

The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology. By Peter Singer. New York: New American Library. 1982.

Sociobiology raises the most important questions in ethics: Is morality rational or merely emotional? Is morality basically egoistic or altruistic? Unfortunately, sociobiology's leading exponents have tended to muddy the issues and even the concepts involved. Edward O. Wilson seems to assume that doing ethics involves the philosopher consulting only his emotions, and Richard Dawkins makes it easy to confuse "selfish genes" with selfish individuals. One might think that the polemical nature of much sociobiology is to blame. However, Peter Singer's recent book, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*, shows that one can use sociobiology polemically and still present the philosophical issues with exemplary clarity.¹ The first three chapters provide an excellent elementary exposition of the facts of animal sociobiology, human sociobiology, and the ways sociobiology can be relevant to ethics. The last three chapters are polemical. Singer argues that universal altruism is the sole rational ethics and is not incompatible with the facts of sociobiology. (The title, *The Expanding Circle*, refers to the circle of altruistic moral community.)

I shall criticize Singer's argument, but not for being polemical. Quite the contrary, I shall show that it is not polemical enough. Had Singer presented his proposed rational altruism along with its proper competitor, rational egoism, his argument would have failed. Moreover, independently of Singer's particular argument, I shall argue that in the light of sociobiology, rational egoism is a better moral theory than Singer's rational altruism. While my essay is mainly critical, this attests to the virtues of *The Expanding Circle*. Because Singer's exposition of the ethically relevant aspects of sociobiology is so worthy of a wide audience and his case for rational altruism so forceful, it is important to see how weak the link between the two is.

EGOISM AND ALTRUISM

It may seem quaintly old-fashioned to engage in polemics on the bearing of evolution on human egoism and altruism. It will seem less so if we take care to bring both our biology and our moral philosophy up to date. In this section, I shall briefly introduce modern sociobiology by applying it against two crude versions of egoism and altruism. Then I shall use these as foils to develop two more-defensible modern principles: rational egoism and rational altruism.

Altruism. While sociobiology studies all sorts of behavior (such as communication, herding, and territoriality), I shall, like Singer, restrict myself to altruism, sociobiology's "central theoretical problem." . . . It is a problem because it has to be accounted for within the framework of Darwin's theory of evolution. If evolution is a struggle for survival, why hasn't it ruthlessly eliminated altruists, who seem to increase another's prospects of survival at the cost of their own?" (P. 5) The first move of modern sociobiology is to refute a popular answer to this question, namely, that altruism evolves because it is for the good of the species. "The flaw in this simple explanation is

that...the real basis of selection is not the species, nor some smaller group, nor even the individual. It is the gene." (Pp. 8-9)² A striking example is provided by the infanticide practiced by male langur monkeys. When a male replaces the dominant male in a group, "he will set about killing all the infants in his newly acquired group. This may not be good for the species as a whole, but the killer is not related to his victims." (P. 15)

Egoism. This example shows that while sociobiology begins with the rejection of species-wide altruism, it quickly moves to the rejection of individual egoism, as well. The function of langur infanticide is not to promote the individual male's interest but that of his offspring. Sociobiology's initial solution to the problem of altruism is kin selection: "genes that lead parents to take care of their children are...more likely to survive than genes that lead parents to abandon their children" (p. 13). Since it is genes, not individuals, that are selected, kin altruism can lead to self-sacrifice for the sake of kin; the individual has no special evolutionary value save as the carrier of genes shared with kin.

We have focused on a single criticism of egoism and altruism: the development of evolutionary theory has undercut the support biology has been thought to give these crude quasi-moral positions. One might become impatient at our method. Why not reject such positions simply because they are not moral? But this would overlook the power of scientific criticism to debunk some moral arguments. It also might easily beg the question of what should count as a moral position. To avoid the latter error, I shall cast improvements on these crude positions in terms of rationality.

