

## Consequentialism and Global Ethics

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‘[T]here is scarcely any widely spread political institution or practice – however universally condemned by current opinion - which has not been sincerely defended as conducive to human happiness on the whole’

- Henry Sidgwick, *The Elements of Politics*, Pt. I, Ch. III, Sect. 3.

## ABSTRACT

The consequentialist claim that right actions are those that result in the best outcome impartially considered is sometimes said to be especially illuminating for framing the basic challenges of global ethics. In this paper, I make four observations about the consequentialist approach to global ethics. First, I show that in some of its most influential manifestations, the challenge is grounded in a substantial and controversial theory of practical reason. Second, I show how the implications of the consequentialist claim are limited by the fact that all else is never equal. Third, I argue that the consequentialist challenge retains its bite even if consequentialism is rejected as a comprehensive ethical theory. Fourth, I argue that one of the basic insights embodied in the consequentialist challenge is that a systematic attitude of complete indifference to the suffering others is an important ethical vice.

## KEY WORDS

CONSEQUENTIALISM; CONSTRAINTS; GLOBAL ETHICS; INDIFFERENCE;  
PERMISSIONS; SIDGWICK, HENRY; SINGER, PETER; UNGER, PETER

## *Consequentialism and Global Ethics*

The consequentialist claim that right actions are those that result in the best outcome impartially considered is sometimes said to be especially illuminating for framing the basic challenges of global ethics. If we take impartiality to mean that everyone is to count for one and no-one for more than one, the consequentialist claim entails that, all else equal, we have no less reason to care about the suffering of distant strangers than about the suffering of our nearest and dearest. A number of consequentialists have drawn direct implications from this about the ethical responsibilities of individuals and institutions in contemporary society. In this paper, I make four observations about the consequentialist approach to global ethics. First, I show that in some of its most influential manifestations, the consequentialist challenge is grounded in a theory of practical reason that seldom plays an explicit role in discussions of global ethics. Second, I show how the practical implications of the consequentialist claim are limited by the fact that all else is never equal. Thus, not only will any plausible consequentialist approach to global ethics have a self-effacing aspect. There are also ethically relevant considerations that any consequentialist approach may struggle to account for. Third, I argue that the consequentialist challenge retains its bite even if consequentialism is rejected as a comprehensive moral theory. Fourth, I argue that one of the most important insights embodied in the consequentialist challenge is that systematic indifference to the suffering of others is an important ethical vice.

### *The Consequentialist Challenge*

According to consequentialism, the right thing to do is to promote what is good. The idea is as attractive as it is deceptive. On the one hand, it is attractive because it is hard to deny that it is reasonable to act for the best. Surely, to prefer a lesser good to a greater is, in some sense, irrational. On the other hand, the idea is deceptive because it is hard to say precisely what acting for the best amounts to. What should we understand by ‘good’ or ‘best’? Should we promote the good by aiming to act for the best on every individual occasion, or by following a policy that will have the best consequences only in the long run? How do we deal with the fact that we are often either unsure or ignorant about the far-reaching effects of our actions? Consequentialists themselves disagree about these and many other questions.

The consequentialist approach to global ethics is often motivated by appeals to vivid examples (c.f. Singer 1972; Unger 1992). The following is a version of one of the best-known examples of this kind. Imagine that you become aware of a stranger who is drowning in a shallow pond near you. You are not the only one else around, but you have good reason to believe that if you don’t help then no-one else will.<sup>i</sup> With little effort you can pull the stranger out of the pond and save his life. It may seem obvious that it would be seriously wrong of you not to. Indeed, in some countries it would be against the law for you not to. Now imagine that you become aware that another stranger is dying of dysentery in a country far away from you. You are not the only one who can help, but if you don’t then no-one else will. With little effort you can make a \$5 donation to a relief fund and save his life. Perhaps it no longer seems obvious that it would be

