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Critical Analysis of Peter Singer's "*One World Now*"

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Abstract

It is from the dawn of time that all kinds of forces have wrestled against each other to determine the state of things. At some point, we humans, joined the arena. And with our unique set of cognitive abilities were able to influence that state too. Not only that, but for we were provided with the gift of reflexivity, we could also judge, and assess whether certain actions, or events, were good or bad. However, given the singularity of our compositions, it was hardly ever the case that these judgments coincided completely. Nevertheless, the struggle to find principles that could guide our development remained. In *One World Now*, Peter Singer contributes to this ongoing debate by defending a global type of ethics. One he regards as a prerequisite to tackle the biggest challenges of our time. The modest aim of this paper will be thus to dissect Singer's work in a hunt for the *oughts* he thinks we should be pursuing to solve these challenges, with the ultimate intent of critically assessing the underlying ethical stance.

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Part I: Introduction, Strategy, Objective

In the face of a rapidly changing world in which relations are becoming ever more intricate, complex and hard to track, new challenges for the sustainable development of mankind are arising everyday, demanding working solutions. Environmental issues like climate change, or socio-economical ones like migration, plus a long list of crises and emergencies spurring continuously and non-linearly, are threatening the wellbeing of all individuals on Earth.

In *One World Now*, Peter Singer researches this theme thoroughly, focusing on the implications that globalization has for ethics and governance. From the climate change problem, to the limits of the World Trade Organization in fostering a sustainable and inclusive economic development, to the issues revolving around international criminal law, humanitarian intervention and global poverty, he tackles most of the concerns we are currently experiencing and striving to find workable solutions to. His ethical approach, offers a fresh perspective on the aforementioned, in that it shows the necessity of common reflection and agreement upon basic moral principles, as room-mates of a drastically changing home, as the inescapable starting point of real action upon real issues. His analysis is rationally divided in four chapters where he tackles, undertaking the method exposed above, respectively the problems of: climate change, the global economy, international law and global poverty. In each of these sections, the philosopher proposes solutions, which, for them being institutions of global governance resting on specific ethical principles, I will call with the triplet: *global-ethical-institutions*. He thus fills the lack exposed in the problem definition, with very practical proposals such as carbon trading to account for climate change or a reforming of the United Nations to foster more inclusive and democratic international relations. It is the proposal of practical solutions which are together “global”, “ethical” and “institutional”, that represents the real strength of this book, and hence the starting point to shed light on the problem from which this paper departs. It will be thus, through the dissection of Peter Singer’s book in a hunt for all these *global-ethical-institutions*, that this research thesis will be aimed at firstly delineating in more detail the problems they are supposed to solve and thus the context from which Singer’s argumentations arise, with the intent of reconstructing, in the process, the ethical position underlying his proposals and ultimately critically assessing it by making it face its critics.

The second part of this paper will be therefore devoted at summarizing the main arguments underlying Singer’s proposals and to highlight, in doing so, the ethical stance underlying them. Following his structure, this part will be subdivided in four sections corresponding to the four main chapters of the book. As I will show, Singer’s ethical position that will progressively emerge from the discussion of the chapters, is a form of utilitarianism aimed at fostering the greatest good for everyone indistinctively. Hence the arguments used in every chapter, despite being essentially underlined by the same ethical framework, they assume different forms. Considering that the aim of this paper is assessing the ethical content and not the form of Singer’s proposals, going into the arguments he uses in each chapter to support his proposals would be a rather repetitive and thus useless practice. To avoid this, after summarily sketching the ideas and arguments presented in the first four chapters, I will move in the third part, using the last chapter about global poverty as a springboard, to a systematic, and hopefully comprehensive enough, evaluation of his utilitarianism. This will be done using Schaler’s work “*Peter Singer Under Fire, the Moral Iconoclast Faces his Critics*”, as well as other secondary literature to give depth to the evaluation. Following this, I will summarize in section four the strengths and the shortcomings of his ethical view. It will follow a concluding section where everything will be rounded up.

Part II: Overview of Peter Singer's "One World Now"

i. One Atmosphere

The first problem Singer confronts himself with is that of climate change, which finds its most lucid delineation in the Fifth Assessment Report curated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and written by more than 800 scientists. What the authors find is that there is unequivocal evidence suggesting that since the 1950's, "the oceans and atmosphere have warmed, glaciers have shrunk, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have been losing mass, Arctic sea ice has been diminishing and sea levels are rising at an increasingly rapid rate" (IPCC, 2014) and that the Earth's surface has never been as warm since 1850. The most crucial information of this report is the virtual certainty (95%) the IPCC has that the main cause of the aforementioned phenomena – also known as global warming – are human activities. To round off, it is also stated that the more activities with the potential to disrupt the climate humans carry, "the greater the risks of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems" (IPCC, 2014) These risks- which are already happening but are expected to increase in harshness- are well summarized by Singer (2016):

- a) Movement of hurricanes and tropical storms to areas which are not prepared to cope with such phenomena.
- b) Tropical diseases spreading beyond the areas where they originate.
- c) Increasing food production at high latitudes and falling food production at low ones (i.e. sub-Saharan Africa).
- d) Increasing risk of flooding in low-lying coastal areas, spurred by rising sea levels.

For it is beyond the scope of the essay to discuss the nature and the extent of the damages caused by climate change, I will stop at the above as a realistic indication for the reader of the severity of the consequences that climate change has on people's lives, with an invitation to note the fact it is going to have the strongest impact on the world's poorest regions -which have already proven to be unprepared to cope with natural catastrophes of such magnitude.