Rationality and Reasons. The altruism and egoism I have discussed each fails to be rational in two ways. Consider species altruism first. As Singer shows, Wilson has tried to give a more rational foundation to species altruism by arguing for the cardinal value of the human gene pool (pp. 72-83). But, again as Singer notes, I may be totally indifferent to the fate of my genes. Of course, the basic dogma of sociobiology says that *genes* must be concerned about their reproduction, but it in no way follows that human individuals must care about their genes. And, again as Singer notes, "values must provide us with reasons for action" (p. 74). Therefore, species altruism fails to be a rational practical principle insofar as it fails to give us a reason for acting on it.

Rationality and Indirection. Turning to egoism, we can see a second way in which principles can fail to be fully rational. They can be short-sighted. Take the problem of removing unreachable parasites and its proverbial solution: you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. But a direct form of egoism undermines this reciprocity. I can do better letting you scratch my back and then failing to scratch yours. (Singer discusses this on pp. 16 ff.) A more indirect egoist removes others' parasites but discriminates against cheats, refusing to scratch any who refuse to reciprocate. If we follow this conditional strategy, we will induce even a direct egoist to reciprocate with us, so this indirection is a more rational egoism.

But the elaboration of indirection need not stop here. As Singer reports, Robert Trivers has argued that there will be a rational "preference for altruistic motivation. People who are altruistically motivated will make more reliable partners than those motivated by self-interest. After all, one day the calculations of self-interest may turn out differently." (P. 43) Hence egoism can lead to something quite removed from directly self-interested behavior. In sociobiology, this elaboration is explained under the heading "reciprocal altruism." Why do I treat this elaboration of indirect strategies as a form of

rationality? Because indirect strategies are means to egoistic ends, and means-ends efficiency is a paradigm of rationality.

TWO MORAL THEORIES

So far, I have illustrated each of the two aspects of rationality—reason providing and indirection—in regard to only altruism or egoism, respectively, but not to both. Now I will pull these two aspects together and present two moral theories based on competing principles that are fully rational in *both* respects.

Rational Altruism. I begin with rational altruism (hereafter, RA). This is the moral theory Singer defends, under the names “universal altruism” (p. 130) and the “imperative of impartial reason” (p. 155). Its first principle is “that I ought to do what is in the interests of all [sentient creatures], impartially considered” (p. 153). I shall consider below Singer’s argument that RA gives us reasons in a way that species altruism fails to. Here, I will consider the second requirement of reason and consider how RA provides indirection.

Singer elaborates a morality based on RA in chapter 6. The main point of this chapter is that while RA is the “ultimate criterion of what is right, it is not wise to make this the sole practical criterion” (p. 156). “An ethic for human beings must take them as they are, or as they have some chance of becoming. If the manner of our evolution has made our feelings for our kin, and for those who have helped us, stronger than our feelings for our fellow humans in general, an ethic that asks each of us to work for the good of all will be cutting against the grain of human nature” (p. 157). Practical criteria—for example, rules favoring kin—are derivative from RA as a first principle. Such a two-tiered moral theory is quite common among theorists today.³ Thus we see that Singer agrees that our two features of rationality, reason giving and indirection, are desirable for a morality.

Rational Egoism. Rational egoism (hereafter, RE) is the second of the two moral theories I shall consider. This is a theory that Singer neglects to develop, although I want to show that it exhibits the same two virtues of rationality that he favors. Its first principle is egoistic: one ought to pursue one’s own interests. This is proposed as an ultimate ethical premise in the sense discussed by Singer on pp. 84-86. There are general grounds for thinking that it is a paradigm of a principle that gives us reasons for actions. Moreover, Singer agrees that “there is a sense of the word ‘rational’ in which we are rational if we act so as to achieve what, on balance, we desire most. In this sense of the term, people can be perfectly rational and yet perfectly self-interested.” (P. 144) So evidently RE has little trouble meeting the first requirement of rationality. The second requirement, indirection, is easier to overlook. We must not conflate perfect self-interest with immediate self-interest, failing to see that RE can have the two-tiered structure common to many moral theories.⁴ Otherwise put, we must remember that RE is a first principle, an ultimate criterion of right, not the sole practical criterion. To return to the example used in the discussion of reciprocal altruism, there will be situations where the practical principle, or rule, derivable from RE is to act in the interest of another who may act in your interest later.