seriously wrong of you not to. Certainly, it is unlikely to be against the law for you not to. Why so? If we agree that you should care enough about the good of others to save the stranger drowning in the pond, then surely by parity of reasoning, you should care enough about the good of others to save the stranger dying of dysentery. As Singer points out, the mere fact of physical distance is not an ethically relevant difference. Nor does there seem to be a relevant difference between death by drowning and death by dysentery. And the sacrifice involved in writing a cheque for \$5 as opposed to pulling someone out of a pond can hardly be thought to make the crucial difference either. According to the consequentialist, this settles the issue. It is as wrong for you not to aid in the one case as it is in the other, all other things being equal.<sup>ii</sup> This is a conclusion with potentially radical implications.<sup>iii</sup> For if the consequentialist is right, many of us ought to change our lives. Given the undeniable fact of massive suffering across the globe, most people reading these words are arguably complicit in the perpetuation of an ethical atrocity. We may not often encounter a drowning stranger in a pond. Yet scores of innocent strangers die from dysentery and other trivial ailments every day in countries across the world. And most of us apparently do nothing. This, in a nutshell, is the consequentialist challenge in global ethics.

Contemporary discussions of consequentialism and global ethics have been marked by a focus on examples such as that of the shallow pond. In this literature, distinctions are drawn and analogies made between different cases about which both the consequentialist and his or her interlocutor are assumed to have a more or less firm view. One assumption in this literature is that progress can be made by making judgements about simple actual or counterfactual examples, and then employing a principle of equity to the effect that like cases be treated alike, in order to work out what to think about more complex actual cases. It is only fair to say that in

practice such attempts to rely only on judgements about simple cases have a tendency to produce trenchant stand-offs. It is important to remember, therefore, that for some consequentialists the appeal to simple cases is neither the only, nor the most basic, ground for their criticism of the ethical status quo. For some of the historically most prominent consequentialists the evidential status of judgements about simple cases depends on their derivability from basic ethical principles (plus knowledge of the relevant facts). Thus, in *The Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick argues that ethical thought is grounded in a small number of self-evident axioms of practical reason. The first of these is that we ought to promote our own good. The second is that the good of any one individual is objectively of no more importance than the good of any other (or, in Sidgwick's notorious metaphor, no individual's good is more important 'from the point of view of the Universe' than that of any other). The third is that we ought to treat like cases alike. Taken together, Sidgwick takes these axioms to imply a form of consequentialism. We ought to promote our own good. Yet since our own good is objectively no more important than the good of anyone else, we ought to promote the good of others as well. And in order to treat like cases alike, we have to weigh our own good against the good of others impartially, all other things being equal.<sup>iv</sup> It follows that the rightness of our actions is fixed by what is best for the entire universe of ethically relevant beings. To claim otherwise is to claim for oneself and one's preferences a special status they do not possess. When understood along these lines, consequentialism is by definition a global ethics: the good of everyone should count for everyone, no matter their identity, location, or personal and social attachments, now or hereafter.<sup>v</sup> Some version of this view is also accepted by a number of contemporary consequentialists, including Peter Singer, who writes that it is 'preferable to proceed as Sidgwick did: search for undeniable fundamental axioms, [and] build up a moral theory from them'

(Singer 1974, 517; Singer 1981). For these philosophers the question of our ethical duties to others is not only a matter of our responses to cases like the shallow pond. It is also a matter of whether these responses cohere with an ethics based on first principles. If you are to reject the consequentialist challenge, therefore, you will have to show what is wrong with those principles.

*All other things are not equal*

All plausible versions of consequentialism agree that our duties to promote the good impartially in practice are limited. Part of the explanation is that other things are never equal. There are several ways in which other things not being equal affects questions in global ethics. Here I shall mention two. The first derives from all else not being equal on consequentialist terms. The second derives from all else not being equal in ways that threaten the claim of consequentialism to be a comprehensive ethical theory.