What deserves greater attention is certainly what has been done so far to tackle such a severe issue. The first formal agreement was reached at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992 where only a non-legally binding commitment to reduce carbon emissions was achieved between the 190 governments participating at the round table. The Kyoto Protocol was then developed in 1997 with the intention to set binding targets for developed countries that would agree to the signing of the treaty. The Protocol failed to have a major effect for a variety of reasons. To cite an example, the US – the country with the highest emission rates at the time the Protocol was signed- was no longer party to the agreement under Bush's administration, and China which became the largest emitter in the period following the Protocol was not given any binding emission targets as it was classified as a developing country when the Protocol was signed. Copenhagen followed in 2009, when the Kyoto Protocol stopped having effect, but it only resulted in a non-binding agreement. Despite the unfortunate outcomes of the negotiations, Obama succeeded in setting binding targets for the US in a private emissions reduction agreement with the then Chinese president. This served as a bold example for other countries to follow up despite the disastrous meeting in Copenhagen. Despite the efforts, the last meeting around Climate Change held in Paris in 2015, resulted in pledges which the committing countries would need to make twice as deep if temperature is to stay within the the 2 degrees' Celsius limits advised in the Fifth Assessment Report to limit the disastrous side-effects of climate change. It is partly consoling that the Paris agreement requires all signatories to renew their pledges every five years so to attempt to confine their emissions into the safety limits. But as hinted

above, it is already clear that to stay within safe limits countries will need to greatly revisit their pledges in 2020. But what is a fair target? And according to which principle should it be decided?

According to Singer (2016) it should be according to a *time-slice principle*. He arrives at it by analyzing different principles of fairness. The first is the so called *historical principle* according to which who broke it, fixes it. As much of the wealth of developed countries is tied to fossil fuels which they started to produce before others, the degree to which they are responsible for climate change and its consequences should be much higher than that of underdeveloped or developing countries. To put it differently, as no one has special ownership rights over a common resource such as the atmosphere, everyone should be naturally entitled to an equal share of it. The usage nations are entitled to make of that resource should therefore be capped at this very share. Countries that industrialized before such as the US, and that used up their budget before the others should be therefore prevented from continuing to abuse a good they have no further right to consume. According to this principle, developed countries would need to bear all of the costs associated with climate change.

One of the counter arguments moved against a historical view of responsibility, is that developed countries could not have known that emitting carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could have caused harm to the atmosphere. It is therefore reasonable to make the polluter pay from the point he was aware of the consequences of his actions. And here comes the second principle proposed by Singer: the *time-slice principle*. To avoid lengthy discussions, according to this principle time would need to be sliced at 1992, year when strong evidence about the destructive effects of carbon dioxide on climate change, was brought forward by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and accepted by leaders worldwide, and George W. Bush. Countries will be then assigned a quota based on their emission only starting from 1992. As with any other limited resource, firstly the remaining amount of that resource will need to be established. When it comes to carbon dioxide, this depends on the consequences associated with its emission which we consider dangerous, and the degree of risk we are prepared to bear. Singer (2016) debates on a number of risk measures and limits for the rise in global temperature, and comes at a reasonable limit which would allow a 3.7 tons of carbon dioxide emission per capita. At the current level of emissions, the US will use up the share calculated according to the time-slice principle by 2022; Australia by 2020 and the European Union by 2030. This set-up is still very demanding on developed countries, but is much more indulgent than the first, and than the third and fourth, as we will see.

The third proposal is based on Rawls' ideas of justice whereby people should act according to what reduces the suffering of the worst off. The only argument that would avoid the developed countries to bear all of the costs associated with climate change according to this principle, would be that of efficiency, namely that industrialized countries can produce much more resources than underdeveloped or developing countries can while emitting the same amount of carbon dioxide. Nevertheless, as Singer (2016) shows, this is not accurate for many reasons such as the fact that the resources produced by these countries stay mainly within the borders of these countries to the benefit of its citizens and thus not to the benefit of the global worst-off.

The last proposal is the utilitarian *greatest good principle*, according to which fair shares should be assigned based on the allocation that is most likely to maximize the overall level of happiness, or preference in the case of preference-utilitarianism, or the greatest net benefits more generally. Without going into much detail, Singer shows how burdensome and hardly light-shedding are any calculations aimed at finding this level. He thus proposes to re-interpret the first three principles from a utilitarian perspective, asking which of the three can be expected to bring the greatest net benefits globally. Despite the discussion around each of this principles being highly speculative, it is nevertheless clear that to maximize utility, the rich countries should bear most if not all of the costs associated with climate change.

“Because of its simplicity and suitability as a political compromise” Singer (2016) finally elects the second principle. As we have seen it is the most indulgent principle but it is also the one that has the greatest chance of increasing global welfare. In addition, for its giving the means to each country to flexibly assess their costs and benefits associated with emitting carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, Singer (2016) proposes to add the possibility of emission trading alongside with the time-slice based distribution described above.

To round up, the *global-ethical-institution* Singer proposes to solve the climate change problem is one able to enforce a time-slice principle to establish the starting emission quotas for each country, and to make tradable quotas possible. The ethical stance underlying this proposal, as I have mentioned above, is a form of utilitarianism which considers feasibility an ethical principle.

ii. One Economy

In this chapter of “*One World Now*” Singer puts economic globalization under scrutiny with the intent of examining whether this process is generating welfare for all. The main global institution responsible of fostering economic integration between countries across the globe is the WTO, signed in January 1995 by 124 nations replacing the previous General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The main rationale behind its creation was and still is, the idea that trade, as long as the transaction costs involved in it are lower than the differences in the costs involved in the production of the items exchanged, is expected to benefit whoever engages in it. This is because parties to the trade benefit from the other’s ability to produce a certain product more efficiently. In principle, this is perfectly in line with Singer’s utilitarian position hinted in the preceding sections. We might thus be inclined to answer the question guiding this section positively. Unfortunately, the Seattle protests of 1999, seem to warn us to be more cautious. In fact, in this occasion, strong charges were brought against this organization. The main ones were that economic globalization harmed the environment, animals, human rights, as well as that it eroded state sovereignty, ultimately benefitting the agenda of rich countries thus increasing between-countries inequality. These were based on real issues that happened to be directly addressed at the Doha round of negotiations in 2001 which set the Development agenda for the future. Again, its scope was to set the stage for negotiations aimed at tackling the aforementioned problems. Unfortunately, over 15 years of negotiations failed at reaching deals that could improve the economic relations between the states. On this basis, Singer (2016) argues that the future of economic globalization lies in regional agreements and agreements aimed at tackling very narrowly defined issues. Nevertheless, as the agreements reached since the inception of WTO, still regulate international trade, there is a need to more closely evaluate the charges brought against this institution for global economic integration, to ultimately assess the extent to which it is actually benefitting or harming the parties involved.

