Christian Personalism versus Utilitarianism: An Analysis of Their Approaches to Love and Suffering*

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Abstract

Although Christian ethics and contemporary utilitarian ethics both employ terms such as “love” and “compassion” in their efforts to deal with human suffering, they are in fact polar opposite ethical views. This fact is not at all easy to discern. One key to perceiving the radical opposition between them lies in clarifying their respective concepts of love and suffering and the relation between the two. In Christian personalism, suffering is always understood as the suffering of individual persons, while in utilitarianism, suffering is primarily understood as a quantifiable entity detached from the individuals who experience it. This detachment of suffering from individuals leads to the depersonalizing and commodifying recommendations of utilitarianism. The dignity of persons as understood in Christian anthropology serves as the foundation of Christian ethics and is the only basis on which ethics can avoid commodifying people. The article begins with an explanation of the utilitarian approach to suffering and its concept of love. It then proceeds to express the view of love and suffering that flows from the Christian perspective. The article concludes by exposing the inherently self-defeating structure of utilitarian ethics and offers the hope-filled, if challenging, approach of Christian personalism. Although Christian anthropology and ethics developed within the historical context of Christianity, and in fact could only have developed there, the arguments here are primarily philosophical elucidations of the differences between the two opposing schools of thought discussed, while here and there including occasional theological points.

Summary: The article examines the difference between Christian ethics and utilitarian ethics, bringing out their stark opposition on the topics of love, suffering and the human person.

Keywords

Christian personalism, Dignity, Ethics, Love, Suffering, Utilitarian

Utilitarianism Defined and Its Conceptions of Suffering and Love Explained

One well-known attempt to deal with the difficult question of suffering from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the ethical movement known as utilitarianism. This ethical theory found its first well-worked-out defense in Bentham's ([1789] 1939) *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Subsequently, Mill ([1863] 1987) developed a vigorous philosophical defense of

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utilitarianism against Bentham's critics in his *Utilitarianism*.

Three basic principles make up utilitarian ethics: *The consequentialist principle*, which states that "the rightness, or wrongness, of an action is determined by the goodness, or badness of the results that flow from it" (Quinton 1989, 1); second, the *hedonist principle*, which states that "the only thing that is good in itself is pleasure and the only thing bad in itself is pain" (Quinton 1989, 1); finally, *the principle of extent*, which takes into account the number of people affected by the action (Bentham [1789] 1939, 804). The following simple formulation of ethical utilitarianism emerges: *the rightness of an action is determined by its contribution to the pleasure of the greatest number of people affected by it*.

The principle of extent distinguishes utilitarianism from basic hedonism. A strict ethical hedonist would agree with the consequentialist and the hedonistic principles but would reject the principle of extent, saying, "those actions are right which increase *my* pleasure." A utilitarian, by contrast, takes into account the pleasure of the greatest number of people concerned, calculating himself in as no more or less important than one unit who can experience pleasure. Mill ([1863] 1987) encapsulates this idea:

the happiness¹ which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. (p. 288)

Professor Peter Singer² (1993) has committed to these principles, though he does not speak of "pleasure fulfillment," as classical utilitarianism does, but rather of "preference fulfillment" (p. 94) and "interest fulfillment," saying, "we define 'interests' broadly enough, so that we count anything people desire as in their interests" (p. 13). Of all people who can experience the desire to have their preferences fulfilled, a calculation ought to be made in order to discern which act will result in the satisfaction of the most preferences. That action *ought* to be chosen,

to think ethically . . . my own interests cannot count for more, simply because they are my own, than the interests of others. In place of my own interests, I now have to take into account the

interests of all those affected by my decision. This requires me to weigh up all these interests and adopt the course of action most likely to maximize the interests of those affected. . . . I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected. (Singer 1993, 13)³

Singer (1981) therefore sees all other considerations, including absolute moral norms, such as the Ten Commandments, which propose not doing that act which would increase the overall number of fulfilled preferences, as constraining on what his moral system of morality would have us carry out,

[F]rom trite rules against lying and stealing to such noble constructions as justice and human rights . . . when the debunked principles have been scrutinized, found wanting, and cleared away, we will be left with nothing but the impartial rationality of the principle of equal consideration of interests. (p. 151)⁴