First, all plausible forms of consequentialism are partly self-effacing. It is natural to think that our effective pursuit of impartial good favours an ethical division of labour. Each individual can be liberated from the task of aiming at impartial good directly provided the framework of social interaction is so adjusted that each individual's pursuit of partial good also promotes impartial good. This indirect mechanism for the promotion of impartial good will sometimes require incentives for individuals to comply with social norms when complying is perceived to be against their individual interest. According to the consequentialist, the provision of such incentives is the ultimate rationale for social institutions such as families, communities, societies, or states (c.f. Harrison 2000). Thus, government is good because the instruments of state

encourage individuals to pursue partial good in such a way as to benefit (or not undermine) impartial good. Furthermore, government can be good for the individual, for at least two reasons. First, the existence of government can enhance the individual pursuit of partial good so long as this pursuit does not conflict with rules designed to promote impartial good. One obvious example of this is publicly recognised standards of fair trade. Second, the existence of government can enhance the individual pursuit of impartial good by embedding individual effort within a wider network of impartially beneficial institutional action, thereby reducing the cost to the individual of acting in favour of impartial good. One obvious example of this is the provision of public services paid for by taxation. The latter feature is of particular interest in global ethics. For even if it follows from consequentialism that my own good is objectively of no more importance than the good of distant strangers, it does not follow that I am wrong in practice to be more interested in my own good than in the good of distant strangers. On the contrary, this kind of ethical partiality would be licensed by consequentialism against the background of effective social institutions that promote impartial good, e.g. by appropriately taxing individuals who are dedicated to the promotion of partial goods and distributing the proceeds accordingly. The consequentialist complaint against existing forms of partiality is that the necessary conditions of impartially effective social institutions do not obtain, and that the actual amounts of suffering involved are so great that no appeal to the self-effacing aspects of consequentialism can excuse existing levels of indifference towards that suffering. According to this complaint, the world as we have it is not ethically well ordered enough for the self-effacing nature of consequentialism to commend our actual dispositions. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds, in which individual pursuit of partial good is guaranteed to promote the good of all. We live in an ethical

disaster scenario, in which a tightening of the permissive norms of received morality is not only permissible, but ethically required.

There is second way in which all other things are not equal. This point is sometimes conceded by consequentialists when they say that their approach is meant to capture ‘the morality of beneficence’ (Parfit 1982; Broome 2004). There would be no point to this label unless there were a contrast class to which the morality of beneficence is compared. There are at least two historically prominent candidates for what falls into this contrast class. I shall refer to the first as ‘the ethics of choice’, to the second as ‘the ethics of nature’, and to both of them collectively as ‘the ethics of special ties’.

The ethics of choice concerns the rights and duties that derive from voluntary agency. Thus, it is widely agreed that there are some ethical relationships we stand in to others because, and only because, we have voluntarily placed ourselves in those relationships (c.f. Nozick 1974). The rights and duties that derive from the ethics of choice are paradigmatically associated with interpersonal interactions, such as promises, contracts and other forms of voluntary association. According to the ethics of choice, voluntary agency is a basic source of rights and duties, distinct from considerations of either partial or impartial good. This idea is arguably implicit in the widely shared assumption that even promises and contracts that do not promote the good ought to be given independent weight in ethical thought, all other things being equal. On this view, our duty to promote impartial good is constrained by the fact that some of our relationships with others are characterised by ties of voluntary agency which do not exist between ourselves and distant strangers. This does not entail that our duties towards others are exhausted by those that

arise directly from voluntary agency. It is compatible with accepting the ethics of choice as basic feature of ethical thought to also hold that the norms to which it gives rise ought to constrain our actions all other things being equal, in the same way as the norms arising from the ethics of beneficence.

The ethics of nature is distinguished from the ethics of choice by the fact that not all special ties arise directly from our own voluntary actions. Thus, it is widely held that we owe a distinct form of respect towards members of our family, our basic relationship with whom is not normally a result of any voluntary action on our part. Historically, it has been common to claim that we owe a special form of respect to our community, nation, or state; some of which we will normally have chosen our membership of voluntarily, and none of which may offer a prudentially attractive right of exit. On this view, our duty to promote the good impartially is constrained by the fact that some of our relationships are characterised by a tie of collective identity which does not exist between us and members of other social groups. Once more, this does not entail that our duties to others are exhausted by those that derive from the ethics of nature. If the ethics of nature gives rise to basic ethical norms it is reasonable to think that these should constrain our actions all other things being equal, just as the norms arising from the ethics of choice or beneficence.

