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In Defense of Sidgwick

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² E. H. Madden, "The Many Faces of Evil," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 24:481-92 (1964).

³ C. A. Campbell, *On Selfhood and Godhood* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 291.

In Defense of Sidgwick

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PROFESSOR SINGER's moral theory is centered around the *generalization argument* (GA) which has this general form: If the consequences of everyone's acting in a certain way would be undesirable, then no one ought to act in that way.¹ This argument is qualified by the *generalization principle* (GP) which states that if act A is right or wrong for one person it must also be right or wrong for any similar person in similar circumstances.² (It should be noted that a justification for *not* acting in accordance with the GA is if it can be shown that one's circumstances are *relevantly* dissimilar from those in which the act is wrong.) If a person is justified in not acting in accordance with the GA, then it is the case that everyone in similar circumstances to his is also justified in not acting in accordance with the GA.

In defending his argument Professor Singer claims against Sidgwick that the argument "not everyone will do it" (PE)—PE, or the principle of exception, stands for the argument "not everyone else will do it"—is neither an objection to nor ever a justification for someone's acting contrary to what the GA prescribes.³ The specific passage to which Singer objects is this: "It cannot be assumed as certain that it is never right to act upon a maxim of which universal application would be an undoubted evil. This assumption may seem to be involved in what was previously admitted as an ethical axiom, that what is right for me must be right for 'all persons under similar conditions.' But reflection will show that there is a special case within the range of the axiom in which its application is necessarily self-limiting, and excludes the practical universality which the axiom appears to suggest, i.e., where the agent's conditions include (1) the knowledge that the maxim is not universally accepted, and (2) a reasoned conviction that his act will not tend to make it so, to any important extent. For in this case the axiom will prac-

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tically mean that it will be right for all persons to do as the agent does, if they are sincerely convinced that their act will not be widely imitated; and this conviction must vanish if it is widely imitated . . .”⁴ The disputed issue, then, is whether or not the argument “not everyone will do it” (PE) justifies an exception to the GA.

Singer’s argument may be summarized as follows: It follows from the GP that if A attempts to justify his doing Y by claiming that although it would be undesirable for everyone to do Y, everyone will not do it, he (A) is allowing this type of reasoning to be applicable for everyone. And “if this reasoning would justify any one such action, it would justify every such action, and this would be self-contradictory” (my italics).⁵ Singer’s conclusion that such reasoning would lead to self-contradiction would be tenable only if it could be used as a justification for every such action that is contrary to the GA regardless of the circumstances of such action, i.e., anyone who wishes to except himself from a GA prescription is entitled to do so. This does not at all follow from the PE and GP. For only those who are in circumstances similar to the person who is using the PE are justified in claiming that they too, with respect to the action under consideration, be excepted from the GA. It will be shown that this consideration precludes the self-contradictory situation envisaged by Singer.

For our test case let us limit our society to five members. Act A is such an act that if performed by all five members (everyone) would produce undesirable consequences. At time T, 1 is inclined to perform A. He knows (how is irrelevant to this discussion) that 2, 3, 4, and 5 are not inclined to perform A and therefore will not use the PE as justification for such action. He also knows that his doing A will in no way, now or in the future, encourage others to do A. Therefore he concludes that he is justified in doing A.

The fact that all five members are justified in using the PE does not render it inapplicable (or self-contradictory). For everyone or anyone is *only* entitled to use the PE when in circumstances similar to 1, viz. that they know that no one is inclined to do A, hence no one will use the PE to justify doing A. Only if, as a *matter of fact*, everyone used the PE would it be self-contradictory. But if this occurred it would also be the case that the PE was not being used correctly. For if 2, 3, 4, and 5 all used the PE, it *could not* be true that anyone *knew* that no one else would do A (or use the PE to justify such action). And 2, 3, 4, and 5 cannot be in circumstances similar to 1 since they could not *know*, as 1 does, that no one else is inclined to do A and that no one else would use the PE to justify his doing A. Therefore, it does not follow from the GP, as Singer maintains, that everyone can use the PE to justify his action since the circumstances of 2, 3, 4, and 5 are not similar to those of 1. Thus one genuine use of the PE, consistent with the GP, logically

precludes its general implementation which would lead us to self-contradiction.

To illustrate the above: Suppose that I were a member of a society where included in the positive morality of that society was an intense aversion toward doing act A. Let it be further supposed that I could know that the other members of the society would not, as a *matter of fact*, do A, hence no one would use the PE as justification for such action. Why is not the PE a justification for my doing it? The fact that everyone could use my reasoning is irrelevant for two reasons: (1) as a *matter of fact* they will not and (2) they could do so only if they were in my (relevantly similar) circumstances, i.e., if they know that as a *matter of fact* no one else will do it. But they cannot be in circumstances similar to mine since they could not know, as I do, that no one else is inclined to do A, and hence no one will use the PE to justify his doing A. Therefore, the fact that someone knows that no one else will do an act that is undesirable if everyone did it shows that that person is in relevantly different circumstances from those in which the act is wrong and thereby no longer under the jurisdiction of the GA.

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NOTES

¹ Marcus George Singer, *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Indefensible Impersonal Egoism

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IT HAS recently been argued by Peter Hare, following the lead of John Hospers, that impersonal egoism is at least a not impossible ethical view, and not accompanied by such odd self-referring characteristics as would make it tantamount to impossible.¹ The purpose of this discussion is to show that this view is mistaken. The discussion includes three parts. First is a formulation of the basic principle of impersonal egoism. Second is an argument to show that Hare's and Hospers' analogy with trying to win a game both fails