The first charge is that the sort of free trade enabled by the WTO harms the environment, attempts at the welfare of animals as well as at human rights. The WTO responds to this charge by pointing out Article XX of the GATT, which was included as one of the founding articles of the WTO. Essentially, according to it, each and every country part to the agreements “should not be prevented from taking measures necessary to ensure the quality of its exports, or for the protection of human, animal or plant life or health, of the environment...” (Singer, 2016), as long as its restrictions apply consistently across all parties to the trade, including themselves. This would be a reasonable answer to the charge above, if it was enforced in reality. Unfortunately, the WTO has an history of failing to do so. The decision of dismissing the embargo that the US was applying to Mexican products that were failing to comply with the US Marine Mammal Protection Act is one. The US was banning the selling of

yellow-fin tuna that was caught by boats not meeting the dolphin production standards throughout their fishing process, and it was doing so consistently across countries. Nevertheless, the embargo was deemed not to apply, because restrictions could only be based on the quality of a product and not on the process involved in its production (product/process distinction). The WTO defended this decision on the ground that allowing for the embargo would set the stage for a “*flood of protectionist abuses*”. Singer (2016) does not consider this a reasonable justification for preventing a country to enforce what it considers to be measures necessary to protect public morals. The argument nevertheless points out at a critical problem, that of the free-riding that could arise from having sovereign states basing their economic decisions on what they consider necessary to protect public morals. In any case, the WTO’s rulings in this regard in the past years have showed that the Seattle protests have had an impact, and that the product/process distinction has been overcome. An example is a 2014 ruling supporting the EU ban against the import of products derived from seal hunting. Evidence thus shows that despite the free-riding concerns, good governance can still limit these while upholding ethical standards at the same time.

The second charge brought against the WTO is that it interferes with state sovereignty. The idea put forward by Singer here is simple. States join the WTO to gain certain benefits from it. Obviously, joining such an organism comes with its costs. Some of these costs are nevertheless not acceptable, especially if they come as a consequence of small interest groups trying to foster their financial agenda. One of these cases is well exemplified by the obstacles that pharmaceutical companies put on the South African government which was trying to make AIDS medicine available at an affordable price to its population through compulsory licensing, so to tackle what it considered a national health emergency. Events following this outrageous happening, solved the problem. Nevertheless, the point remains. Sovereign states purposefully incur some costs upon entering agreements so to gain the associated benefits. Nevertheless, to limit unjust ones, it is clear that the WTO will need to be brought under a more democratic rule. One that limits the abuse that global corporations can often perform by appealing to the supremacy of national legislatures.

The third charge is that it is difficult for the poorest states to have an impact that is comparable to that of other states on WTO decisions. This risks of making the WTO an organism dominated by a few. This was the reality until the Seattle protests of 1999. In its first four years, the WTO was indeed *de facto* dominated by four major trading powers, the US, EU, Japan and Canada, commonly known as the Quad. To tackle this problem, the WTO has started to offer technical assistance to the poorest states, and an independent organization, the Advisory Centre on WTO Law, was established in Geneva to provide affordable legal advice to these states. Nevertheless, in practice, these bodies have failed at making the impact they were expected to. Overall, despite not being dominated by the Quad anymore, a lot of progress has to be made to properly make the voices of all of the states be heard and included in WTO decisions.

The last charge Peter Singer evaluates is that the WTO and economic globalization in general, favors the rich while making the poor even poorer. To do this, Singer considers two measures, absolute change in welfare and inequality. While it is clear that economic globalization has brought incredible welfare gains for all strata of society, except for the bottom 5% which has remained the same, the story seems to be a little more complex for inequality. At the simplest, it can be argued that while income inequality has risen in the past decades, inequality in terms of gains in health, life expectancy and overall quality of life have decreased. Based on this, Singer argues that it is reasonable to say that economic globalization has made everyone richer and better off.

Overall, it follows from the discussion above that there is scope to think that a rightful enforcement of Article XX can make sure countries can uphold their right to protect public morals without it being a sheer protectionist move. And that civil society movements and non-governmental organization can

aid under-developed and developing countries in making their voices be heard in WTO decisions, and in limiting the abuse of lobbying groups. Despite this, it seems like there is still a long way to go for the WTO to be a global organism adequately fostering the interests of all. Firstly, without global environmental protection standards as set in *Section ii*, the trading practices fostered by the WTO, that are normally expected to bring about Pareto efficient outcomes, are not likely to do so. Secondly, without international labor standards, free trade risks of creating disasters such as the collapse of the building housing clothing factories in Bangladesh in 2013, which killed 1,136 workers. And finally, without a process in place apt to evaluate the legitimacy of sovereign states, there is no hope to participate in a global trade that generates positive effects for all. Trading with countries governed by illegitimate rulers will in fact most likely produce non-desirable outcomes.

To summarize, the *global-ethical-institution* Singer (2016) proposes in this chapter is a reformation of the current WTO, which would need to be essentially brought under a more democratic rule, if it is to produce the benefits it is supposed to. As in the case of the preceding section, for its considering the benefits that certain rules or processes have on everyone indistinctively, the ethical principle underlying this proposal, and more in general the evaluation of the implications of economic globalization discussed in this section, is utilitarianism.

iii. One Law

Overcoming poverty and injustice and educating populations are just some of the steps that history has proven useful to reduce the likelihood of humans committing horrible crimes, such as genocides. It is from the biblical episode of the genocide of the Midianites by Israelites, to that of the one and a half million Armenians perpetrated by the Turks to the most recent episodes in Cambodia and Rwanda, that the passing of time keeps proving that many are the reasons that make us humans commit horrific acts. That is why Singer (2016) argues that similarly to how the rule of law is a useful instrument for a state to condemn the horrific acts perpetrated within its borders, mechanisms of global law enforcement are the last but nevertheless needed instruments to prevent atrocities such as those mentioned above from happening. Evaluating both their rightfulness and effectiveness, especially now that countless events demand international interventions, becomes thus a challenging but needed task, and one which Singer (2016) takes on in this chapter.