If the ethics of special ties is a basic feature of ethical thought, our ethical relationship towards others is more complicated than the ethics of beneficence suggests. Thus, between you and any distant stranger there will be a plurality of special ties the ethical significance of which must be taken into account before we can draw definite conclusions about the nature and extent of your

all-things-considered duties. This is not to say that if we take account of the ethics of special ties this will undermine the consequentialist challenge. Indeed, the contrary is arguably the case. First, the ethics of choice may suggest that we are bound by duties of reparation towards distant strangers whose suffering is a consequence of voluntary agency in which either we, or those to whom we owe are related by special ties, have been voluntarily involved (c.f. Barry 1982). Second, the ethics of nature may suggest that the way we have traditionally distinguished between those we do, and those we do not, count as members of our ethical community is based on ignorance and arbitrary prejudice, such as sexism, racism or even 'speciesism' (c.f. Singer 1981). Third, there are ways of formulating the consequentialist challenge that undermine the force of appealing to the social complexities deriving from special ties in defence of the ethical status quo. Thus, it should be obvious that neither pulling a stranger out of a pond, nor writing a cheque for \$5, is likely to make many readers of these words neglect their special ties to kin or country. The question is not whether all other things are equal. The question is whether enough is.

The limits imposed on the ethics of beneficence by the ethics of special ties can be divided into two kinds, which (following common usage) I shall refer to as 'constraints' and 'permissions' (c.f. Scheffler 1982). Constraints restrict promotion of the good as a matter of obligation, for example where the acts involved would infringe on important rights of those affected. Thus, it might be argued that it is not permissible to steal another person's property in order to give it to someone else who would benefit more from it. Some consequentialists question this view. Thus, Peter Unger suggests that it would be wrong for an employee to not steal small amounts of money from their employer and give it to charity, provided they could get away with it (Unger

1992). However, most consequentialists stop short of making this claim on the grounds that a general respect for property rights is indirectly justifiable on consequentialist terms (Sidgwick 1891; Hooker 2000). On this view, the effective distribution of institutional surplus is better approached by means of a system of government taxation or the like, including incentives that favour charitable giving. Either way, the examples with which we started have no obvious implications that run foul of property rights or other important constraints. In each case, the claim is that you ought to act so as to promote the good impartially on the assumption that you can do so at little or no cost to yourself. In undertaking to do so, you do not necessarily interfere with anyone's rights, including your own.

Permissions allow failure to promote the good in restricting the range of obligation, e.g. where the acts involved conflict with important personal commitments. Thus, it is widely accepted that it is permissible to distribute the fruits of one's labour primarily among family or friends, even if there are other people who would benefit more from them. To this extent, thinking in terms of permissions arguably comes closest to capturing the essence of the received view about our ethical relations to distant needy that is the primary target of the consequentialist challenge. According to this view, we are obviously permitted to help the distant needy, and indeed it might be better if we did. Yet we have no obligation to, so long as we put the resources thereby saved to good use. Many consequentialists would agree with this claim. First, some partial values are indirectly justifiable on consequentialist terms. Second, permissions do not entail that acting to promote the good impartially is morally prohibited. The permissibility of partial concerns is consistent with the equal permissibility of impartial commitment. Other consequentialists would object that this compromise conjures a virtue out of a vice. Short of neglecting our nearest and

dearest to the point of infringing their rights, there is no rationally defensible case for the policy of promoting our own good exclusively at the cost of others, at least in cases where the cost of helping others is negligible in comparison to the benefits gained. That is the lesson Singer claims to derive from the examples with which we started. Even someone defending the centrality of permissions in ethical thought may find it hard to reject this claim. As already noted, for many people reading these words, occasionally writing a cheque for \$5 and sending it to a charity would not conflict with any serious commitment to their nearest and dearest, some of whom would even hold them in higher esteem for doing so.

