

Utilitarianism gone mad: Singer Moral development: Kohlberg

EFFECTIVE ALTRUISM. Though Singer's presentation is deceptively clear, let's note a few important points. Effective altruists are prepared to go to considerable lengths, like choosing careers to benefit others and donating organs. This sounds praiseworthy, but think again. If you choose your career on the basis of an altruistic calculation, then you are not *invested* in that career itself. It is just a means for something quite different. Indeed, this is confirmed by Singer's own examples of various philosophy students (and their spouses). So from the outset you are *alienated* from your chosen career.

The same with organ donation. Your body becomes a vehicle for benefiting others. Then why should *you* choose to donate? It is better to have a committee that decides on the basis of all the data available. You are going under the knife as soon as the sums come out right.

Singer vacillates between saying that effective altruism is not absurdly demanding (you are not to engage with morality 24/7) and the clear contrary implication that it is in fact demanding. I think we should be clear that the latter is more plausible. Your important life choices, like the choice of your career or even organ donation, should be determined by moral, utilitarian considerations. If all that the effective altruist is saying is that you should donate to charities wisely, then this wouldn't be news. Perhaps though the novelty is in his rejection of luxury? But this too is not news. That was a commonplace in protestant morality hundreds of years ago. Even so, however, this claim is far from obvious, as we saw in Mandeville.

In any event, if effective altruism is not to be a vacuous view, then its novelty must be exemplified in the story of Zell Kravinsky. Your dominant goal in life, at least for those people that are reasonably well off (i.e. Western middle class), must be the sustained concern in the well-being of others.

Question 1. Think of the possible principled objections to effective altruism.

KOHLBERG'S SIX STAGES. We investigate people's reactions to moral dilemmas, like 'Heinz and the druggist'. Kohlberg's claim: responses have a universal pattern independent of particular cultures, but highly correlated with the age of the participants.

The distinctions are summarised in several tables corresponding to the different issues raised. There is a fundamental gap between the first two stages and the rest. Only at stage 3 we observe 'role-taking' that is the chief characteristic of morality. This involves the ability to take the perspective of others, to respond to a situation from the other's point of view.

Stage 4 is an expansion of the role-taking that emerged at stage 3. Here, the person judges the situation from the standpoint of the community. What matters is not the impact on the given individual (say, a family member), but the impact on the whole community in terms of the preservation of the social order. So the actions are judged right when they contribute to that goal. As Kohlberg notes (echoing Durkheim), stage 4 is the most widespread condition of adult morality.

We have seen the celebration of stage 4 in Hegel, where it corresponds to the 'ethical life' of the state. Yet, Kohlberg argues, stage 4 is not the most developed form of role-taking. We are urged to adopt the perspectives of others within the given social order, or even the perspective of the communal interest as a whole. But what of other communities and their members? And how do we change the extant rules and customs? Stage 4 has nothing to say about that.

Remark 2. In Hegel the transition to other systems of rules and customs is governed by objective historical laws, the manifestation of spirit leading to ultimate freedom.

At stage 5 we observe, as a fact of ontogenetic development, the novel attitude of a *legislator* of laws and customs, rather than a mere protector of the extant laws and customs. The law is no longer a barrier against external enemies and internal disturbance, but an instrument of adjudicating between the interests of different groups. The governing principle of this adjudication is the concern for universal welfare, with the built-in notions of equality and impartiality.

Other important characteristics of stage 5 are the contractual nature of obligations and higher reflexivity. Rules are adopted by receiving the consent of the contracting parties. This is in contrast to stage 4 where contractual obligations were interpreted as lending justification to the already existent

rules. Secondly, the evaluation of a given situation is done not by focussing on that particular situation and the agents involved (or perhaps individual feelings), but by examining the rational justification of the principles that governed particular actions. Once again, contrast this with stage 4 where no such metaethical stance was even possible. 203

Remark 3. Compare here Scanlon's discussion of principles.

FROM STAGE 5 TO STAGE 6. Kohlberg describes this transition by a dilemma of civil disobedience. How exactly is this case difficult for a stage 5 thinker? Kohlberg argues that stage 5 lacks the resources to pass judgement when the situation is not covered by extant laws and regulations. But if we interpret stage 5 as an utilitarian approach, as apparently we should, then the concern for general welfare, supplements with further principles like impartiality, should generate some resolution. 205

However, this resolution is expected to vary from society to society. Utility is served better by one course of behaviour in one social and historical circumstance, and by another—in another.

Remark 4. Compare Sidgwick's discussion of utilitarianism in 464ff.

Similarly, utility calculations will prescribe different kinds of behaviour depending on the particular details of the situation. Perhaps, e.g., Heinz should steal the drug if the wife is sick with cancer, but not if she is sick merely with a flu.

Therefore, stage 5 thinkers are in effect committed to a form of relativism, or in any case, to the rejection of any 'one morality'. This is because, for them, moral principles are simply shortcuts (perhaps very well established) for the improvement of welfare. 208

Yet there is space for a further stage 6 where moral principles are invariant under changes of circumstances. A stage 6 thinker believes that moral principles are exactly those that all rational people accept (and most of such people recognise). 208

So, for example, Heinz ought to save his wife regardless of the legal status of stealing or of his personal attachment to the wife. Nor should his action be driven by utility calculations. It is rather that his course of action should be driven by the overriding concern for the human life. This is something that all rational people would agree on. 209 211

Remark 5. Compare, again, these ideas with Scanlon's contractualism.