No Love for Singer:
The Inability of Preference Utilitarianism to Justify Partial Relationships

In his book *Practical Ethics*, Peter Singer advocates preference utilitarianism, which holds that the right moral action is the action that satisfies the collectively weightiest preferences of the most individuals concerned. His preference utilitarianism is founded on the idea that ethics has with it the implicit assumption of universalizability. Ethics, says Singer, assumes that one should make decisions not from a self-serving point of view, but from a universal, non-personal, objective view point. He believes that preference utilitarianism and his Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests is the best way to facilitate such a principle. The Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests states that one should regard everyone’s interests equally when making decisions. Discussion of partiality and impartiality arises in that for Singer, we are morally required to consider the interests of everyone equally, without special weight being given to any particular individual or group. For Singer, the only criteria that makes one a candidate for moral consideration is the ability to suffer and have preferences. However, as a consequence of this, it appears that one cannot reserve special treatment for those with whom one has personal relationships. Such preference for certain individuals is as much an arbitrary bias, as far as universal ethical principles are concerned, as poor treatment of other individuals based on gender or race. The consequence of utilitarianism is that we are unable to morally justify personal relationships. Singer weakly attempts to defend the compatibility of utilitarianism and personal relationships, which are “of their nature, partial” (Singer 244). However, it seems that the two are not possible to reconcile. Instead it appears that utilitarianism replaces the value of partial relationships with a cold, moral bureaucracy, in which everyone is treated equally. This flaw in utilitarianism serves to point out the value that some things have independently of an impartial, universal view. In this case it is a value that is conditioned on a lack of impartiality. Thus I intend to show that Singer’s preference utilitarianism exhibits a weakness in this negative consequence of the theory. I will not discuss any philosophical justification for the value of personal relationships. Rather, for the purposes of this paper, I will assume that personal relationships are, as Singer suggests, a fundamentally important part of human life (245). A moral theory that eliminates the possibility of acting on such personal relationships by morally condemning them has a significant flaw that must be addressed.
Preference Utilitarianism and Impartiality

Peter Singer addresses the problem of impartiality in his chapter entitled ‘Rich and Poor,’ in which he discusses the problem of famine in third world countries and what our moral obligations are to people living in such places. Singer determines that we are morally compelled to assist, and that such help must come from personal sacrifice of luxuries on the part of those living in affluent countries. Singer entertains a number of objections to his conclusion, one of which is that “even if we could achieve so high a standard, to do so would be undesirable” (242). Such an objection to Singer stems from the idea that utilitarianism requires that we donate until we are on par with those we are trying to help. For Singer, we are obligated to help until all are on the same level of care, comfort and wealth. The objection to Singer is that we are potentially forced to significantly reduce the quality of life for those we care about (as well as ourselves), for the benefit of those with whom we have no affiliation. Though referring to the charity that Singer asks us to donate to third world countries, this is really an objection to utilitarianism as a whole. The sacrifice for the greater (utilitarian) good appears to be that of personal relationships, which are founded on partiality towards the given individual with whom one has the relationship.

Singer replies that even within his prescribed universal point of view, there is some place for “partiality for kin” (245). He goes on to say that personal relationships are clearly a necessary part of most people’s well-being, and thus something of significant moral value. Thus, the moral principle of impartiality that he is advocating, he says, does not require any such sacrifice of personal relationships (245).

Singer’s outward claim that he does not intend to limit personal relationships seems to clash with his previous premises, and he provides no serious discussion (in Practical Ethics, at least) of how partial relationships are not ruled out by his utilitarian views. It appears that a necessary consequence of the Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests is the sacrifice of personal relationships, which, as he points out, are marked by partiality.

Lori Gruen, paraphrasing William Godwin, offers the following response to such criticism of utilitarianism: Godwin says that if personal relationships are morally significant (in Singer’s
language) and sacrificing them in favour of equal consideration of interests promotes a less than optimal overall outcome, then one does so against utilitarian premises. That is, if some degree of partiality leads to the best overall results for everyone, then it is in line with utilitarian reasoning to maintain some such relationships (Gruen 139).

Gruen points to Singer’s distinction (adopted from R.M. Hare) between the intuitive and critical levels of reasoning (140). Intuitive reasoning, Singer says, is used for daily decision making where we do not have time to analyze every possible choice. Instead we construct some general rules to follow. Critical reasoning is used for exceptional or unusual situations for which we do not have intuitive rules (Singer 92). Presumably, the intuitive rules are first constructed using critical reasoning in a utilitarian framework. Take for example the scenario of a mother who must either provide for her own child first, and thus act partially, or else must consider everyone’s children equally, as per utilitarian instructions. Given the situation, if one assesses it critically using preference utilitarianism, the mother is morally compelled to consider all children’s interests equally. On the intuitive level of reasoning, however, perhaps it has been previously established (as per Godwin) that, in general, utility as a whole is maximized when people maintain such personal relationships. (Indeed, there is a defense of utilitarianism that says, because people in tight-knit families/groups/communities know each other better and are better able to satisfy the preferences of one another, then perhaps the greater good is served by maintaining these relationships.) In this case it is likely morally right for the mother to consider her own child first. Unmentioned by Gruen, one here must also take into account Singer’s point made in Practical Ethics, that many moral decisions must be considered on a long term basis. At any given moment, it may be better for a mother to consider all children equally; however, over all, and in the long run, it may be optimal if all parents provide for their own children, and each child is given preferential treatment by a parent. (It is clear that it will never be the case that all children have some parent who treats him or her favourably. The discrepancy is irrelevant here.)