In summary, I have sketched two moral theories, similar in structure but diametrically opposed in the way they go about approaching the derivation of practical criteria of action. RA is a *top-down* theory; it starts with maximum scope for moral governance and pares this down when faced with the facts of

human nature. In contrast, RE takes a bottom-up approach, beginning with a minimal moral guidance and expanding it due to the possibility of beneficial cooperation. Both begin with a moral principle, but RA's is global, while RE's is local.⁵ Each seems to allow derivations of principles of action that lie in some middle ground. Of course, it is possible that the two theories reach the same middle ground, and this turns out to be the mixed bag of rules that make up our common morality. However, this is unlikely; and I will treat them as competing justificatory systems.

IMPARTIAL REASON

Now I turn to Singer's argument that RA is capable of giving us reasons for action and so is rational in the first sense discussed above. Actually, in the light of Singer's emphasis (in chapter 3) on the autonomy of ultimate ethical choices, this should not be too difficult: one merely chooses to be impartially altruistic. But Singer wants a stronger conclusion than this, since he wishes to avoid the charge of subjectivism. "Unless there is a rational component to ethics that we can use to defend at least one of our fundamental ethical principles, the free use of biological and cultural explanations would leave us in a state of deep moral subjectivism" (p. 85). Therefore, he sees that he must show that RA is *uniquely* rational (p. 102). Since I have argued so far that RA and RE are *both* rational moralities, we must be shown that RA but *not* RE is rational. I shall argue that Singer has not managed to do this, because his arguments in chapter 4 all depend on ignoring or misrepresenting RE. As a result, the considerations he brings forward are either indifferent between RE and RA, beg the question in favor of RA, or simply misrepresent the RE alternative.

Moral Progress. Much of chapter 4 tells a tale that Singer sees as the history of moral progress, beginning with justifications impartial within a limited group and moving through customs to come to include all humans equally. But, fortunately, Singer does not put much weight on this tale. (Unfortunately, its prominence in an introductory book may mislead some intended readers.) He acknowledges that he must show that this apparent progress is not accidental (p. 99). I might add, he must also show that it is not the result of a fortuitous selection of examples. By what objective measure is our age identified by the animal-liberation movement rather than, say, religious sectarianism? My main criticism is that the appeal to moral progress toward impartial altruism simply begs the question I have raised, since it assumes that RA is the standard of progress. In contrast, a reciprocal altruist could see extending consideration to animals that cannot cooperate with us (nor are valued by others who cooperate with us) as a mark of moral regress—of failure to discriminate properly.

Group Appeal. The focus on disinterested reasons, which will lead Singer to RA, is set by the beginning of his speculative history of ethics. He sketches a group about to move from kin, group, and reciprocal altruism to the use of reason to resolve a dispute:

If someone tells us that she may take the nuts another member of the tribe has gathered, but no one may take her nuts, she can be asked why the two cases are different. To answer, she must give a reason. Not just any reason, either. In a

dispute between members of a cohesive group of reasoning beings, the demands for a reason is a demand for a justification that can be accepted by the group as a whole. Thus the reason must be disinterested. [P. 93]

If this argument (from reasonableness to group acceptance to disinterestedness) seems obvious, it may be due to Singer's failure to attend to the alternative of reciprocal altruism based on RE. What if our nut-grabber, call her Gab, says, "I took Cheater's nuts, because he takes my nuts all the time and never offers any reason"? Has Gab offered a reason that can be accepted by the group as a whole? Perhaps not, since Cheater will likely refuse to accept it. Can Gab go on to say that Cheater doesn't count, because he refuses to reason (or limit his behavior by reason)? Obviously, asking whether Gab's reason is disinterested is affected by the same problem: do Cheater's interests count, or only the interests of those willing to abide by the rule (or perhaps by reason)?

