourselves, and others, then we ought to do it.”<sup>45</sup>
- “If we can prevent something bad from happening to someone else—no matter whether the degree of badness for them is mild, moderate or extreme—we ought to do so, even if this comes at an extreme cost to ourselves.”

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland, *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 20

- “[F]ailing to help another person directly, *in an immediately presented emergency*, at a comparatively insignificant cost to oneself is wrong (other things equal).”<sup>46</sup>
- “The interests of children must always supersede the interests of adults whenever there is an interest conflict between children and adults.”
- “Convert as much non-sentient matter to sentient matter as possible, and prevent as much sentient matter from becoming non-sentient matter as possible.”
- “Always perform the action that maximizes the good and minimizes the bad, no matter what you must sacrifice to do so.”
- “If something intuitively feels morally right, prescribe and act in favor of it. If something intuitively feels morally wrong, prescribe and act against it.”

Some of these principles do not require anyone to donate to charity, while others are even more demanding than those Singer proposes. All are, however, consistent with an obligation to save the drowning child. Cullity describes this as a problem of underdetermination. Using Singer’s method, we can always generalize different principles from the same case—many of which will lead to wildly different requirements in future cases.<sup>47</sup>

One response available to Hare and Singer is that yes, all these principles are consistent with our judgment about the shallow pond, but we need to narrow these down by testing all the principles against multiple cases. “Convert as much non-sentient matter to sentient matter as possible, and prevent as much sentient matter from becoming non-sentient matter as possible” supports our moral judgment about the shallow pond, but has outrageous implications elsewhere, and so hardly anybody will seriously want to adopt it. This seems right, but it does not assure that one of Singer’s two suggested principles will survive this winnowing process for everyone. After all, many people think that a requirement to sacrifice all the goods in our lives except what we need to keep existing and effectively producing value for the world’s worst off is itself an outrageous implication to be avoided. In *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency*, Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland argue that the principle, “If we can prevent something very bad from happening at moderate cost, then we are morally required to do it” is more plausible than any of Singer’s suggestions because it takes distant suffering seriously without demanding anything like our donating to the point of marginal utility.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Garrett Cullity, *The Moral Demands of Affluence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 14

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Christian Barry and Gerhard Øverland, *Responding to Global Poverty: Harm, Responsibility, and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 15

Some people who contemplate the shallow pond might be drawn to a principle like, “If it is possible to directly save an apparently innocent life that is in imminent danger, and if you can do so without seriously injuring yourself, and if your opportunity to do this is not a frequent occurrence, you ought to do so.” A principle like this does not require any charity donations whatsoever. However, it looks vulnerable to Singer’s and Hare’s requirement that principles exclude “morally irrelevant” clutter. In “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” Singer briefly argues against the moral relevance of personal contact and the location of the suffering and dying.<sup>49</sup> Peter Unger takes up this challenge even more forcefully in *Living High and Letting Die*, concocting thickets of hypotheticals designed to show that empathy boosting factors such as social proximity are “distortions” that mislead our ethical impulses and have no rational basis.<sup>50</sup> This is a useful discussion which I think casts serious doubt on the importance of distance and social connection when it comes to the alleviation of suffering, but it may accomplish less than Unger thinks. It still seems legitimate for someone who prescribes in favor of saving the drowning child in the specific way to say, “Well, look, if it is possible to directly save an apparently innocent life that is in imminent danger, and if you can do so without seriously injuring yourself, and if your opportunity to do this is not a frequent occurrence, you ought to do so—*right?*” The specific principle does not tell us why we should rescue a nearby drowning child if we can do so safely in a one-off situation, but neither do Singer’s principles tell us why we should minimize badness wherever it may be. The specific principle does not tell us what to do in every possible situation, but why does it have to? There is nothing in the principle preventing us from taking the interests of distant people into account. It just is not expansive enough to say we have to. That is okay—we can have other principles, and maybe one of those will commit us to marginal utility donating.