Utilitarianism accepts as morally relevant⁵ what we could call "suffering as a quantifiable entity." Although Singer (2003) is deeply interested in reducing suffering⁶ in the world, he also favors preference utilitarianism over hedonistic utilitarianism because "Many people prefer to live a life with less happiness or pleasure in it, and perhaps even more pain and suffering, if they can thereby fulfil other important preferences" (p. 528). It follows from this view that, "The right act is the one that will, in the long run satisfy more preferences than it will thwart" (p. 528). Suffering and the thwarting of preferences are morally relevant in utilitarian systems because they are the contrary opposites of the only goods: pleasure or preference fulfillment. Utilitarianism could be represented by saying that if we could stick a thermometer into the world which would measure the amount of overall suffering or preference thwarting, then a right action is any one that makes the needle go down. For this reason, utilitarianism denies the category of acts termed in Catholic moral theology "intrinsically immoral," that is, acts which may never be chosen.⁷ Any act that succeeds in reducing suffering or fulfilling preferences is in this system considered morally right.

Singer's (1981) view of quantifiable suffering as the highest morally relevant factor leads him to draw the conclusion that the behavior of Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta was irrational, indeed he might even say immoral,

Mother Teresa described her love for others as love for each of a succession of individuals, rather than “love of mankind, merely as such.” If we were more rational, we would be different: we would use our resources to save as many lives as possible, irrespective of whether we do it by reducing the road toll or by saving specific, identifiable lives. (p. 157)

This remark exposes the utilitarian view of love. Singer seems to perceive a mutually exclusive and competitive relationship between the following two types of love,⁸

- A. *Individual love* in which two persons face each other. Mother Teresa’s use of the word “succession” implies that each individual relationship is based on an attitude of care and respect that demands one’s full attention to that person before moving on to the next person.
- B. *Nonindividual love*, which Singer calls “love of mankind, merely as such.”

The nature of the competition seems to be that love A, if practiced, saps time, energy, and resources from love B. Thus, the perceived irrationality of practicing A is grounded in the utilitarian principle of extent: this principle assumes that reducing the quantity of suffering overrides all other ethical concerns and, staying with the traffic law scenario, because Mother Teresa is not, for example, spending her energy calculating auto accident rates against various speed limit options, she is not as rational as she might be. Singer thinks that to be morally correct, Mother Teresa should sacrifice the time she would spend focusing on one person such that each person she meets knows and experiences that she cares deeply about him or her. That time should instead be used to focus on “mankind.” But mankind cannot be loved because it is not a person.

Because utilitarian ethical theory in this way relegates individual, personal love to the sidelines, this causes the question to arise: why does this ethical view have such a large following? One possible answer⁹ is that there is a plausibility to it grounded in a kernel of truth: we *do* all hope that large-scale suffering diminishes. We all rightly hope, for example, that when a natural disaster hits, as few people as possible are harmed. But as Crosby (1996) points out, the problem in the utilitarian response to this good desire is that it does not distinguish between personal causes and natural causes,

consequentialism teaches that, to the extent that events *are* subject to our control, we should bring about just those results which, when events are not subject to us, we hope for. It teaches that a moral agent is just as much a natural cause as the causes beyond our control, and should distinguish itself from other natural causes by being as beneficent a cause as possible, intervening in the world out of the same beneficence that it feels in the form of wishing and hoping at those times when it can only look on helplessly. (p. 113)

This reiterates the point that utilitarianism tosses all absolute moral laws out of ethics: it sees no difference between a boulder killing a person and one person killing another person so long as in both cases some greater good resulted—and the ultimate result of this is the theoretical rejection of the specifically personal and inner dimension of morality, including the type of love exhibited by Mother Teresa toward each person she helped.

Summarizing, the utilitarian view of suffering can be understood to split suffering off from the specific individual who suffers in order to focus on a larger entity, the impersonal aggregated amount of overall suffering currently happening, which can be measured or estimated. Ethical decisions are arrived at by determining which action would reduce that overall amount of suffering the most, including the killing of an innocent person or the violation of any other absolute moral norm in traditional morality. This reduction of the overall amount of suffering at all costs seems to be the definition of love in utilitarianism, and Singer calls it “love of mankind, merely as such.”