The instrument that the international community has at the present date to intervene and prosecute the perpetrators of grave crimes, such as genocides, war crimes or crimes against humanity in general, is the International Court of Justice, established in 1998 in Rome by 160 states. Despite the risks associated with politically motivated prosecutions and interventions motivated by geo-political expansion strategies, the ICC seems to have served reasonably well its scope. Some of the highlights of its successfulness mentioned by Singer (2016), are the arrest in 2006 of Thomas Lubanga, the leader of a para-military group responsible of human rights violations in DRC, or the 2012 arrest of Germain Katanga, another Congolese who was sentenced 12 years for massacring hundreds of civilians in DRC in 2003. While the aforementioned prosecutions were rectified by the countries of which these criminals were citizens, interventions for humanitarian purposes are slightly more problematic for their invasive nature. In fact, to an intervening sovereign state there is always the sovereignty of another state that is being effectively denied. This makes the definitions of the conditions under which a state can intervene a very burdensome task, if the international community is to prevent political and strategically motivated interventions. To tackle this, the international community decided to shift its focus from the concept of humanitarian intervention to the responsibility to protect, which is more respectful of the idea of sovereignty. This was formalized at the 2005 UN World Summit where 191 member states recognized the responsibility of the

international community to protect civilians from fundamental violations of human rights (commonly specified as either genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity), if the target state is failing to do so and if peaceful means to achieve this have failed. This resulted in many actions taken by the UN such as the intervention after the widespread violence following the 2010 political elections in Côte d'Ivoire. (Singer, 2016). But does the responsibility to protect go against any of the UN's previously established principles? In this regard, Singer (2016) points out at a possible tension with article 27 of the United Nations Charter read in conjunction with Chapter VII. Accordingly, it seems that the UN Charter does not allow interventions in the affairs of other states other than those motivated by "threats to peace, breaches of the peace and acts of aggression", thus in effect excluding any violations of human rights. Singer (2016) reconciles the responsibility to protect with the Charter by proving the reasonability of not extending domestic jurisdiction to states that commit crimes against humanity or allow them to happen within the borders of their states.

In the second half of the chapter, Singer (2016) discusses the fact that democracy could help in lowering the probability of crimes against humanity as opposed to dictatorial regimes which are less likely to need to justify their actions in a public arena. Similarly, he also argues that military interventions do more good than harm only if the country subject to the intervention is not thrown into a vacuum. It is in fact accepted that the international community has a responsibility to protect people threatened by a state that is failing to do so. Nevertheless, it is also true, Singer (2016) argues, that if the costs of doing so outweigh those of not doing it, then there is no ground for an intervention. In practical terms, if the intervention of the international community is unable to ensure the replacement of a threatening government with one that is able to protect its people, then the intervention is likely to produce harm.

Singer (2016) rounds up his discussion by confronting us with the recurrent question of whether humanitarian intervention is not a form of cultural imperialism. His reasons not to think so seem to stem from the realization that certain cultural practices are simply destructive and live for no particular reason other than *inertia*. He in fact argues that the killing of 6 million Jews by the Nazis, the numerous genocides perpetrated in human history, or other practices such as female genital mutilation are not distinctive cultural traits, rather events or habits that exist and eventually persist without any justifiable ethic underlying them. This nevertheless imposes certain limits on the way we reach out. For instance, having a country under a non-democratic rule is not enough to justify any intervention. People of a state might in fact decide themselves to leave under the rule of a monarch. On this note, legitimization processes of non-democratic regimes might serve as a mean to limit on the one hand the invasiveness of the *protectors*, and on the other at increasing their capacity to meet their responsibility to protect people. Many questions nevertheless remain around the feasibility of such processes and although not exploring this theme further, Singer (2016) does seem to point towards the implementation of mechanisms apt at recognizing the legitimacy of certain governments to make interventions rightful and justifiable – similarly to that proposed in *Section iii* to make sure all parties involved in global trade can benefit from it.

Such proposals do not come without their irony, as Singer (2016) reminds us, about the current non-democratic structure of the main body responsible for matters of international security such as the aforementioned interventions: the UN Security Council. Formed after WWII, it features only five permanent members who also have veto rights on whatever decision comes their way. Its reformation, Singer (2016) argues, would be thus one of the first step necessary to build the ground for the transition to a global ethics and to global mechanisms of governance. This reformation would mean including all legitimate countries (here Singer's previous proposal would come in handy), and change veto rights into a special majority of two thirds, for example. This would make one of the strongest bodies responsible for global governance, a democratic one, and would thus pave the way for a broader shift in the areas discussed in the previous sections. In addition, for the same reasons

mentioned above, Singer (2016) proposes reforming the General Assembly of the UN, which despite including all of the 193 member states, it equates the voting power of highly populated countries to that of nations with small populations. Again, for a body that is responsible for making decisions which affect us all, it seems unfair to be only partially democratic.

Overall, the developments we are facing in the realm of international law are solving problems as well as creating new ones. Creating mechanisms of real and democratic global governance is a necessary step envisioned by Singer to successfully tackle the harshest ones. Reforming the UN could be one of the first ones to take, and can thus be considered the *global-ethical-institution* proposed in this Chapter. Once more, as in the case of *One Atmosphere* and *One Economy*, the attention given by Singer to the consequences of problems to everyone indistinctively, highlights the utilitarian basis of this proposal.

Part III: One Community and Evaluation of Singer's Utilitarianism

i. One Community and Partial Preferences

Following on his central argument, namely that the pressing challenges created by globalization need us to reconsider the moral significance we assign to state boundaries, in the last chapter of "*One World Now*" Singer argues in favor of the moral duty we all have towards the global poor. He carefully builds this argument by firstly assessing the validity of partial preferences. In doing so, he pulls out the example he used in the influential article "*Famine, Affluence and Morality*" he published in 1971. In it he famously argued that we have the same moral duty of helping both a child drowning in a pond we walk by, and a child dying of hunger in a refugee camp on the other side of the world, if we can do it at a reasonable cost. In essence, a dying child here has the same worth as a dying child there, posed that we have the means of help prevent the two tragedies at a comparable cost. Very bluntly put, analogously to the first four chapters, also in this chapter Singer advocates in favor of what he believes will generate the greatest good for the whole of humanity indistinctively.