To that end, Singer could say to the specific principle holder, “Fine, but ought we save all the lives of distant strangers that we can, if we can do so through charitable donations, and even if the possibility of doing this is a constant occurrence and thus a near limitless obligation?” If the specific principle holder prescribes that this is not required, Singer can ask what the morally relevant differences between the cases are. I think it would be reasonable for the specific principle holder to say something like, “The sacrifice to me is much greater in the unending obligation to suffering strangers case, and degree of sacrifice is morally relevant. Also, I can imagine being an impoverished person who needs help and yet who thinks it is permissible for distant, comparatively

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972): 232

<sup>50</sup> Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

wealthy strangers not to donate to the point of marginal utility. I cannot imagine being a drowning child who thinks it is permissible for someone at the edge of the shallow pond to shrug and walk away.”

Even if Singer and Unger manage to convince us to abandon the specific principle, it is not clear that we have to accept one of the principles they favor. Singer calls the most demanding version of his shallow pond principle “uncontroversial,” but if we look at it closely, it is basically a form of negative utilitarianism that allows us to define “badness” broadly.<sup>51</sup> “Prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance” is another way of saying “always do what most reduces badness.” Singer makes this obvious when he clarifies that “without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance” simply means “without causing anything else comparably bad to happen.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, prevent badness as long as you can do so without creating more badness overall. By not strictly defining the bad, Singer’s strong principle perhaps commits us to something more like “ideal negative utilitarianism,” or the minimization of badness broadly construed—putting a badness-focused twist on G.E. Moore’s ideal utilitarianism that maximized a wide variety of goods, such as the contemplation of beauty, as opposed to just maximizing pleasure.<sup>53</sup> Even so, we do have to keep in mind comparative degree of badness when we decide how to act. The loss of our expensive outfit is bad, but less bad than the death of a child. If we join Singer in thinking that death and suffering are the worst bads, this principle treats these as the primary ills to be addressed. Ideal negative utilitarianism therefore seems to collapse into standard negative utilitarianism. But negative utilitarianism is hardly an uncontroversial philosophy.

Even Singer’s qualified principle—which seems to require minimizing badness without violating deontological constraints—apparently entails that none of us purchase anything trivial. For those of us who do buy some trivial things, endorsing this weaker principle would at best be aspirational. Hare would call this insincere assenting. Perhaps the hope is that by endorsing the principle, you feel compelled to act more in line with it. But you would only want to try this if you already thought you *should* act on it, and because of the limitations of Hare’s framework (which Unger more or less takes up

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<sup>51</sup> A simple reason to suspect that Singer’s principle is a thinly veiled version of negative utilitarianism is that acting on the principle would cause us to behave like negative utilitarians.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972): 232

<sup>53</sup> Anthony Skelton, “Ideal Utilitarianism: Rashdall and Moore” in *Underivative Duty: British Moral Philosophers from Sidgwick to Ewing*, Thomas Hurka (ed.) (New York: Clarendon Press, 2011), 45

as well), Singer and Unger can pretty much only insist that we *already do* endorse it—which is unconvincing given the underdetermination problem.

For some people, thinking it is wrong to let the child drown probably has less to do with principles than with the negative emotions they would feel at letting a child drown or knowing that someone else let a child drown, with their compassion being especially strong for those they see or know, or with intuitions of wrongness. There would be nothing inconsistent about such a person calling it wrong to leave a child to drown and yet not donating to charity if the failure to donate does not seem intuitively wrong to them, or does not provoke their strong negative emotions. If you reject the legitimacy of intuitions or emotions for guiding moral actions, then you can make that case, but the problem remains that you cannot call someone inconsistent for not consistently following a principle they do not actually have. You can try to get them to verbally commit to your principle, and then hit them with the full implications of the principle once they do, but this will not mean much if they feel cornered into accepting the principle and are not enthusiastically endorsing it with full awareness of what the principle entails.