The Christian Anthropological View of Love and Suffering

From time immemorial, humanity has sought to discover a meaning in suffering, and many deep answers have been given, some partial and others more complete. The Book of Job teaches that while suffering is rightly understood as punishment due in justice to a wrongdoer, nonetheless, many innocent people also suffer, in the case of Job as a test of his faithfulness (cf. John Paul II 1984, 10–11). In more recent times, we have the profound work of Frankl (1984) who told us that hidden in the depths of the worst types of suffering, there is a task to be discovered related to the fulfillment of one’s unrepeatable vocation during life. There is also suffering which leaves us grasping for answers, such as

the innocent suffering of children. In a section reflecting on the difficulty of innocent suffering, Benedict XVI (2005) explains that the mystery of evil is not dissolved for Christians but remains for them just as it does for nonbelievers,

Even in their bewilderment and failure to understand the world around them, Christians continue to believe in the “goodness and loving kindness of God” (Tit 3:4). Immersed like everyone else in the dramatic complexity of historical events, they remain unshakably certain that God is our Father and loves us, even when his silence remains incomprehensible. (para. 38)

Given the existence of suffering in our fallen world, one can ask about its inner meaning, how it relates to other aspects of our lives, and what our response to it should be. Perhaps the most concise, straightforward pastoral answer to the question was given by John Paul II (1984) when he said that “Suffering is . . . present in order to unleash love” (para. 29).

This “unleashing” is meant by the Pope in a threefold sense: (1) in the *interior* life of persons as the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, a *sensitivity* of heart which has an emotional expression unique to it (John Paul II 1984, 28); (2) *externally*, giving birth to works of love toward neighbor (para. 30); (3) and *culturally*, transforming the whole of human civilization into a civilization of love (para. 30).

Authors in the Christian anthropological school of thought, including John Paul II, have developed the point that persons ought never to be conceived of as a means to an end, no matter how noble that end (Wojtyla 1993, 21–44, 95–100; Hildebrand 2009, 16–17n2, 101–22; Seifert 1976, 70–77; 2003; 2013; 2017, 110–23; Crosby 1996, 9–24).¹⁰ Responding to another person as an end, in the minds of these authors, means respecting another person for that other’s own sake because of the individual’s inner worth and preciousness. Related to that is the interesting relationship that if one person does respect another as an end, it also happens that, as a surprising fruit of such respect, moral values and happiness spring up in the inner life of the one who shows such respect. This is sometimes expressed in the surprise of volunteer healthcare aids when they say, “I received so much more from those whom I served than I could ever have given to them!”¹¹

Along these lines, John Paul II (1984) perceives something internal to the very nature of suffering

itself that is conducive to the realization of love; in fact, he goes so far as to say that “man *owes* to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions” (para. 29, emphasis added). Thus, we might want to say that although persons ought never to be conceived of as mere means to the achievement of any end (even love and happiness), it nevertheless seems that there is a mysterious ordination within suffering to achieve the end of the flourishing of love when persons are respected for their own sake. We ought not be too quick to assume that those who *help* the suffering are the only ones who grow in this interior experience of love. Indeed, sometimes, it is a more difficult challenge for the suffering one to grow in love toward the one who helps him—this presupposes, for example, a profound humility to accept the help and to be thankful.

This point, that the flourishing of love is a kind of side effect, is important because if one held that the *raison d’être* of suffering were its ability to cause love to flourish, then it seems that one comes too close to reducing persons in their suffering to a mere means to the achievement of other ends and also to the view that love ultimately depends on the existence of evil.¹² The character of Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, rightly rebels against this notion when he wants to give back his ticket into heaven if it depends on the suffering of a child (Dostoyevski 1980, 225–26). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Pope says that the mystery of suffering is “an especially impenetrable one” (John Paul II 1984, 31).

John Paul II and Benedict XVI, speaking with the tradition, note that there is no “easy solution” to the problem of suffering, and in particular of innocent suffering, but that we are able to give an answer, even if not exhaustive, to the question about the inner meaning of suffering if we relate it to love: in the care and respect generously given to those who suffer, and generously accepted by the suffering who receive such help, there is a power that has as its fruit the flourishing of love. With respect to innocent suffering, one could say that if this side effect of the flourishing of love were to become widespread, certainly deliberate hurting of the innocent would tend toward extinction.

