

Generalization in Ethics: An Essay in the Logic of Ethics, with the Rudiments of a System of Moral Philosophy.



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CRITICAL STUDIES

Generalization in Ethics : An Essay in the Logic of Ethics, with the Rudiments of a System of Moral Philosophy. By MARCUS GEORGE SINGER. (New York : Alfred A. Knopf. London : Eyre & Spottiswoode. New York, 1961 ; London, forthcoming. Pp. xxxviii + 351. Price 30s).

Professor Singer's book is to be doubly welcomed : it provides us with a full and closely reasoned treatment of the most central feature of moral arguments, and one the better understanding of which would do more than anything else to advance moral philosophy ; and it is to be heartily recommended as a text-book. It can be predicted that any student who has worked through it under an accurate teacher, and has thought out for himself which of its arguments will hold water and which will not, will have greatly improved his understanding of the subject. It is not, however, a book which should be read without care, since the writer argues always confidently, and sometimes over-confidently, and readers will be well advised if they are correspondingly cautious and vigilant.

It is the writer's thesis that there is a type of argument, central to moral reasoning, whose form he exhibits as follows (p. 61) : " If everyone were to do x , the consequences would be disastrous (or undesirable) ; therefore no one ought to do x ". The steps of the argument are as follows. The first is founded on what he calls the generalized principle of consequences : " If the consequences of everyone's doing x would be undesirable, then not everyone has the right to do x " (p. 66). The second is founded on what he calls the generalization principle : " If not everyone has the right to do x , then not anyone (no one) has the right to do x " (ib.). He elsewhere adds the necessary rider : ". . . without a reason or justification ". The book is devoted to the elucidation of this type of argument, to the clearing away of misunderstandings and objections, and to the discussion of the views of philosophers (especially Kant) who have advocated methods of moral reasoning which have an affinity with it.

Many of the objections which have been urged against this type of argument are indeed misconceived or based on misunderstandings ; and Professor Singer provides some satisfactory and clearly-stated answers to them. There are other objections, however, which he does not seem to me to answer so conclusively. In confining myself, for reasons of space, to these latter, I do not wish to be taken as setting out to carp at what I think to be a very helpful book ; but these faults (as they seem to me to be) in the argument do, collectively, point to a more deep-seated weakness in Professor Singer's approach to the subject which it will be useful to explore.

The most important of the means by which he defends the argument rests upon the rider, already mentioned, “. . . without a reason or justification”. This enables him to deal effectively with objections which adduce cases in which, though it would be undesirable if everyone did x , it is not undesirable for some specially placed or qualified people to do x . But in dealing thus with this objection, he encounters the difficulty of saying just what is to *count* as a reason or justification—in other words, what particular circumstances or qualifications can justify *me* in doing something which *everybody* ought not to do. This resolves itself into the following problem : given that an action would exemplify some principles such that it would be undesirable for everybody to follow them, and would also exemplify other principles such that it would not be undesirable, how are we to say whether it is or is not the case that the action ought not to be done ? Which of these many principles are we to take account of in assessing the morality of the action ?

Professor Singer uses, in the attempt to overcome this and kindred difficulties, the notions of ‘invertibility’ and ‘reiterability’. He says that a generalization argument is to be discarded as invalid in a certain application if in that application it is either invertible or reiterable. It is *invertible* if we can say, not only that it would be undesirable if everybody did x , but also that it would be undesirable if nobody did x . So we may reject from consideration all principles which are formulated in such a way as to make this the case. It is *reiterable* if the expression which is to be substituted for ‘ x ’ is such that, although indeed it would be undesirable for everybody to do x , it would likewise be undesirable for everybody to do y_1 or y_2 . . . (etc. *ad. lib.*), where y_1 , y_2 , etc. are expressions such that they can, in turn, be ‘arbitrarily’ (a word whose meaning remains unclear) substituted for ‘ x ’. He gives the following example : it would, indeed, be undesirable if everybody dined at *this* restaurant (because then it would become so overcrowded that nobody could be served) ; but we cannot argue that therefore nobody ought to dine at this restaurant. This application of the generalization argument is ruled out because it is reiterable ; we could substitute for *this* restaurant any other restaurant, and the argument, if it held in the first case, would still hold ; we could therefore argue that nobody ought to dine at *any* restaurant. But the fact that it would have this absurd result should make us, in Professor Singer’s view, rule out this application of the argument. Having rejected those applications which are invertible or reiterable, we shall be left (apart from some other qualifications which there is no space to mention) with those which are valid.