The problem lies in Singer's assumption that he can pick out the relevant group prior to, and therefore as a neutral premise for, his argument for disinterestedness. But we have just seen that RE, via derived reciprocal altruism, picks out a different group from the one selected by RA. So picking the RA group begs the question. There is no easy way out of this problem for Singer, since if he allows the group to be delimited neutrally between RE and RA, no conclusion about disinterestedness, in a sense strong enough to lead to RA, follows. Nor can he appeal to his description of the group as "cohesive." Since the grounds of cohesion still need to be spelled out, either in RE or RA terms, this move merely prolongs the problem. Therefore, if this appeal to group acceptance in this "first step" is kept from begging the question, it remains neutral between RE and RA. (When Singer returns to the criterion of group acceptance on p. 108, he again neglects the crucial question of how the group is defined. Groups of rational egoists can certainly accept rules that aim at the good of groups of cooperating egoists.)

Direct Egoism. Singer's argument for the sole rationality of disinterested reasons faces another criticism. Throughout his discussion, he presents the ascent of the group as a whole as if its sole alternative were "a bare-faced appeal to self-interest" (p. 93). But as I have shown in my discussion of RE as a two-tiered system, this need not be so. Of course, Gab will have an interest in the reason she proposed (that, in part is what makes it RE-rational), but this interest will not be bare-faced. It will likely be modified by the indirect rules of RE, like reciprocity. So, once again, the case for RA depends on truncating its competitor, RE, into something—bare-faced self-interest—unlikely to solve the problems by which we judge a moral system. A fair comparison would treat RE and RA in the same state of development. If the group is offered the bare-faced axiom of RE, unmollified by its derivative rules, then the alternative should be bare-faced RA, with the pacifism, redistribution, and vegetarianism that this requires. Of course, the primitive group sitting around the primal campfire is unlikely to accept this proposal. No, Singer agrees that even for civilized folk like us, RA needs to be cut to the cloth of human nature. But then, so must RE be similarly developed. This unfair comparison undermines Singer's argument in the section "The Rational Basis," where RA is claimed to be the only way to resolve conflicting preferences. The alternative he defeats is once again bare-faced self-interest. It is rejected (pp. 104-5) as dangerous for a group, because egoists will cheat on each other. But as I showed in the first section above, if most follow the reciprocal altruism derived from RE, then they won't cheat (nor will even direct egoists dare cheat

them). So the criticism from the danger of egoism depends on substituting “bare-faced” direct egoism for the system of reciprocal rules derivable from RE.

Inherent Logic. Now I come to Singer’s main—and most original—argument. Why should evolution produce a capacity—reasoning in terms of RA—that ignores individual, reciprocal, and kin boundaries?⁶ Singer’s answer is that “the capacity to reason is a special sort of capacity because it can lead us to places we did not expect to go” (p. 88). His example is counting, which leads us unexpectedly from ordinals through integers and rational numbers to irrationals. Similarly, Singer argues, reason applied to conduct “is inherently expansionist. It seeks universal application.” (P. 99) But why should this lead us to RA? So far, allowing this to be true of reason, it could be also true of RE. For example, take the most elementary form of the rule of reciprocity: Tit for Tat, or help those who have not refused to help you. One might consider this principle too limited, as it fails to take into consideration whether the other helps others, who help others, etc. Perhaps the fully recursive version of Tit for Tat is what is demanded by the expansion of reason. Perhaps. It seems that RE, equally with RA, is capable of being described in terms of the expansion of reason. The only difference is that RA expands its premise, and RE expands its conclusion.

This result should suggest a deeper problem with Singer’s argument. What if the expanded version of Tit for Tat was not in one’s interests? Perhaps it is too global, leading to the spread of conflicts. (“Yes, you cooperated with me, but you didn’t with X.” “But X didn’t cooperate with Y.”) So now ask, What if the expansion of disinterestedness to RA turned out...? But the question is indeterminate, since now we have no independent standard with which to evaluate the expansion. The expanding RA sets its own standard. It seems that we need an argument at this point to show that RA once so expanded is still capable of giving us reasons, since it is determined by something other than our interests. The criticism is similar to one I quoted Singer using against Wilson. Singer asked why I should care about my genes’ interests. Now we ask: Why should we care about reason’s expansion? Put crudely, there is no reason to think that that which appeals to reason will appeal to us if, as Singer argues, reason has different interests (expansion, perhaps elegance) from us. So Singer’s claim that reason’s independence leads to RA can be seen to cut the other way. RE has the advantage of controlling the growth of impartial reason by appeal to our interests.⁷