Christian Anthropology and Ethics as the Antidote to the Commodification of Utilitarian Ethics

The Christian view, unlike the utilitarian view, does not accept the severing of suffering from the

individual who undergoes it. In the Christian view, there are two morally relevant factors rather than just one: suffering and individual persons who have a lofty worth. As Dietrich von Hildebrand (1953) summarized well, *both* of these factors motivate moral action:

We see a poor man in great need. The need of this man, his sufferings and troubles, are a disvalue. We grasp the call to do away with this disvalue. Our value response of love for this suffering man is at the basis of the negative response to his sufferings. Our will to help him is really motivated by the value of a human person, and the disvalue of his sufferings. (p. 260)

This radical difference between the utilitarian and the Christian views of suffering has profound consequences with respect to the threefold sense in which, according to John Paul II, suffering is meant to “unleash love.” The utilitarian view of suffering makes this unleashing of love impossible, while the Christian view of suffering is able, precisely because of that unity between suffering and the individual person who suffers, to achieve the threefold release of love.

Recalling the story of the rich young man, Max Scheler noted that Christianity recognizes an inner change on the part of the one who gives help that is a primary dimension of morality and which is lost on utilitarianism in its exclusive focus on the external help that the giving brings about. In the story, the rich young man told Jesus that he has followed the commandments his entire life and wanted to know what *more* he could do to follow Him. Scripture tells us,

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. (Mark 10:21–22)

Scheler (1998) points out that,

When the rich youth is told to divest himself of his riches and give them to the poor, it is really not in order to help the “poor” and to effect a better distribution of property in the interest of the general welfare. . . . The order is given because the *act* of giving away, and the spiritual freedom

and abundance of love which manifest themselves in this act, ennoble the youth and make him even “richer” than he is. (p. 71)

Scheler’s (1998) point is that in the Christian view, full cognizance is taken of two incomparable goods that come about in morality: the moral good of the benefactor and the objective good of the recipient.¹³ The help given, he points out, can be small while the love is great or the help is great while the love is small, remarking that love is not a mere “institution of charity” (p. 71). Along these same lines, John Paul II (1984) states that,

every individual must feel as if *called personally* to bear witness to love in suffering. The institutions are very important and indispensable; nevertheless, no institution can by itself replace the human heart, human compassion, human love or human initiative, when it is a question of dealing with the sufferings of another. This refers to physical sufferings, but it is even more true when it is a question of the many kinds of moral suffering, and when it is primarily the soul that is suffering. (para. 29)

John Paul II explains that it often takes a long, long time for the answer to our question about the meaning of suffering to become clear. He explains that the reason for this is that although God hears the question, He does not answer it directly, nor abstractly (John Paul II 1984, 26). The answer to the question of suffering, namely, its presence in the world for the releasing of love, only becomes clear to a person by participating in suffering and making a personal response to it—only then is a certain interior peace and spiritual joy in the midst of suffering possible (para. 26).

The Personal Experience of Love as a Source of Moral Knowledge

The notion that one can only understand suffering through personal experience relates to one such personal experience of Peter Singer, written about in a profile piece on him (Specter 1999, 46–55). In a rare but complete break with his entire philosophical corpus, Peter Singer himself seems to have glimpsed the deepest source of the immeasurable, intrinsic worth of persons. Singer’s mother, who became ill with Alzheimer’s disease, reached a point in her life where she no longer recognized Singer, his sister, or her grandchildren and she had lost the ability to

reason. She was in a state in which, according to Singer's theory, she did not meet the definition of a person (Specter 1999, 55). According to a strict reading of his ethical theory, she ought to have been killed, or been left to die, and certainly, no money should have been spent on her survival because the moral calculus would require that such money be spent increasing the preference fulfillment of the greatest number of people and she herself, according to his theory (to be explained below), was no longer a person. Instead, Singer and his sister hired a team of healthcare aids to look after her, spending tens of thousands of dollars in the process (Specter 1999, 55). Michael Specter, the author of the piece, asked Singer about this, who first responded, in an attempt to remain consistent with his views, that this was "probably not the best use you could make of my money" (p. 55). However, on further probing, Singer said to Specter: "I think this has made me see how the issues of someone with these kinds of problems are really very difficult. . . . Perhaps it is more difficult than I thought before, because it is different when it's your mother" (p. 55). This experience of Peter Singer with his mother can be analyzed philosophically, and his actions in the case of his mother coincide with the Christian view for, it is precisely when Singer gets into the position of reuniting suffering with a specific individual person (one whom he loves) that *he reverses in his actions what he insists upon in his books*.