There is more than one way of handling permissions and constraints as they affect the consequentialist challenge. The first we have seen at work already, namely to argue that some constraints and permissions are indirectly justifiable on consequentialist terms. On this view, constraints and permissions are strongly defeasible, in the sense that their strength and scope is a direct function of what will promote impartial good in the long run. If so, the strength and scope of permissions and constraints will vary considerably across history and across cultures, sometimes in ways that contemporary readers will find surprising or uncomfortable.<sup>vi</sup> Furthermore, and given the extraordinary increase in our capacity to help distant strangers highlighted by Singer and others, there is no *a priori* guarantee that the permissions and constraints that apply in our actual social circumstances will commend the status quo. Finally, even if permissions and constraints understood along consequentialist lines actually do support the status quo, they will do so by displacing what for many is their most natural explanation. For as understood by the consequentialist, your duty towards your nearest and dearest is not ultimately a matter of the intimate relationship in which you stand to them, but rather a matter of

how conducive such relationships are to the promotion of an impartial good with which you may struggle to stand in any meaningful personal relation (c.f. Williams 2006). It is partly this fact that explains why so many philosophers have failed to be convinced by consequentialism, even in its most sophisticated contemporary formulations.

The alternative way to handle permissions and constraints is to admit a plurality of basic ethical considerations, grounded in considerations of the good, choice, and nature, etc. (c.f. Ross 1930)). This approach is incompatible with consequentialism considered as a comprehensive ethical theory. It is nevertheless important to bear in mind when evaluating the consequentialist challenge in global ethics. Consider, once more, the examples with which we began. Suppose that special ties give rise to ethical considerations that are just as basic as considerations of beneficence. Why should we think this makes a crucial difference to the consequentialist challenge? Surely, it would have to be a very important promise that would trump your duty to save someone next to you from drowning? Likewise, it would surely have to be an exceptional need of a friend that would outweigh the threat of imminent death to a distant stranger you can save at little or no cost to yourself? Even a non-consequentialist should concede that sometimes the ethics of beneficence weighs more heavily than the ethics of special ties. The gist of the consequentialist challenge therefore remains even if we reject consequentialism as a comprehensive ethical theory. Thus, even though it might be tempting to think that there are two ways to go in response to this challenge depending on whether or not you are a consequentialist, this is a mistake. Consequentialist or not, you might go either way.

## *Indifference as a Vice*

Whichever way we decide handle permissions and constraints, the consequentialist challenge forces us to question how we normally decide what counts as ethically relevant. The ethics of choice apparently allows us to draw a basic distinction between those with whom we stand in voluntary relations and everything else. The ethics of nature apparently allows us to draw a basic distinction between those with whom we are biologically, socially or otherwise continuous and everything else. The ethics of beneficence extends the domain of ethical concern to all beings in possession of whatever properties we identify as ethically relevant, whatever the relations in which we stand to them. According to those consequentialists who accept Sidgwick's axioms, our refusal to so extend the domain of ethical concern amounts to an irrational prejudice. Yet even those of us who doubt Sidgwick's axioms are faced with the challenge of defining the range of ethical concern in a way that is reflectively robust. The history of modern moral philosophy suggests that we shall only be able to do this by including among the basic features of ethical thought some version of the ethics of beneficence (c.f. Schneewind 2003). If so, any reflectively robust extension of our ethical beliefs will contain an aspect that is genuinely global in its reach. As already noted, it does not follow that this global aspect of ethical thought will be judged on reflection to be always, or even mostly, overriding. What does follow is that no reflectively robust extension of our ethical beliefs can permit a basic distinction between different beings, all of whom possess the ethically relevant properties, but only some of whom count as ethically significant. What the ethics of beneficence rules out as impermissible is a systematic attitude of complete indifference towards beings with whom we are not connected by special ties. Insofar as our actual attitudes towards ethically relevant beings in that category is characterised by such

indifference, we are to that extent guilty of exhibiting an important ethical vice. If Singer's argument succeeds in proving anything, this is arguably it. After all, in the case of the drowning stranger, it is assumed we agree it would be seriously wrong to not help, even if the person saved is not someone to whom we are connected with any obvious special ties. In accepting this point we should also accept that the consequentialist challenge cannot be dismissed by appealing either to how all ethical theories are self-effacing; how beneficence does not exhaust ethical thought; how all individual action is embedded in a complicated causal nexus of collective historical agency; how little we often know about the distant consequences of our actions; or how the ethical status of what we do is partly a function of the ethical status of past, present or future actions of others over which we have no control, and so on. True, these are serious difficulties we must face once we have decided to treat the suffering of others as something that matters.<sup>vii</sup> They do not, however, show that we are right to treat that suffering as a matter of indifference if, as in the examples with which we started, we can actually do something about it at little or no cost to ourselves.