This concludes my critical examination of Singer’s argument for the exclusive rationality of RA. I have agreed with Singer that the sociobiology of ethics does not exclude the possibility of a rational morality. But I have criticized his argument that this possibility restricts us to one morality, rational altruism. I have shown that his argument is marred by his failure to consider RE as an alternative to RA. In a sense, the whole argument begs the question by assuming that rational altruism is the sole candidate for the title of rational morality. This is facilitated by Singer’s ignoring how the sociobiological elaboration of egoism into reciprocal altruism adds to the attractiveness of rational egoism. We have seen that once we introduce rational egoism as a second contender, none of Singer’s arguments count decisively against it, and some even count for it.

MORALITY AND HUMAN NATURE

I have shown how none of Singer's arguments shows his favored theory, rational altruism, to be more rational than rational egoism, in the light of sociobiology. Now I can turn to other arguments that may decide this question.

Our two contending moral theories have been taken to consist of both first principles and the practical rules derived from them. This emphasis excludes two sorts of arguments that it might be tempting to introduce at this point. First, critics of RE might point to its disagreement with (some of) our considered moral judgments. The problem with this criticism is our working assumption that RE and RA are *both* plausible when developed as moral theories. Taken together, they easily explain most moral judgments. Further, the disagreement of RE with some RA-laden judgment has little critical weight, especially if RA is held for Singer's main reason, namely, that it purports to be the only reasonable moral theory. On the other side, defenders of RE are tempted to chide RA for being unrealistic, especially with respect to our biologically given nature. But this ignores the fact that RA can be elaborated to take even the most selfish human tendencies into account, as facts with an impact on our conduct. So an elaborated RA need be no less realistic than RE.

However, this last point leads to an argument I will press against RA. Singer contends that facts about our narrow tendencies cannot be used by an agent to justify his own conduct. This would be "bad faith." Blaming my own actions on my genes implies that I do not control my own behavior. . . . When we turn to ask what the ethical code of our society ought to be, however, we are dealing not with our own actions but with the actions of people in general. Statistical predictions of human behavior can be made without diminishing individual responsibility." (Pp. 153-54) To be precise, this distinguishes my own behavior from that of all other people, since in the case of "people in general" I should always take my own case as different, subject as it is to my control. Further, this distinction between self and all others is the basis for a difference in the way I ought to treat people, according to Singer's elaboration of RA. While I ought to act according to the first principle of RA directly, I should treat others according to derived rules, suitable to their less-than-fully rational nature. The point of these rules is to shape their behavior to achieve what I aim at directly, namely, universal altruism. And finally, these rules also aim to make others more like me, that is, more rational in the universal altruistic sense (p. 157).

It would be confusing to call this view a higher-level egoism. But it does manifest a disregard for others that has counted against egoism, narrowly construed. RA counts others' ordinary interests, directly, as its moral goal, and their innate tendencies, indirectly, as relevant factual constraints. But only the RA-rational moral man's *moral interests* direct the scheme. Put another way, something about everyone counts, but what is counted is selected by the higher-level goals of those who participate in Singer's favored version of rationality. In the light of this, we should not grant to RA the much-acclaimed virtues of equality and respect for persons. On the contrary, it seems to license a form of elitism that involves treating others manipulatively, with less than full respect for them as persons, for the way they naturally are and what they might aspire to.