For one supporting this principle, examining whether we owe special obligations to a certain group of people, be it our relatives, friends or compatriots, becomes a necessary task and an intriguing question. And one that seems to be necessary to highlight if not to solve, if one is to uphold any type of proposal based on the type of utilitarianism Singer endorses. The proposals made by Singer so far in the areas of environment, economy and law, do in fact rely on the acceptance of the principle of impartiality, namely that everyone on this planet has equal worth and should be treated accordingly. But what is the basis of this principle and why should we follow it? Is it just because in the globalized world we inhabit someone else's problem soon becomes mine? Or is there a wider motivation for agreeing to set emission quotas as well as protecting people that are not our own, and help the global poor, apart from the fear that not doing so will inevitably backlash on us?

It is not uncommon to feel special obligations towards one's own kind. As long as family members, lovers, close friends and countrymen are concerned, many see it as self evident. When it comes to race, not too long ago, as many were seeing that, as self evident as the above. Now, the majority would be horrified at racist discriminations. So to what extent are we allowed to discriminate? Is it just a matter of time and cultural evolution until people become horrified about the idea of owing special obligations to family members, lovers, close friends and fellow countrymen? In general, is there a certain degree of partial preference which can be considered morally right to hold? One way to answer this is through Hare's (1982) principle of universalizability. Namely that a statement to have moral weight, must be thought to be universalizable by the person pronouncing it. In other words, to be able to justify partial preferences on impartial grounds. Samuel Parr answers claiming that sometimes impartiality goes against human nature and that it is thus unreasonable to expect humans to make choices on completely neutral grounds. In other words, "the moral obligations of men cannot be stretched beyond their physical powers" (Parr, 1800). One of the solutions proposed to this tension between partial and impartial morality is that stemming from Kahneman's division of the brain's decision making into System 1 and System 2. While the first type of cognition is considered intuitive and fast, the second is rather rational, reflexive and deliberative. Combining the two into a comprehensive moral framework could aid us in solving the tension. Following our instincts on a day to day basis and then take the time to reflect upon them, in an attempt to solve those we consider wrong, could bridge the seemingly opposed conceptions of morality. When it comes to partial preferences we could act upon them on a day to day basis but then take the time to critically reflect on their meaning and the impartial reasons that might exist for us to hold them.

At this point Singer (2016) submits our partial preferences to Hare's test. The special obligations we feel towards our parents or sons seem to be so grounded in biology to make it reasonable to justify such partial preferences on impartial grounds and thus granting them the status of morally viable. Something similar holds for close friends and lovers. Those making up our inner circles usually make up for much of the satisfaction we get from life. Denying the partiality that defines the very nature of this relationships, would be very hard to justify impartially. Holding them seems therefore morally viable too, according to the same test.

What about broader preferences such as for the inhabitants of one's city or nation? Some of the reasons provided to defend the morality of broader preferences refers to the evolutionary concepts of cooperation and reciprocity, which justify holding such because of the benefits they create, especially in close communities where the degree of contact and thus of expectations between its members is reasonably high. Nevertheless, when it comes to holding partial preferences towards geographically dislocated people, as well as distant family members with which one hasn't had any contact for long, it becomes harder to point out at an impartial justificatory ground. The same holds for the nation-state which in most cases is nothing but an imagined community, with no firm grounds to justify the holding of partial preferences. Overall, exhibiting a preference towards one's kin, or close friends, or towards an imagined community, is something Singer argues to be a widely shared behavior and in most cases accepted principle. To different degrees, for each of these examples, the roots of this partiality can be traced back to our nature of social animals. It is thus reasonable to justify partial preferences when they so deeply relate to our well-being. Nevertheless, Singer argues that, when doing so causes harms to others that could have been avoided at little cost, it is hard to see the moral viability of such a principle.

One of the arguments used by Goodin (1995) to justify the existence of the system of special obligations enacted by the nation-state, is that from efficiency (Singer, 2016). According to this argument, the impartial justification for the existence of such a system of partial preferences stems from the efficiency of having bodies that are clearly responsible for the individuals living within their borders. Nevertheless, Singer (2016) argues that the unequal distribution of resources around the planet discharges the validity of such an argument. Having states that to only marginally raise the utility of its citizens spend amounts which could save lives on the side of the world, does not seem that efficient after all.

Another argument used as an impartial justification for partial preferences towards the sovereign state, comes from the idea that justice within a state matters more than that across states. Therefore, a state has the right to only care about its wealth, as its wellbeing does not negatively impact that of other states. The reasons for this, argues Wellman (2000), are two. Firstly, it is only the economic inequality within a state which risks of attempting the political equality of that state, and not the economic inequality between different states. Secondly, that inequality matters insofar as it generates depressing relationships, and that happens only for inequality within states, as people are expected to compare themselves to the people they have contact with. Both arguments are easily undermined by the account Singer (2016) offers throughout his book of the increasingly globalized nature of our politics and economy, as well as our relations. We compare our lifestyles to that of Americans through social media, and as we have seen in the preceding sections, the increasingly globalized nature of our economy is also contributing at drawing bolder connections between the inequality of a state to that of another.

Singer concludes this chapter by pointing out at the gap between people's expectations of the aid their countries provide to the global poor and the aid that is actually given. It follows that in a world where we regard the institutions of most of the nations as democratic, and where what people think it should be right to give is well above what countries give - and probably enough to greatly relieve, if not

solve, global poverty- any step aimed changing the state-of-the-art seems to require education to come in.