It might be tempting to classify indifference as a vice of omission, in virtue of the fact that it seems to consist in a passive failure to respond to ethically relevant facts. This appearance is importantly misleading. There are at least two ways being indifferent, only one of which is classifiable as a simple omission. This is the kind of indifference manifested by an agent who fails to intervene in a causal process with which he or she is at best accidentally connected. Singer's example of the drowning stranger can be read as presenting an opportunity for indifference of this kind. Thus, we can imagine that the agent in question is confronted with the results of a natural accident, such as a sheet of ice breaking at the sound of thunder. A second

way of being indifferent is to not intervene in a causal process in which one is intentionally entwined. With some adjustment, Singer's example of the drowning stranger can also be read as presenting an opportunity for indifference of this kind. Thus, we can imagine the drowning stranger to be trapped in a pool of water accidentally released from the community septic tank. In this case, failure to help is less obviously a simple omission, insofar as the threat facing the stranger is one in the causes of which the agent is in some way intentionally involved. As has frequently been pointed out, many of the opportunities for indifference presented by the consequentialist challenge are (inevitably much more complex) versions of the latter kind (c.f. Pogge 2007). Thus, if the causes of world poverty include the economic relations between rich and poor countries that sustain our own standard of living, the vulnerability of many innocent strangers to death from poverty-related causes is partly conditioned by a nexus of social relations in which each of is intentionally entwined. The consequentialist challenge to those of us who belong in the privileged category is then as follows. If we do not propose to act to directly address the avoidable suffering produced by the causal nexus in which we are intentionally entwined, what else do we propose to either think, say or do (as family members, friends, colleagues, volunteers, share holders, tax payers, institutional representatives, voting citizens etc.) in order to respond to what the ethics of beneficence classifies as ethically significant suffering? If the answer is 'Nothing', then the indifference exhibited is described as a vice of 'complicity' than a vice of 'omission'.

In this respect, Singer's way of presenting the consequentialist challenge is less than helpful. True, considered as one-off opportunities to display or acquire ethical virtue his examples may awaken us from our indifferent slumbers. Yet the practical significance of Singer's discussion is

that these are not rare or isolated cases, but persistent features of our social reality. Given this fact, it is impossible to draw any sensible practical conclusions without further consideration of prevailing norms and social institutions as they actually obtain in concrete historical circumstances. A consequentialist approach to these questions would obviously take as its ultimate criterion the overall tendency of such norms and institutions to promote impartial good (c.f. Sidgwick 1891). It is therefore reasonable to think that a consequentialist approach to global ethics should encourage individuals to act so as promote the development of impartially beneficial norms and institutions. Quite apart from writing a cheque for \$5, this is something that any enfranchised member of a democratic state has a legally protected right to do. In exercising this right, it falls upon individuals to make difficult judgements about which, among the available alternatives, propose reasonable ways of handling the fact of massive human suffering in a global context in which people are related to each other not only *qua* individuals, but also *qua* members of the social entities of which they are a part. Thus, it is incumbent on us to reflect, in light of available evidence, on which part of the ethical burden is better placed on centralised systems of aid and development funded through tax receipts, donations and the like, and which part is better placed in the hands of private individuals. It is also incumbent on us to reflect on the extent to which different alternative practices are more or less effective in the prevention of suffering and injustice than other available alternatives (c.f. Pogge 1997; Ayittey 2005). In some cases, this will be a Herculean task. Either way, a systematic attitude of indifference is indefensible, both on consequentialist and non-consequentialist grounds. Even this modest conclusion is practically significant in the context of the widespread moral and political apathy seen in many contemporary societies. If so, there is a good case after all for returning to Singer's example of the shallow pond, in all its naive simplicity.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The significance of this assumption is as follows. If there are other people present who would act in your place, then your assistance is not required in order to secure the relevant good. So you are arguably permitted to not make the effort (or at least not as much effort). On the other hand, if other people present would not act in your place, then your assistance is actually required to obtain the relevant good. Singer argues that the latter scenario is analogous to our actual situation with respect to massive amounts of actual human suffering. His claim is that in this case, given that the cost of helping is small, we are required to do so, even if in some possible scenario where others were more generous we might not be. This claim conflicts with other consequentialist views, some of which claim that our duties are fixed by what would secure the relevant goods in a possible scenario where all, or most, people were more generous (c.f. Hooker 2000). The shallow pond example clearly brings out what is at stake in adopting this (less demanding) version of consequentialism. It also brings out how different versions of consequentialism will give different answers to the questions of who should help, how often, and how much. In this paper, I shall bracket these important questions by assuming that the consequentialist would answer: ‘more than most of us actually do’.