We too easily accept that some variant of RA captures our ethical concern

for respect for persons, while certainly no egoistic theory could. Turning to the positive side of my argument, we see that this is mistaken. As the literature on reciprocal altruism has emphasized, the follower of RE should not aim to manipulate others in order to take advantage of them. The best environment for a reciprocal altruist is where as many others as possible are also reciprocal altruists. So it is in the interest of the reciprocal altruist for others to become as rational as possible, in the RE sense, and hence to become reciprocal altruists. And this is in the others' interests as well. By bringing together interest and reason for both parties, RE avoids the imperialism of "higher" reason over amoral human nature that marks RA. The RE-based reciprocal altruist appeals to others' reason—RE reason, that is—which is one of the tendencies sociobiology leads us to expect in human nature. Thus rational egoism, unlike rational altruism, encourages us to respect others as persons, as beings endowed by evolution with the ability rationally to cooperate in pursuit of their interests.⁸

1. All page references in the text are to Singer's book. Wilson's charge about philosophers' emotions is discussed on pp. 55-56 and Dawkins's on pp. 28 ff. Singer's references to these two books, which are well worth reading, are: Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1975), p. 3, and Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 28-30. Singer provides a guide to the literature in "Ethics and Sociobiology," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 11 (Winter 1982): pp. 40-64.
2. For a forceful presentation of the gene-selectionist case against the popular-species-selectionist views of Ardrey and Lorenz, see Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, who also provides a philosophically interesting discussion of the near-tautological definition of the gene as the fundamental unit of self-interest (pp. 34-39).
3. R. M. Hare's recent *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) discusses the two-tier structure of a utilitarianism similar to that which informs Singer's argument.
4. Jesse Kalin, "Two Kinds of Moral Reasoning: Ethical Egoism as a Moral Theory," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 5 (Nov. 1975): pp. 323-56, explicitly develops a two-tiered moral theory with an egoistic first principle. His discussion of the "primacy" of the reason-giving ability of egoism (p. 330) is also relevant.
5. I admit to doubts about applying *moral* to RE. For example, Kalin, "Moral Reasoning," n. 3, applies *moral* only to the more global principles derived from his principle of egoism. This tension will be even more acute for some, I am sure, when I draw out the contrast to the terms Singer uses for RA; RE is particular, not universal, and partial, not impartial. Many, like Kalin, insist that RE be a universal principle: everyone should pursue his own interests. But I would argue that a theory can be based on the weaker particular principle: I should pursue my own interests. Once we see that rules of reciprocity follow from this premise, it is in my interest for others to act in *their* interests, so that we can reach a more global principle as a derived result. I am inclined to call RE a moral first principle, due to the consequences that can be derived from it. But my reasons for this must be given elsewhere; and since my argument here does not depend on this terminological point, those unconvinced can substitute *practical* for *moral* throughout.
6. Singer acknowledges Colin McGinn, "Evolution, Animals, and the Basis of Morality," *Inquiry* 22: 81-99, yet Singer's treatment of the rational element is more general than McGinn's, which relies on strong dogmatic Kantian assumptions about morality. I should note that my argument has shared with Singer and McGinn a rather dogmatic insistence on basing ethics on reason abstractly considered, rather than basing it on a more general appeal to human nature which includes a noncognitive element. A corrective to this narrowness can be found in Mary Midgely's worthwhile book, *Beast and Man* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978). Nonetheless, balance is hard to achieve in these matters; see Midgely's fierce attack on the link between evolution and rational egoism in "Gene-Guggling," *Philosophy* 54 (Oct. 1979): 439-58.

7. Were there space to rehearse Dawkins's fascinating idea of the independent evolution of ideas, or "memes" (*Selfish Gene*, chap. 11), we might tie this criticism to Mackie's observation that the effectiveness of something like RA can be explained by the fitness of the *RA idea*, not the fitness of the behavior it requires. J. L. Mackie, "The Law of the Jungle: Moral Alternatives and Principles of Evolution," *Philosophy* 53 (1978): p. 462.

8. Much more needs to be said about the significance of reciprocal altruism for the moral theory of rational egoism. The most far-reaching development of reciprocal altruism is a series of papers by Robert Axelrod culminating in the formal presentation in "The Emergence of Cooperation among Egoists," *American Political Science Review* 75 (June 1981): 306-18. I develop rational egoism in the light of some of these results in my "Simple Minded Solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma," mimeographed (Toronto: York University, 1981).