Many people, including myself, published criticisms of Singer for this (Berkowitz 2000; Neuhaus 2002; Colosi 2005); we were in turn taken to task on the premise that instances of hypocrisy do not refute a theory (McDonough 2009, 296–98)—which is true, they do not.

But this "critique of the critique" misses the point altogether. The point in bringing up Singer's caring actions and his remark "it is different when it's your mother" is not primarily to accuse him of hypocrisy.¹⁴ The point is, his statement implies the possibility that he *saw* something in reality (the dignity¹⁵ of his mother present before him), and it was love (which is precisely what is different when it is your mother) that made him see it. The relationship with his mother, in this potential explanation, would be what opened his eyes to the truth of her dignity. Such an awareness can influence moral decision-making in profoundly meaningful ways. Perhaps this is what happened in the case of his mother when he refused to euthanize her and instead cared for her until she died a natural death.

Utilitarian logic, on the other hand, leads to the commodification of persons, namely, by thinking

of human persons in terms of having variable degrees of worth and therefore as exchangeable or disposable for the sake of goals extrinsic to them, even to the point of euthanizing them to achieve those goals. The truth is that all human persons, no matter how sick or vulnerable, have an invariable lofty worth and preciousness, and this grounds the Catholic teaching to care for them until they die a natural death. When love for a specific person enters the picture, and the preciousness and dignity of that person is thereby perceived, the commodifying approach to persons becomes unthinkable.¹⁶

The difference, when it is one's mother, is that one loves her, and this is a highly relevant fact for a theory of ethics. When one loves another person, that love has the mysterious ability of opening one's eyes to the true source of the worth of the beloved person: that person's uniqueness and preciousness.¹⁷ It is, of course, precisely the glimpse of the unrepeatable uniqueness of another person which first inspires love. Yet, once this glimpse is achieved and love springs forth in the soul—as it does like a surprising gift—that love then has the remarkable power of allowing one to see more clearly and deeply both the humanity and the unique preciousness of the beloved, and then, that sight in turn inspires more love. When considering one's mother, this process of loving and seeing has occurred quite a lot and the vision of worth and preciousness is overwhelming.¹⁸

Singer's view that killing innocent human beings is not wrong in all cases is based on his contention that living human beings who either never have thought about their future or never again will be able to think about their own future preference fulfillment do not have the worth that grounds a prohibition against killing them. In the case of these human beings, if the utilitarian calculus warrants it, there is nothing intrinsic to them that would ground a prohibition against killing them, and therefore, the killing should be carried out (Singer 1993, 83–100). Here is how, based on this view, he argues for his well-known support of infanticide,

A self-conscious being is aware of itself as a distinct entity, with a past and a future. (This, remember, was Locke's criterion for being a person). A being aware of itself in this way will be capable of having desires about its own future. For example, a professor of philosophy may hope to write a book demonstrating the objective nature of ethics; a student may look forward to graduating; a child may want to go for a ride in

an aeroplane. To take the lives of any of these people without their consent, is to thwart their desires for the future. Killing a snail or a day-old infant does not thwart any desires of this kind, because snails and newborn infants are incapable of having such desires. (Singer 1993, 90)

But when love enters the picture, one immediately sees that these abilities or lack thereof have nothing to do with the preciousness of persons, which all persons—vulnerable and healthy—have equally. This correct intuition, I argue, is very likely what explains the case of Singer and his mother. In addition to this intuition, or knowledge of the heart, there are philosophical arguments for the existence of the spiritual soul or person in human beings who are nonconscious and minimally conscious (see Hölscher 1986, 188–93; Schwarz 1990, chaps. 6 and 7; Seifert 1997, chaps. 3 and 4; Crosby 1996, chap. 4; 2004, chap. 6; Colosi 2008a, 2018, and 2019).