Similarly to the other sections, Singer has come at proposing a solution (donate excess income) to solve a global problem (global poverty), on utilitarian grounds. Throughout all of the sections, it has been clear that what moves Singer's evaluation of the institutions we now have in place to solve global problems, and his proposed solutions, is a form of utilitarianism, and one that regards everyone equally. As the main focus of this paper is on the ethics underlying Singer's proposals to solve the most pressing challenges of our time, I will now turn at critically discussing his utilitarianism, in light of common objections, in attempt to ultimately shed light on the validity of the proposals and the critiques presented so far.

ii. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a consequential ethics and it is based on four main tenets. Firstly, its aim is in the pursuit of a non-moral good. In other words, the right is what produces this non-moral good. For this reason, it is also referred to as a teleological morality, namely one defined in terms of an external end (Jongepier, 2017). Secondly, it prescribes a maximization of this non-moral good. Contrarily to other teleological normative theories which might seek the minimization of the suffering of the worst off¹, or similarly making sure everyone has a sufficient amount of this good, as in the case of Nussbaum's capability approach (Jongepier, 2017). Thirdly, utilitarianism recognizes the non-moral good in some conception of well-being or utility such as happiness (utilitarian hedonism), satisfaction of preferences (preference utilitarianism) or other forms of utility listed objectively. Finally, utilitarianism assumes impartiality. The utility of each sentient being should be regarded equally. But how is utilitarianism applied in practice? Generally, philosophers agree in distinguishing two types of approaches guiding utilitarian choices, rule and act utilitarianism. In the first case the agent follows a rule that is believed to maximize utility. In the second case, in each and every situation he/she is required to calculate the extent to which his/her actions are maximizing utilities in that specific instance and act based on the outcome of this evaluation.

From the discussion presented in the previous sections, it is clear that the ethical principle underlying Singer's arguments is a form of utilitarianism. Firstly, his aim in the pursuit of a non-moral good. In the case of the environment for example, this is exemplified by the fact he advocates for setting emission quotas based on that principle which is expected to increase wellbeing. Secondly, he seeks the maximization of this good. Using the same example, in fact, while a duty based ethics would have probably supported a fairer set up such as that based on a historical principle, his choice of what is feasible, rather than what is right, proves his adherence to utilitarianism. A similar reasoning can be used to show that Singer ethics follows the third tenet of utilitarianism too. As mentioned above, the moral good he supports relates to a certain conception of well being. Finally, the fact that he evaluates current institutions and makes proposals taking into account the consequences that these have on all of the parties affected, proves he adheres to utilitarianism's impartiality.

¹ Here a reference is made to John Rawl's "*Theory of Justice*".

iii. Objections to Utilitarianism: Over Demandingness and Feasibility

The first objection to utilitarianism is that of being over demanding. Acting morally according to this doctrine would in fact require us to revise many of our day-to-day actions. Based on the principle of impartiality listed above, we would be most likely acting immorally when killing animals or when avoiding transferring our excess income to the global poor. Defences against this claim include over demandingness not being an excuse to abandon a certain ethical theory altogether. It would become one in case over demandingness would result in non-compliance. What is the right approach then? Is lowering moral standards justified for the sake of feasibility? The answer to this question involves appealing to higher principles and in particular to the function that ethics should have in the life of human beings. Should it be aimed at correcting and guide human behaviour in an attempt to help society reach a higher state of affairs, one where a certain good is maximised, or should it start from the assumption that human behaviour cannot be corrected and thus advise and guide humans within their biological limits.

What is interesting to note now is that Singer seems to embrace the idea that one should nevertheless advocate for the policy that is feasible and that will produce the best results. This is clear from the change he makes from a strong position in his article “*Famine, Affluence and Morality*” where he advocates for a donation of up to 20% of our income to the world’s poor, to a much weaker one in *One World Now* where he only advocates for a 1% donation for people earning salaries of 50,000 \$ (Jongepier, 2017). He obviously makes this move out of a pragmatist concern as discussed above. But is this right?

In one of the essay included in “*Peter Singer Under Fire: The Moral Iconoclast Faces his Critics*” by Schaler J.A., Lichtenberg (2011) argues that this is not for three reasons. Firstly, it would mean giving up on his utilitarian position. By advocating for sub-optimal results, it is argued that the pursuit of the utilitarian “*greatest good*” is compromised. Secondly, as already hinted above, she argues that ethics should be action-guiding. Singer’s compromise is on the contrary an indication of an action-following ethics. Thirdly, she argues that an adequate ethical framework is expected to be publicly known. It follows that embracing Sidwick’s distinction between privately held beliefs and publicly advocated ones for the sake of pragmatism, as in the case of Singer, would nevertheless mean advocating an inadequate ethical framework. The above counter-arguments, taken together, risk of undermining the viability of Singer’s revised version, as acceptable ethical guide.

Despite the critiques put forward in the above paragraph, Lichtenberg’s (2011) answer to Singer’s proposals to solve global poverty seems to be mainly centred around the necessity to abandon the ethical question and focus instead of what is expected to actually lead to tangible results. In the case of global poverty, focusing on what influences human beings to give and help, and exploit that. Doing so, might in fact lead to more tangible effects than focusing on developing an action-guiding ethics. In this regard, she points out to *situationism* as a very interesting psychological theory highlighting how the differences in behaviour between us and our fellows is determined much more by differences in contexts and situations than by differences in personalities. The extent to which positive situations may act as catalyst to one’s disposition to give is further suggested by Lichtenberg (2011) who puts forward a few interesting examples. The first of an experiment proving how finding a dime in a phone booth as opposed to not finding one, greatly influences people’s propensity - when exiting the booth - to help a stranger who dropped a sheaf of paper on the ground.² The second of an experiment

² Out of sixteen people finding a dime, fourteen helped strangers outside the booth. While out of the sixteen not finding one, only one helped the stranger.

suggesting how students are much less willingly to help a suffering stranger, when in a hurry³. Despite the eloquence of this result, it is still hard to believe to a complete predominance of situations on personality traits. The Milgram experiments where two thirds of the individuals participating in the study were willing to shock another person beyond the safe levels only because instructed to do so by an authority, are suggested by Lichtenberg (2011) to prove so. After all, there must be an explanation to the behaviour of the remaining one third who was not willing to act so brutally. This prevents condemning “moral education and character building” to useless practices, but suggests that understanding the circumstances under which individuals are more prone to act in a certain way, might come in handy to any practitioner willing to make a positive contribution to the fixing of some of the world’s problems. Another aspect affecting the extent to which we value certain material or non-material goods we possess – and thus our propensity not to give them away - is their degree of relativity and *positionality*. The value of most of non-subsistence goods is in fact not absolute, rather relative to our environments or more precisely to our *reference group*. Lichtenberg (2011) explains this superbly by highlighting how one might be much less willing to donate his/her time by volunteering in a charity, when his/her colleagues are not, and are instead working over time and building career capital. Acting on reference groups might thus be expected to lead to stronger results than acting on the individual’s propensity to give. One could argue that reference groups vary from person to person and targeting a reference group in the sense above would thus mean targeting the reference group of each and every individual. This is partially true. Yes, everyone’s reference group could well be a hardly-traceable one formed by a mixture of family members, colleagues and friends living in the opposite hemisphere. Nevertheless, targeting a whole corporation with a volunteer proposal instead of trying to mobilize single individuals, can still be reasonably expected to lead to better results. All in all, building up on Lichtenberg’s (2011) reasoning I believe that if one’s objective is to change the way people approach global problems, not considering the aforementioned advances in psychology would be naïve.