These are ingenious devices, but they arouse suspicion. Is Professor Singer, in effect, saying ‘ It is objected that in certain applications my rule of inference would lead to absurd consequences ; I therefore amend the rule to say that if it leads to such absurd consequences in some case, it is not to be followed in that case ’ ? This would be like having a rule of inference in logic which carried the rider ‘ But if the use of this rule leads to a false con-

clusion, do not follow it'. I am inclined to think, however, that the *ad hoc* appearance of Professor Singer's defence is misleading, and that this objection is unfair to him.

A more serious difficulty is this : when exactly are we to say that a generalization argument is reiterable? In the 'restaurant' example just referred to, the reason why we can substitute a reference to any restaurant is that this restaurant is picked out by means of the word 'this'—a word which does not specify any *property* of the restaurant ; it is not, therefore, in virtue of being any particular *kind* of restaurant (of anything *about* it) that it is undesirable for everybody to dine at it ; nothing therefore has been mentioned, in this argument, to rule out the same thing being said about any restaurant, whatever its properties. If, on the other hand, we had said 'It would be undesirable if everybody dined at a restaurant which was Φ (where ' Φ ' is a universal term), the argument would not be reiterable *ad lib.*, because we could only use it concerning restaurants which were Φ . So stated, the rule against reiterable generalization arguments would be a neat way of expressing the well-known and (I am convinced) important thesis that moral principles are not allowed to contain any uneliminable singular terms, or references to individuals.

But this cannot be Professor Singer's meaning ; for he cites examples of reiteration in which the expressions substituted for '*x*' are universal terms. For example, he says that the fact that, if everybody with twelve toes on each foot fails to pay his taxes, the consequences would not be undesirable, cannot be used to justify such a man in not paying his taxes, because other unusual properties could be substituted for this one, and the argument reiterated. Indeed, I have not found in the book any use of the distinction between singular and universal terms in this context. But it may be that, through neglecting the importance of this distinction, he thinks that a ban on reiterable generalization arguments which has a sound basis when 'reiterable' means 'reiterable by substituting references to other individuals' can be extended to cover cases where it means 'reiterable by substituting other universal terms'. And this may have concealed from him the fact that (though he shows himself aware of the difficulty, and tries to meet it) he fails (or so it seemed to me) to give us a clear way of distinguishing between those universal properties, possession of which really does justify a man in making an exception of his own case, and those which cannot be so used.

I shall not try to say here how I think this distinction can be made, since I have elsewhere, in a forthcoming book (*Freedom and Reason*, 6.8) made my own attempt to deal with this difficult problem. This, however, depends upon views about the nature of moral judgments and moral reasoning which are foreign to Professor Singer's approach ; it depends on confronting the agent with a choice between universal prescriptive principles which are to hold in hypothetical situations as well as actual. Professor Singer, on the other hand, says little about the prescriptivity of moral judg-

ments. This may be because he has a philosophical trash-basket labelled "relativism", of the contents of which he speaks in a disagreeably contemptuous tone of voice, and into which he might be inclined to put (though he does not say so) some other theories besides the ones (many of them absurd) which he actually mentions. If prescriptivism were being lumped with these as objects of his contempt, it would explain why he has failed to notice that generalization arguments cannot be successfully mounted unless moral judgments are recognized to be prescriptive (cf. *op. cit.*, 6.3, 5, 9).