It is very important to point out that although the love one has for someone is one reason never to kill that person, it is not the deepest reason. The deepest reason is the *inner* worth of the person. Love for another is inside of oneself, but the humanity, uniqueness, and preciousness of others are inside them. What happens when one loves someone is that one sees more clearly the inner worth of the other person. Other persons have this inner worth whether or not they are loved, so no one should kill them—but unless love is in the picture one might have trouble knowing this inner worth. A simple way to put the point is that there are aspects of reality which we would not see or know fully unless one loves that reality.¹⁹

This experience Singer relates has the possibility of revealing a truth that is lost in the utilitarian concern about the masses or “mankind merely as such”: the deepest source of the worth of every person lies in the very fact that there is no one else in existence, nor ever was, nor ever will be, nor could be, who is the same as another person, and among the reasons for the absolute inviolability of each person, this is the highest. Love has the power to make one know this truth about the persons one actually loves, but it also has the power to make one know that by extension, this is true of every person.²⁰ This knowledge about the intrinsic worth of persons gained through love is accessible to believers and nonbelievers in God, and it seems that Singer may have experienced this with his mother, including in her vulnerable state.

It follows from this that Mother Teresa’s way of life is the most rational. She acted in the same way he did toward his mother with every person she met.

One must distinguish here between two meanings of the term “rational.” Rational in a utilitarian sense means a detached calculation aimed at reducing the quantifiable amount of overall suffering and maximizing preference fulfillments—any action which can do that must be done. But, there is a rationality of the heart, if you will, expressed in Mother Teresa’s love for each person she met. Her noble effort never to abandon anyone springs from an insight that Singer rejects: no person is replaceable, and no person ever loses worth. Love, which clarifies the vision of the beloved, is an experience common to believers and nonbelievers alike, and so even though Singer is an atheist, these insights, which guided Saint Mother Teresa’s life, are available to him through his experience with his mother.

Singer calls the view that all humans have equal and lofty worth, regardless of their cognitive abilities, “speciesism” (Singer 2003, 528), and holds that it has never been shown to be true by philosophers (Singer 1999, 296). The argument against (what he calls) speciesism in favor of killing those humans who have lost much of their cognitive abilities denies the deepest source of love intrinsic to persons: the unique, precious, and unrepeatable person. No aspect of our species membership alone, nor the ability to perform higher-level mental activities, could be the intrinsic aspect of another which inspires love.²¹ Vulnerable persons, including those with diminished consciousness, are fully present with all of their worth and preciousness.²²

The Exterior and Cultural Unleashing of Love

Returning to the question of inner moral goodness as essential to Christian ethics, one could ask whether the emphasis on the expression of and growth in this interior love means that Christian ethics ends up neglecting the exterior goal of actually reducing suffering and in particular on a large scale? The many examples of Christian charitable organizations and hospitals illustrate just the reverse. Also, in *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II (1984) spends a series of paragraphs reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, which

witnesses to the fact that Christ’s revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering *is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity*. Completely the

reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering. (para. 29)

He points out that it is difficult to list in this sort of document all the types of “Good Samaritan” work that exist in the Church and in society, although he does name the profession of the doctor and the nurse with great enthusiasm, noting that these have an evangelical content raising them to the level of a vocation rather than a mere profession (John Paul II 1984, 29). And so, although there are times when the only way possible to help another is to offer compassion in the form of an interior love for the suffering person, the Good Samaritan does not stop at sympathy and compassion, but not sparing material means²³ goes to the point of making a gift of his whole being to the other—and this is accomplished also in bringing actual help in suffering whatever its nature may be (John Paul II 1984, 28–30). One of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, teaches that interior love is a direct result of a genuine exterior giving of oneself (Vatican Council II 1966, 223), and this giving can take many forms.

Finally, the third way in which suffering is meant to unleash love according to John Paul II is the bringing into existence of a *civilization of love*. In a civilization of love, large-scale suffering would be greatly reduced, yet the realization of such a civilization is inseparably linked to the first of the threefold senses in which suffering exists to unleash love: an interior, affective love of individual persons whom one faces. The following text from a daily meditation book by Fernández (1989) concisely expresses this idea:

The ultimate solution for restoring and promoting justice at all levels lies in the heart of each man. It is in the heart that every type of injustice imaginable comes into existence, and it is there also that the possibility of straightening out all human relationships is conceived. (p. 204)

This idea suggests that the solution to worldwide suffering lies in the heart of each person. This inner life of persons is precisely that dimension of morality which is relegated to the sidelines in utilitarian ethics, and for this reason, it is incapable of achieving its own stated goal: large-scale reduction of worldwide suffering.