In no way this critique is meant by Lichtenberg (2011) to target Peter Singer specifically, who always tries to tie in, development in sciences in his arguments. An example is the reference he makes in his answer to Lichtenberg’s (2011) in *Peter Singer Under Fire*, to the theory of nudges. He follows up on Lichtenberg’s proposals to exploit human’s psychology to improve on their altruism, adding the proposal for governments to add a default option where people are required to opt out on a pre-set level of donations for the world’s poor instead of one to opt in, as in the often cited example of organ donations. In addition, it is clear that his main concern, or at least the concern he departs from, is building a credible ethical foundation for his global proposals, rather than researching the most effective ways we have of helping the global poor, which quite reasonably does not top the list of a philosopher’s tasks.

To come back to Singer’s compromise which sparked the necessity of the paragraph above, Singer’s defence invokes saying that holding certain beliefs privately and advocating different ones publicly does not undermine in any way utilitarianism. It is indeed reasonable to think that such a mixed approach might be the one leading to the best consequences which is ultimately the scope of utilitarianism. The rightfulness of this defence will obviously depend on the result of this approach. In any case it seems like it would be an open question nevertheless, unless Randomized Controlled Trials or other statistical methods apt at proving causal links, are involved in the discussion. Without it, I believe we are only allowed to judge Singer’s position based on what he believes will lead to the best consequences. Hence we are only allowed to attack him if he purposefully chooses an approach or action leading to suboptimal consequences. Despite this, building also on Lichtenberg’s (2011) argument that Singer despite donating 20% of his income still fails at meeting the targets set by

³ The students where either hurrying or were early to a presentation they had to give about the tale of the Good Samaritan, notably known as a tale about altruism.

himself in “*Famine, Affluence and Morality*”, I am inclined to interpret Singer’s compromise slightly differently. Not as a badly thought move, shaking, if not destroying, the foundations of the ethical architecture he built; rather a conscious and transparent admittance of the limits of whatever comprehensive ethical framework and thus ultimately as a proposal of a revised form of utilitarianism, one where *the greatest good* becomes *the greatest feasible good*. One could obviously argue that the two are the same, but without lingering too much around the intricacies of this question, I will stop at inviting the reader to ask him/herself whether it is not at least reasonable to think that such a compromise might not lead to the best consequences in the longer term, and that there might have been another, certainly most resource-intensive way, for Singer to tackle this problem apart from the compromise he set out. In any case, whether keeping a private morality and advocating something different publicly in certain instances - as opposed to indistinctly applying one rule for both - leads to better consequences is an open question, and I cannot see a reasonable answer to it, if not with the speculation suggested above.

iv. Objections to Utilitarianism: Locus of Responsibility

The above has unveiled different ways in which philosophers, practitioners or whoever is interested in changing the course of things, can act. The second part of the section has been thus devoted to outlining these different possibilities, thus tackling the question of how should we help instead of that of whether we should or not help. This was done especially in light of Singer’s proposals to solve the problem of global poverty, which -differently from those set out in the chapters treating the themes of environment, economics and law- target individuals and not governments, as main responsible for in- or bad-action.

What the experiments outlined by Lichtenberg (2011) above suggest is that a variety of circumstances influence the behaviour of humans. These can be the overall mood as suggested by the dime experiment; being or not in a hurry as in the Good Samaritan tale experiment; or being instructed to do something by an authority. It was then further suggested that when it comes to our propensity to give away a certain material or non-material good, the extent to which giving that good up would mean losing relatively to others, influences that propensity. In addition to these examples, Lichtenberg (2011) brings forward a great deal of research in the social sciences, especially among psychologists and economists, about *cascade* effects, or more commonly known as band-wagon or snow-ball effects. Simply put, something becomes true when others think it is true too. This is reflected in many examples, also in international aid, whereby the publicity of certain events and other factors led to this sort of cascades where individuals started to donate more than they ever did only because of the collective nature of that action. This, as Lichtenberg (2011) explains, is due to different factors, one of which is the degree of veracity that a certain proposition acquires the more people endorse it. Based on the outlined psychological limits of individual actions, it seems at least reasonable to think that governments should be responsible of solving the problem of global poverty and not individuals.

v. Common Objections to Utilitarianism

As mentioned in the sections above, the proposals set out by Peter Singer throughout his book, are all underlined by a form of utilitarianism. After having discussed above the main and most relevant objections for the purpose of critically analysing “One World Now”, it remains now relevant to also discuss the remaining common objections moved against this ethical stance, and evaluate whether they compromise the validity of any of Singer’s proposals. Without the presumption of discussing

all of the possible objections movable or moved against this ethical theory, I will rather attempt at giving a reasonably comprehensive overview of the strengths of Singer framework and proposals to answer to common objections. To this aim, I will use the remain objections to utilitarianism outlined by Jongepier (2017).

The first is that of Nozick's experience machine, often moved against hedonistic utilitarianism. Essentially, that it is misleading and wrong to think that people always regard and want to only maximise pleasure and minimize suffering. Humans might indeed regard other values such as real and purposeful social interactions more than sheer pleasure or lack of suffering. Nevertheless, the kind of utilitarianism emerged from "*One World Now*" does not seem to imply in any way an association to hedonistic utilitarianism. It is therefore safe to dismiss this objection.