This answer for utilitarianism is objected to by another criticism that Gruen relays, though she seems to either miss the connection or just not make it explicit. Personal relationships thus justified by utilitarianism do not recognize the value of these relationships independent of
utilitarianism (Gruen 141). But further, under such an account, one is only morally justified in maintaining a partial relationship with one’s child provided it facilitates the greatest good possible for everyone in general. One cannot act partially towards one’s child simply for the feelings one has for the child (independent of reason, as feelings presumably are), nor for merely the benefit it offers the child, others’ interests aside. Instead, one may only maintain personal relationships for the overall, optimal outcome it bestows upon the world.

One could easily point out the missed target here. Gruen fails to mention that a close personal relationship, love or affection, are not in reality conceived of and ‘implemented’ on utilitarian grounds- not for anyone, including Peter Singer. The love one has for one’s child, if conditioned on the moral justification utilitarianism provides it, is not love at all. The personal relationship disappears. One is here not partial, but faux-partial in light of impartial, utilitarian considerations. Love for one’s child, for example, is reduced to utility for the greater good, rather than any real affection for the child. There appears to be something vital missed in the utilitarian equation.

Lastly, this utilitarian answer is, for Singer, self-defeating for his Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. If, considering everyone’s interests equally, we find that the best possible outcome comes when we do not consider everyone’s interests equally, but rather it comes when we maintain partiality, then this principle forces us to abandon the principle itself. The principle becomes self-defeating and impossible to maintain. According to this reasoning, being impartial shows that we must be partial.

Elsewhere in her paper, Gruen makes use of the distinction between two types of impartiality: formal and substantive. Singer (quoted by Gruen) says the following: “[...] the judgment ‘Parents ought to buy treats for their own children before buying them for other children’ is one that encourages parents to be partial to their children, but it is itself universalizable and impartial” (35). In this instance- “parents ought to buy treats for their own children before buying them for other children”- the statement is formally impartial. Essentially no proper noun or pronoun is used. The statement is ‘if you’re a parent, buy your children treats before you do so for others.’ If X, do Y. This is formally impartial because it applies equally to
all X’s, and is universalizable amongst X’s. Substantive impartiality is stronger than this. It is exemplified by Singer’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. All moral decisions must consider everyone, everywhere equally, without partiality. The principle is equally applicable and universalizable to everyone (not just mothers, for example). (Singer limits ‘everyone’ to beings able to suffer or have preferences. Presumably substantive impartiality is not compromised by not extending the principle to non-sentient creatures and objects.) For substantive impartiality, everyone must be allowed to do Y, not only X’s. Substantive impartiality does not allow any such restrictions.

Singer’s quote above (previous paragraph) is intended as a justification of partiality in personal relationships within his utilitarian framework. As should be clear given the previous example, and as Gruen points out, Singer’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests- his preference utilitarianism as a whole- is founded on substantive impartiality. Moral decisions must be assessed with substantive impartiality, not merely formal impartiality. We cannot say ‘if X then Y.’ Singer’s example of the parents and children (‘if you’re a parent, tend to your children first,’ ‘if X, then Y’) constitutes merely formal partiality. Such a justification of partiality is ruled out by Singer’s utilitarian premises which are themselves substantively impartial. Singer’s utilitarian judgements must be substantively impartial as well as formally so. Singer’s parent/child example cannot be used to answer criticism against the fact that his Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests rules out the possibility of personal relationships.

Having exhausted all the plausible defenses for utilitarianism I know of, I do not believe that there is a way that one can maintain Singer’s utilitarian, ethical premises while retaining the ability to morally justify partial relationships.

Towards a Solution

Perhaps Singer needs to recognize the weight of some intrinsic values independently from overall utility. In Practical Ethics, he loosely discusses candidates for independent moral value such as respect for the autonomy of others (99), nature and the environment. These are things that he seems to want to defend as having some special status, though he does not grant them any. He tries to give them a sort of utilitarian justification instead of recognizing their intrinsic
(non-utilitarian) value. What would be the consequence of introducing such values, including the value of personal relationships, as a fundamental part of his moral framework?