It may be that when many people make a moral prescription, and then are asked by Hare what their substantial moral principle is—or are told by Singer or Unger what their substantial moral principle is or should be—the principle they claim allegiance to is more like a confabulation or a *post hoc* rationalization that maybe gets at why they think we should treat certain things as right or wrong, but is not the full or maybe even partial explanation for why they actually treat something as right or wrong. When someone acts inconsistently with a principle they claim to hold, we might think they are making some kind of logical error, cuing Hare and Singer to make their consistency challenge. But another interpretation is that their supposed assenting to this principle is insincere or confused, and so we might as well say they do not really assent to it. This, however, frees them from Singer's and Hare's logical grasp.

Another possible explanation for someone claiming to hold a particular principle and then not following through on all its implications is that this is not their only principle. They might endorse other principles, some of which conflict with or mitigate this one. This points to a further problem for those like Singer and Unger who employ Hare's model. Accepting one of their principles is not enough to get to radical philanthropy. It is also necessary to retract allegiance to any principles, inclinations and considerations that conflict with or strongly mitigate radical philanthropy principles. For instance, Christmas presents are arguably morally insignificant, as these constitute some of the unnecessary purchases that prop up consumer society. But what would we make

of parents who became radical altruists on Boxing Day and returned or sold all their children's toys and much of their clothes and other personal items to donate the proceeds to charity? Some people would call this wrong, and a principle to support that judgment could be something like, "If you are a parent, treat your children with special respect and care, even when this could mean neglecting stronger interests elsewhere." To the extent this principle conflicts with Singer's, aspiring radical philanthropists must reject it along with any other principle that similarly conflicts. Unfortunately, many people might feel that some of these conflicting principles are difficult to give up. This problem is easy to overlook because Singer often makes his arguments by considering the implications of a single principle in isolation. If we start considering principles that could ground our judgments in cases like the radically altruistic parents, how to adjudicate between all these different principles gets messy, and it becomes increasingly less obvious that we are committed to all the requirements of the one principle Singer suggests we take in light of the single moral judgment he has us contemplate.

### The Problem of Principles for Animal Equality

These issues all resurface in *Animal Liberation's* key ideological chapter, "All Animals Are Equal." Here the basic argument is that most of us agree about the wrongness of racism and sexism; a principle that can ground this judgment is the principle of equal consideration of interests—and this principle commits us to giving equal consideration to the interests of all sentient beings. Singer describes what equal consideration entails:

If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as rough comparisons can be made—of any other being. ... [S]peciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species.<sup>54</sup>

Just as I believe Singer is right that a principle of minimizing badness could lead to something like radical philanthropy if it is our only principle and we sincerely assent to it, I also believe that adopting the principle of equal consideration of interests and no conflicting principles would require drastic changes in our treatment of animals. However, I think it is a mistake to say that someone who opposes racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of intra-human group supremacism, necessarily accepts the principle of equal consideration. Recall the earlier point about underdetermination. We

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), xvii

should not assume that only one principle could possibly underlie a rejection of intra-human group-based oppression, nor should we assume that a principle need underlie it at all.

For instance, someone could say they have an intuition that racism and sexism are wrong, and an intuition that speciesism is not wrong. There is no failure of logical consistency if this person condemns racism while benefitting from experiments done on nonhuman animals.<sup>55</sup> Singer might claim that such a person is simply unaware that they adhere to the principle of equal consideration of interests, and so they are in violation of it by accepting speciesism, but this would be implausible given that this person is both denying that they accept the principle and (by embracing speciesism) rejecting important implications of the principle.

Another retort to an intuition appeal might be: what if someone has the intuition that racism is right? If you have your intuitions and I have mine, and that is it, how is ethical debate possible? Escaping these brute intuition stalemates is a major reason Hare invented prescriptivism in the first place.

Intuitionists are not really so defeatist about ethical debate, but I am not here to defend intuitionism, so let us consider those more inclined to embrace firm principles. How could such people deny a principle as nice as the equal considerations of interests? Well... perhaps they are parents who think they have a special obligation of respect and care to their children. Imagine they celebrate Christmas and it is Christmastime. If they give presents to their children instead of donating to the point of marginal utility, they will be appeasing the relatively minor interest their children have in playing with new toys over the greater interest that faraway children have in being free from disease and premature death. By buying fun stuff for their kids instead of entirely devoting their lives and resources to helping the worst off, they fail to sincerely assent to the principle of equal consideration of interests (or are letting other principles override it), and so they cannot claim to fully accept this principle.