This love in the inner life of persons for individuals, the love that Christ was hoping would blossom in the heart of the rich young man, is expressed in

and blossoms more fully through concrete acts of self-giving, and for this reason, it did not blossom in the heart of the rich young man. Relief of suffering on a large scale will not occur on earth unless such love in the inner life of persons is present there. John Paul II (1984, 29) says that this inner sensitivity of the human heart must be carefully fostered in the family and educational institutions.

This point brings up the very difficult question concerning the emotional involvement of health-care providers with their patients. The two extremes are, on the one hand, an exaggerated or unhealthy degree of personal involvement in the lives of patients and, on the other, a complete suppression of any and all affective relating to patients. Neither of these is appropriate. It is clear that John Paul, because of the importance he puts on the interior unleashing of love in the face of suffering, would certainly not say that the solution to the hardship on healthcare providers who feel appropriate emotions in their work would be the recommendation of extreme stoicism. The calculating method presented by contemporary utilitarianism based on “love of mankind” will fail. The reason it will fail is that only love of actual people, the kind of love present when two persons face each other in an attitude of care and respect, as opposed to a disinterested assessment of units of pain and preference fulfillments, can lead to a society that truly cares for the suffering as persons and one that might make real headway in relieving their suffering (see also Benedict XVI 2005, 18).

Thus, the third sense in which suffering is meant to unleash love is intimately and necessarily connected to the first sense.

Conclusion: The Inherently Self-Defeating Structure of Utilitarian Ethics

As mentioned above, utilitarianism is premised on the logic of commodification because it thinks of human beings as having variable degrees of worth and therefore as exchangeable or disposable for the sake of goals extrinsic to them even to the point of euthanizing them to achieve those goals. The truth is that all human beings are full human persons, no matter how sick or vulnerable, and all of them have the invariable lofty worth and preciousness discussed in this article which grounds the Catholic teaching to care for them until they die a natural death. Therefore, because utilitarian ethics allows for the killing and abandonment of individual persons to

achieve its goal of reducing overall suffering, it has actually doomed itself to failure from the outset. The link between the legalization of euthanasia and large-scale killing is not correctable through “guidelines” but follows from an inner and unavoidable logic. Not only has large-scale killing followed on the coattails of legalized euthanasia historically but also the logical connection between the two can be demonstrated (see Smith 2003, 81–106). If the killing of any person becomes allowed, then the only foundation on which one could oppose mass killing has been stripped from the equation. This is the reason why guidelines—the restrictions that must be met prior to euthanizing a patient, such as waiting periods, psychological evaluations, and prognoses of a six-month life expectancy—written into laws legalizing euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide never hold. When proposing such laws, euthanasia advocates often claim that “abuses” will be avoided. By “abuses,” they mean the killing of any people who have not met the guidelines. However, the truth is that since killing is intrinsically immoral, euthanizing the people within the guidelines is already an abuse. Once a decision to accept deliberate killing in medicine has been made, guidelines begin to look “unfair” to anyone who desires access to the law but has not met the requirement of this or that restriction. Once the decision to kill has been made, tussling over guidelines becomes a relatively minor matter, restrictions are removed one by one, and the killing spreads.²⁴ Only those who understand the inviolable preciousness of every person, however vulnerable, can truly bring about a civilization in which the callous spread of killing can be avoided, namely, a civilization of love.

On March 20, 2004, Pope John Paul II announced to the participants of an international conference titled, “Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State: Scientific Advances and Ethical Dilemmas,” the following:

I feel the duty to reaffirm strongly that the intrinsic value and personal dignity of every human being do not change, no matter what the concrete circumstances of his or her life. *A man, even if seriously ill or disabled in the exercise of his highest functions, is and always will be a man,* and he will never become a “vegetable” or an “animal.” Even our brothers and sisters who find themselves in the clinical condition of a “vegetative state” retain their human dignity in all its fullness.

Suffering is an unavoidable and overwhelming fact of life, yet John Paul II believes that one of the deepest meanings to be found within suffering is its ability to “unleash love,” which if realized in more and more individual cases, will eventually expand into an entire societal ethos characterized by Christian love. There is, however, a strong temptation to think that people who are sick have lost their worth and do not deserve love and care until they die a natural death. It is for this reason that the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997, 2276) insists that “Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect.” This is not because they are worth more than the healthy, but because it is too easy for the healthy to forget that they still have all of their personal dignity. As soon as love comes into the picture, however, the right attitude toward vulnerable individuals returns. Despite his experience with his mother, Peter Singer’s answer that he did wrong when he cared for his mother, as one of my students put it, “excuses his action, but does not express the motive for it.”²⁵ His critics are looking for that motive and have not yet been presented with a satisfactory one.²⁶ Perhaps he knew his mother was still there regardless of her level of consciousness. Perhaps love made him aware of the presence of his mother, whom he loves, before him still, and of all of the reasons within her being for which she should not be killed. That is what is different when it’s your mother.