Early in Practical Ethics, Singer claims that a universal point of view is something fundamental about ethics, it is something implicit. He posits this presumption in the place of an explanation. In place of a logical argument here, he makes reference to Kant, Hume, the Stoics, Hare, and a host of others who include some idea of an impartial point of view into their ethical frameworks (Singer 11). In chapter 12, ‘Why Act Morally?’, Singer is quite upfront about his inability (or very poor ability) to answer questions of why it is rational to act ethically or impartially, instead of in self-interest (322). Essentially, there is no fundamental, logical claim that Singer can provide to support his preference utilitarianism, nor any other ethical framework. Singer starts in the beginning, more or less, with ‘this is the nature of ethics, preference utilitarianism is the best way to facilitate this.’ There is no justification of this ‘nature of ethics,’ and thus his preference utilitarianism is essentially founded on a desire for a certain type of world.

My point is not to criticize Singer’s ethical approach specifically (all ethical theories have the same problem at their root), but rather to suggest that he would not be on any philosophically weaker ground if he were to stipulate some values that appear to be universal. His grounding for the idea that ethics is implicitly impartial has no greater logical strength than a claim that autonomy, the environment, and perhaps personal relationships are universally valued, and thus valuable independent of overall utility. Singer, in prescribing equal consideration as the single source of value in ethics, is no less presumptuous then one who supposes that respect for personal relationships (or anything else) is a source of value in ethics.

John Cottingham, in “Ethics and Impartiality” suggests that to act morally one must take into account the interests of all others, but that, however, this does not mean that one must give the interests of everyone equal weight (86). Perhaps a more detailed sketch of this stipulation could be sufficient to amend Singer’s theories. Cottingham’s idea seems to entail a sort of consideration for everyone, though not equal consideration, with additional values added such as partiality to one’s self and loved ones. One need not act impartially, but also should not act self-
interestedly to the point where this will unnecessarily, significantly harm another individual.

There are two consequences if one were to introduce such principles on top of Singer’s utilitarian premises. The first is that there would be conflicts: personal relationships would sometimes need to be sacrificed for the greater good, or the greater good would sometimes need to be sacrificed for the intrinsic value of personal relationships. Such values could never be quantified and compared to everyone’s satisfaction. However, an attempt to do so—even imperfectly—seems preferable to Singer’s current preference utilitarianism which leaves no possibility of morally justified personal relationships.

The second problem is in large part aesthetic: Singer’s moral theory would no longer be reducible to a single principle. This second problem leads to the first problem mentioned. It allows for conflict between competing moral principles, which cannot happen if we only have a single moral principle—the Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. However, these conflicts of values aside, there is something reminiscent of empirical science here that may come as an issue of contention. It seems that Singer, consciously or unconsciously, wants his theory to be a unified, single principle. Perhaps there is an underlying assumption that ethics has a single right answer from which all other ethical consequences emerge: for Singer this is preference utilitarianism, equal consideration of interests. Thomas Nagal, for example, in his book, *Moral Questions*, argues that it is wrong to think that there is only a single source of value, “displaying apparent multiplicity only in its application to the world” (132). For Singer, this single value is utilitarianism, which *appears* to value different things at different times when it is applied (depending on the preferences of everyone considered). Nagal rejects this idea, saying we cannot determine a single source of value. Singer would likely point out the tensions that arise between competing values within Nagal’s ethical framework—something that does not arise under Singer’s single principle. It is a separate issue, beyond the scope of this paper, whether it is at all probable that ethics could or should be refined to a single principle. Regardless, were Singer to introduce some additional, purely intrinsic values on top of his utilitarian premises, his theory would be altered and made more complex, from which additional complexities would arise. It is my opinion that such an alternative that allows one to morally justify personal relationships,
despite its negative aspects, is a step in the right direction away from Singer’s preference utilitarianism.

Conclusion

It appears that Singer’s preference utilitarianism cannot morally justify personal relationships which are by their nature partial. Preference utilitarianism rejects justification of personal relationships under its premise of the impartial point of view. It is in my view a shortcoming of an ethical principle that it does not allow for such relationships, and it appears that Peter Singer agrees by recognizing the vital importance of personal relationships to human well-being. However, he attempts to argue that preference utilitarianism could allow for personal relationships. I do not believe any such attempts to justify personal relationships using preference utilitarianism succeed. As seen, an attempt to amend his theory so crudely as to tack on certain additional intrinsic values leads to some practical and theoretical problems for an ethical theory. Still, this consequence of amending the theory seems a better alternative to his ethical theory as it stands, which suffers from this negative consequence. It is better that an ethical theory allow for everything of great value and exhibit tensions between competing values, rather than that it rule out some things of intrinsic value entirely. Perhaps a whole new theory needs to be developed to allow for such intrinsic value without the complexities and potential tensions between competing values within a single ethical framework. As it stands, Singer’s preference utilitarianism does not morally justify personal relationships and is thus inadequate.
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