The second is that of the *consequences of the consequences*, commonly illustrated through the story of *Jim and the Indians* (Jongepier, 2017), and moved against act utilitarianism. In a nutshell, while it is easier to evaluate the short term consequences of your actions, it becomes much more difficult to predict the longer term ones. Act utilitarianism might thus risk of favouring choices which do not entail the best consequences overall. This applies to the current discussion, as Singer proposal to donate aid to solve global poverty, considering the limits of the current state-of-the-art of international aid, might not be the best fix. This is supported recently by the powerful critiques such as those illustrated in *Dead Aid* by Dambisa Moyo, or in *War Games* by Linda Polman, that aid, in many situations, can not only be useless, but even harmful in the long term. Singer (2016) counters this by putting forward the example of the eradication of small pox which lead to saving 57 million lives - which divided by the 2.3 trillion dollars he estimates have been given in aid in the past five decades- leads to a cost per life saved of 40,000 dollars. He argues that this conservative figure is already sufficient to justify the effectiveness of aid. Without going much into abstruse calculations, it is at least reasonable here to highlight that there is the risk that aid might not produce the best outcomes. As there is no basis to accuse of immorality utilitarians which have done choices based on what they expected were the consequences of their actions, I will again appeal to the speculation outlined in the previous section, namely that it should probably be the moral responsibility of better equipped and informed entities to make choices such as those aimed at solving the problem of global poverty.

Lastly, at least as far as the main objections against utilitarianism sketched by Jongepier (2017) are concerned, there is the *repugnant conclusion*. Utilitarianism is usually understood as the ethical principle advocating for the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people. This leads to another objection to utilitarianism, namely that it can lead to the *repugnant conclusion* stated by Parfit (1984). Sidgwick (1981) helps in solving this by outlining how "the point up to which, on utilitarian principles, population ought to be encouraged to increase, is not that at which the average happiness is the greatest possible—as appears to be often assumed by political economists of the school of Malthus—but that at which the happiness reaches its maximum". Nevertheless, this is already acknowledged by Singer's (2016) in the chapter *One Atmosphere* where he recognizes that give countries emission quota allocations based on their current population gives them "insufficient incentive to do anything about population growth". He thus advocates for allocations based on current and acceptable projections of population growth per state.

All in all, it seems that Singer's utilitarianism can deal sufficiently well with at least two of the remaining three objections outlined in this section. As far as the *consequences of consequences*, are concerned, there is scope to think that despite Singer's utilitarianism being a relatively good heuristic, it leads to proposals that might not have the best expected consequences.

Part IV: Strengths and Shortcomings

Confronting the form of utilitarianism that seems to be underlying Singer proposals in *One World Now*, with some of the main objections moved against utilitarianism has led to some interesting insights, both generally for Singer's ethical position and for the validity of some of his proposals.

Firstly, the fact that Singer compromises his pursuit of the utilitarian *greatest good* with the *greatest feasible good* -such as in the case of using a time-slice principle to allocate emission quotas, or in the advocating of smaller income donations compared to those advocated in his article *Famine, Affluence and Morality* (1972)- because of concerns of over demandingness of unfeasibility, has been observed as a threat possibly downgrading Singer to an advocate of sub-optimal results, and his ethics to an action-following one. In this regard, I have come to the conclusion that the various compromises he sets out should by no means be thought as badly thought moves shaking the foundations of his ethical position, rather as realistic ones made in virtue of the principle spelled out by Joseph Heath that efficiency and I shall add feasibility, in this context, are moral principles (Singer, 2016). There nevertheless remains scope to think that an ethical position should to a certain degree be action-guiding. Striking this balance is therefore recognized as a major challenge for whatever ethical theorist confronting himself with the grand task of proposing solutions to the world's problems.

A second possible shortcoming of Singer's utilitarianism, has been observed when looking at the way it deals, and the type of solutions it proposes to tackle the problem of global poverty. Advocating for income donation is seen by Singer as the action leading to the greatest good in this context, and thus as the needed piece to solve the puzzle of one of the most pressing challenges of our time. In doing this, Singer has individuated the locus of responsibility for this evil in individuals. In light of Lichtenberg's observations about the psychological limits and biases of individual decision makers, as well as more in general, the limited means that individuals have to assess the *consequences of consequences* of their actions when compared to higher entities such as governments, this move has been recognized as dubious. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that this limit lies rather in Singer's proposal to solve global poverty, than in his ethical framework. In this regard, utilitarianism, remains a sufficiently robust model to guide decision-making. Re-assessing the actions, and the responsibilities it should entail, both for individuals, and for state, should be a viable approach to limit the shortcomings outlined above. As well as, considering the limited space devoted in this paper to a comprehensive discussion of this theme, an interesting avenue for further research.

Overall, it is safe to say that Singer's position deals well with most of the objections put forward in Part III of this critical analysis. In addition, the fact that his ethical stance results in realistic proposals to solve some of the world's grand challenges, cannot be neglected. On the contrary, it needs to be highlighted as one of its main strengths.

Part V: Conclusion

This Bachelor Thesis started with the modest aim of dissecting Singer's work in a hunt for the *oughts* he thinks we should be pursuing to solve the biggest challenges of our time, with the ultimate intent of critically assessing the ethical stance underlying them.

Firstly, after having carefully studied his proposals a few noteworthy things have emerged. The era following the Treaty of Westphalia, one dominated by independent sovereign states, is slowly fading away, challenged by global issues arising in the areas of environment, economics, international law and wealth distribution. Nevertheless, governments and individuals seem to often be reluctant in fully understanding the implications of such a changing socio-economical landscape. Just yesterday, Italy's Interior Minister has refused docking to any Italian port to a ship carrying over 600 refugees, claiming "Italians before everything else", interestingly echoing Bush's famous "first things first are the people of America"

The ever-increasing complexity of the *rhizomatic* socio-economical relations in which we are embedded at the present moment, belligerently refuses such one-sided approaches. As mentioned throughout this paper, there is in fact no ground to think that the wellbeing of the people of one country is independent to that of other countries, nor that my fellow countrymen are more worth than people starving on the other side of the planet. As superbly proven by Singer, state-boundaries carry no moral weight, and solving the global problems we are witnessing nowadays starts from acknowledging this.

Embracing a global ethics that regards everyone and possibly everything equally, has been thus shown to be the main driver of the solutions discussed. And one that -in light of the ability it showed in responding to most ethical objections- can be regarded as sufficiently adequate.

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