This should sound familiar. While Singer has ostensibly given us a different principle to ground equality claims in “All Animals Are Equal” than he gave us to ground claims about the wrongness of letting children die in *Practical Ethics*, in practice it is difficult to distinguish them. That is because the point of both these principles is that we ought to distribute goods—and/or badness reductions—impartially, or close to it. We have

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<sup>55</sup> Shelly Kagan makes a similar point in: Shelly Kagan, “What’s Wrong With Speciesism?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Volume 33, Issue 1 (2016): 6

seen that we may concoct a wide array of principles to ground a given moral judgment. Singer is a utilitarian, so it is only natural that the principles he is most inspired to devise for this purpose would have us behave like utilitarians. He calls these “basic moral principles which we all accept,”<sup>56</sup> but in “All Animals Are Equal” we again see Singer smuggling utilitarianism or near-utilitarianism in through the guise of allegedly uncontroversial principles. We also see why someone might reject his principles—they might not be utilitarians.

“Not all of us are utilitarians” might not satisfy those who think, “All of us should be!” So I will conclude this section with one cause for concern about the equal consideration of interests principle in the context of animal ethics.

First, let us accept an additional “uncontroversial” principle: when human survival is at stake, it is permissible for humans to kill non-human animals who would have otherwise gone on to live for much longer, because a human’s interest in living can trump a non-human animal’s interest in living. Not everyone would endorse this, but Singer has. He points out that neurotypical humans have a sense of self, develop sophisticated goals and plans, and have a capacity for engaging in complex social relations and for understanding and communicating abstract ideas.<sup>57</sup> By lacking these traits that many believe importantly contribute to a rich and valuable life, or having these traits to a lesser degree, most non-human animals are non-persons with “less to lose” at death. [For convenience, I will use “persons” to refer to those with the coveted cognitively sophisticated traits, and “non-persons” to refer to those who arguably lack them.] A typical human’s interest in living is thereby stronger than an animal’s interest in living, so putting these human lives before non-human animal lives does not conflict with the equal consideration of interests principle.

Now we must admit, there are some humans who do not qualify as persons by these standards, which—if we accept the equal consideration principle—means their interest in living counts no more than non-person animals’ interest in living. This leads to a frequently cited problem called “the argument from marginal cases,” and although it is typically deployed against animal farming and experimentation, Singer’s acceptance of killing animals for human survival invokes it as well. If it is okay to kill non-human non-person animals who are healthy and minding their own business when human survival is at stake *because the animals are non-persons with less to lose*, it should be

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<sup>56</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), xvii

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 20-21, see also Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, third edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90-93

okay to kill healthy, non-threatening non-person *humans* when neurotypical human survival is at stake. But neurotypical human survival is at stake all the time. There are neurotypical humans who need replacement organs right now or they will die. Given the principle of equal consideration of interests, and the view that persons have a greater interest in living than do non-persons—and can therefore sacrifice non-persons when their survival is at stake—it must be permissible (and perhaps even highly encouraged) for parents of cognitively impaired children to offer their children to be killed and harvested for their organs.

Many people, however, would consider that to be an outrageous conclusion to be avoided, and yet at the same time could find it difficult to shake the intuition that it is okay to kill animals when human survival is at stake. Fortunately, we are not stuck with whatever principles Singer happens to offer us. We can devise our own.

One principle that seems to avoid these problems (though may very well create new ones) is, “Persons have rights protecting their interests whether anyone wants to respect their interests or not, while non-persons have rights protecting their interests only if we feel a significant responsibility of care toward them.”<sup>58</sup> Whatever you think of this principle, it does at least have the virtue of being reasonably actionable, and of approximating the beliefs of those who reject intra-human oppression while embracing speciesism. It could also accommodate anti-speciesism for those who do feel a significant responsibility of care for vulnerable non-humans.