Another symptom of the same attitude may be his failure to consider very deeply how we are to determine whether a certain state of affairs would be undesirable. "I see no need for qualms", he says, "about the fact that many of my judgments or assumptions of desirability are unsupported. They need no support" (p. 95). This would be so only if he were always arguing with someone who had the same desires as himself. He relies, it is true, on what he calls "clear cases", in which we can be sure that, as a matter of contingent fact, nearly everybody *will* have the same desires: "An earthquake is a disaster . . . and so would be a nuclear war; and this does not depend on anyone's theory of value, or on anyone's interests or point of view, except in exceptional circumstances" (p. 94). But it may be questioned whether even in these extreme cases the undesirability of what happens is independent of whether people do or do not desire that it should not happen (however contingently sure we can be that they will not). It may be pointed out in passing that, if it were absolutely certain that nobody with the power to start a nuclear war would desire to do so, the future of the human race would be more assured than it is. Happily, he seems aware of the gap in his argument which is left here: "an application of the argument cannot be expected to carry conviction for one who does not regard these consequences as undesirable, or who regards them as positively desirable" (*ib.*). He promises, later in the book, to "settle, or to bypass, the question whether the consequences would be desirable" (p. 95). There, he discusses Kant's categorical imperative, with its criterion of "*being able to will that the maxim of an action be a universal law*" (my italics). It is in this valuable discussion of Kant, and in particular of his doctrine about 'contradiction in the will', that he gets nearest to an awareness of the importance of the prescriptive character of moral judgments, without, however, giving it sufficient emphasis.

He consistently uses the formulation "It would be undesirable if *everybody* did *x*". This makes it look as if the argument always rests on the premiss that, if everybody did *x*, there would be too much of a crowd doing *x*—i.e., that the wrongness of doing *x* arises from the fact that if a great *quantity* of people did it, the consequences would be undesirable. But if this were the basis of the argument, it might be thought unpalatable to conclude that, because actions like *x*, done in quantity, would be undesirable because of the quantity, therefore it would be wrong for such an action to be done just once (even if the agent knows that he is not going to be imitated). He argues

against this objection ; but he does not notice that, at any rate in some contexts, it is not necessary to rely on mere quantity in this way. If an action is wrong, it is wrong because it would be wrong for *anyone* (N.B. not 'everyone') to do it in just these circumstances, whether or not anyone else did it in the same or in different circumstances. Sometimes the demand for generalization is to be regarded, not as an appeal to the dire consequences of an action being repeated by everybody, but as a demand that the agent should look at the proposed act, not from his own particular point of view, but from those of other people. It is because he cannot acquiesce in anybody else doing this to *him* that he is brought to agree that it would be wrong for him to do it to another. Whether these be regarded as two different arguments, or as two different formulations of the same argument, it is most important to distinguish them ; and it is a pity that Professor Singer says so little about the second.

As well as having a prejudice against any theory that could possibly be labelled 'relativist', he seemed to me to be unreasonably hostile to the view that the generalization principle is not itself a moral principle, but a truth about the logical character of moral judgments. This is perhaps because he thinks (as many do) that if it were merely a logical truth, it could not have any relevance to moral problems. I have tried to show elsewhere (*op. cit.*, 3.1 ff.) that this view is mistaken ; here I shall say only that some of the weakest arguments in the book occur where he is attempting to refute Professor Nowell-Smith's opinions on this question. For example, when he says on p. 50, "To act in accordance with moral principles is to be moral", he fails to distinguish between the sense of the word 'moral' in which only *good* moral principles are moral, and that in which even bad moral principles are moral principles. In the first sense his statement is true, in the second false ; but it would have to be true in the second sense if his argument against Nowell-Smith were going to be valid.

Nevertheless, it can be safely affirmed that Professor Singer's book contains many more good arguments than bad, and that nothing but profit can come from the serious study of it.

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