<sup>ii</sup> This way of formulating the challenge is sometimes faced with the objection that there is an ethical difference between cases where we are faced with the possibility of helping one or more identified individuals on the one hand, and cases where we are faced with the possibility of helping one or more non-identified individuals on the other. Whereas the shallow pond case clearly falls into the first category, our actual situation with respect to distant strangers normally falls into the second. It might therefore be thought that Singer’s argument trades on an ambiguity

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with respect to how we are related to the distant stranger, on one reading of which we are obliged to help and on the other reading not (or at least not obviously). On reflection, however, this objection can be seen to overshoot its target. True, there may be no reason to save the life of one non-identified individual as opposed to another, all other things being equal. It does not follow that there is no reason to save the life of any one of these individuals at all. I shall return to the ethical significance of all other things not being equal below.

<sup>iii</sup> In the final chapter of his *Living High and Letting Die*, Peter Unger stops short of this conclusion by proposing a ‘contextualist’ semantics for ethical terms, according to which the radical conclusions implied by consequentialism are correctly assertible only in the context of philosophy seminar rooms and the like. I shall ignore this complication below. Singer’s discussions of this topic make no use of this kind of sophisticated semantical casuistry.

<sup>iv</sup> Three caveats about Sidgwick: i) Sidgwick was a classical utilitarian, in the sense that he identified the good with pleasure, or happiness. This part of his theory does not, however, follow from his three self-evident axioms; ii) Sidgwick worried that there might be an irreducible conflict between two of his axioms in the sense that the rationality of moving from egoism to impartial beneficence requires a metaphysical guarantee of prudential reward for altruistic sacrifice, if not in this life then after (c.f. Schultz 2005)). This problem does not prevent Sidgwick (or his contemporary followers) from applying his theory to global ethics as if this conflict has a resolution in favour of impartial beneficence; iii) Sidgwick was aware that all else is not equal with respect to the ability of individuals to successfully promote the good directly and on their own. This partly explains his defence of what has later come to be known as ‘Government House Utilitarianism’ (c.f. Williams 1973). I shall return to this third caveat below.

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<sup>v</sup> There are particular difficulties attaching to our ethical relations to future generations, the population and identity of which is in part determined by how existing individuals act in the present. I shall bracket these issues here. For further discussion, see e.g. Mulgan 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> Thus, contemporary readers are likely to be taken aback by Sidgwick's descriptions, in *The Elements of Politics*, of native inhabitants of European colonies as 'savages' of 'inferior race', who 'though not uncivilized, are markedly inferior in civilization to the conquerors', whose dominion of the colonised territories should 'not be hampered by pedantic adherence to the forms of civilised judicial procedure' (Sidgwick 1891, Pt. I, Ch.XV, Sect. 4; Ch. XVIII, Sect. 7-8). The issue here is not that contemporary consequentialists are guilty of the same prejudices as Sidgwick. It is rather that the application of ethical theory in practice leaves hostages to historical fortune that armchair moral philosophy gives no easy handle on. It is therefore unsurprising if serious doubts remain about the idea of consequentialism as a realistic guide to politics even among those of us who take the consequentialist challenge seriously.

<sup>vii</sup> For discussion of some these complications in the context of a radical critique of the individualist assumptions embedded in contemporary moral philosophy, see Geuss 2005.