I am not claiming this is the only or the best alternative to the principle of equal consideration, nor even that we need principles at all. The point is that rejecting the principle of equal consideration does not mean we can no longer oppose sexism or racism. This is good news, because if it did mean that, almost no one could oppose sexism and racism, since almost no one accepts the principle of equal consideration—if by acceptance we mean consistent action, as Hare did.

### **Conclusion: What does this Mean for Effective Altruism?**

Singer recently abandoned Hare’s metaethical system, depriving it of perhaps its last significant proponent. Yet Singer’s old arguments against speciesism and for radical philanthropy continue to shape the rhetoric surrounding the animal welfare and effective altruism movements. Effective altruists who are at all inspired by Singer’s earlier writings may be making arguments that are vulnerable to the critiques that I or others

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<sup>58</sup> “Who is this ‘we?’” is a challenge to this principle that would need to be resolved.

have leveled against Hare's metathics. This is important if it leads some effective altruists to be less persuasive and effective than they otherwise might be.

The Hare-inspired strategy of describing what principles underlie our moral prescriptions and correcting us if we include what are said to be morally irrelevant details will frequently end in frustration for all involved because instead of trapping us into consistency with our own principles, it traps us into consistency with the principles that ethicists like Singer and Unger believe we should have—but which we very likely do not. Of course, logical consistency arguments must be persuasive sometimes. If you tell people they already have a principle that commits them to behaving how you want them to, and you make the principle sound nice enough, they might feel like they have to go along with it. However, we should expect this to fail frequently. Someone who denounces intra-human oppression but eats factory farmed meat and is much more concerned about the wellbeing of people they know than about suffering strangers is not simply mistaken about the full implications of the principle of equal consideration—they do not accept the principle of equal consideration.

This obviously does not mean that nothing can make them care more about the suffering of faraway strangers, animals and future beings. Nor does it mean that principles have no role to play in encouraging this. Hardly anyone's actions are fully guided by principles, but principles can still have a major influence on behavior. That said, it is worth questioning the value of principles that no one does or ever will live up to. These might even be actively harmful at times, by turning away people who might have been open to making less dramatic but still beneficial changes. Taking this insight on board might increase the appeal of less demanding principles such as the principle of preventing badness at moderate cost, which Barry and Øverland defend in *Responding to Global Poverty*. In *The Moral Demands of Affluence*, Cullity suggests we approach the issue of global poverty without reference to substantive moral principles. He instead frames the reluctance to address the world's suffering as a simple failure of beneficence.

Another interesting model comes from Joel Marks' *Ethics Without Morals*.<sup>59</sup> Marks was a vegan Kantian who converted to moral non-realism, but maintained his passionate opposition to animal exploitation. In the book's sixth chapter, Marks compassionately describes what he sees as so abhorrent about humans' treatment of animals, without appeal to objective moral obligations. This general strategy of describing a state of affairs you would like to see change, offering relatable reasons for why you want it to change, and providing suggestions for how it could be changed, seems less vulnerable

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<sup>59</sup> Joel Marks, *Ethics Without Morals: In Defence of Amoralism* (London: Routledge, 2012)

to debunking arguments. You no longer get to say, “You have to do this,” but commanding might not be the most effective strategy anyway. Perhaps “I disapprove of factory farming, please do so as well” has something going for it after all.

I think the main upshot to take from this paper is that the task of spreading the ideals of effective altruism is more daunting than Singer’s logical consistency arguments might lead us to believe. It could turn out that most people are not future effective altruists at heart who only need a little dose of rationality to recognize their demanding obligations. Effective altruism may be more revisionary than many EAs believe.

None of this is to say that compromise is the only way forward. Effective altruists could still encourage us to do as much as we can to reduce the world’s badness and increase its goodness. What they cannot do is accurately say that everyone is obligated to do so based on the values they already have. Instead, EAs need to inspire new values, beliefs and passions to help.

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