Utilitarians desire to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people, but the means to achieve it does not lie with that approach to human interaction because it overlooks the lofty value of every human life and treats irreplaceable people as fungible and therefore as commodities to be used to achieve an end, namely, the overall reduction of suffering, which it will actually frustrate, because of its lack of attention to the preciousness and true good of each unrepeatable human person. Let us strive to achieve a civilization of love on the only basis possible: recognition of and love for the inviolable preciousness of every person.

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Notes

1. Mill uses the word “happiness” here, and so, it should be noted that for classical utilitarians, pleasure and happiness are considered identical, whereas in the Christian tradition, although they can coexist in the same person, they are not identical with each other. I will not be able to develop this point further here.
2. Contemporary utilitarian ethics has its most famous and perhaps most logically consistent proponent in Professor Peter Singer of the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, and for this reason, I will primarily analyze his thought as representative of this view.
3. Singer (1993, 94): “According to preference utilitarianism, any action contrary to the preference of any being is, unless this preference is outweighed by contrary preferences, wrong.”
4. For another example of a contemporary thinker who holds these views, see Kagan (1989).
5. A morally relevant factor is an aspect of reality which makes moral claims on moral agents, but which may or may not itself be a moral value or disvalue (see Hildebrand 1953, 280). For example, a baby does not possess the moral values of truthfulness or generosity, but the baby is morally relevant since by its very existence it makes moral claims on its parents to care for it. Suffering and pain as such are not moral disvalues, like jealousy or greed are, but pain is morally relevant because it issues a type of claim to others to relieve it.
6. Throughout *Practical Ethics*, the guiding principle driving the ethical deliberations with respect to killing is “Pain and suffering are bad and should be prevented or minimized, irrespective of the race, sex, or species of the being that suffers” (Singer 1993, 61).
7. See Singer (1995, 189–206). The subtitle of this section is “Rewriting the Commandments,” and Singer does precisely that on these pages rejecting what he calls the old commandments, such as to never intentionally take innocent life, and replacing them with what he calls the new commandments, which allow for the taking of innocent life based on the utilitarian moral calculus.
8. Scheler’s (1998, chap. 4) profound study in which he separates out the differences between Christian ethics and utilitarian ethics seems to have been inspired by his astonishment that Friedrich Nietzsche was unable to detect the difference between their opposing approaches to love.
9. Another possible answer, as Scheler (1998, 93, 98–100) has pointed out, is that in some cases, one detects a *ressentiment* toward God, moral laws, and traditions as a reason for the adoption of the utilitarian system.
10. Kant (2012a, 40–42) formulated the principle of persons as ends and not means with great clarity; since then, the personalists have developed and enhanced the idea (see Wojtyla 1993, 27–28). Although Christian personalist philosophers are grateful to Kant for enunciating the idea that persons are “exalted above all price” (Kant 2012b, 557), thus removing persons from the realm of commodities, Kant’s philosophy lacks an understanding of redemptive suffering and its link to love so essential to Christian teaching, and so beautifully articulated by John Paul II (1984); see also Colosi (2009b).
11. Consider the following text of Frankl (1984): “... happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to ‘be happy.’ Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically” (p. 162). Frankl works out a notion of self-transcendence in which persons relate to realities for their own sake because they have their own objective meaning, and this results in the gift of happiness on one’s inner life.
12. I have attempted a development of this point in Colosi (2009b).
13. For a fuller philosophical development of these two dimensions of morality and the unity between them, see Seifert (1976 and 2017). I would state the basic point and its relationship to utilitarianism like this: the moral condition of the agent is determined (although not exclusively) by the material of the act, co-suffering or relieving suffering (but not by the act’s actual success or failure). Also, the richness and goodness of the act of helping is greater in proportion to the richness of the love in the inner life out of which that act flows. Thus, love and happiness are both fruits of good acts as well as originating sources of them. Utilitarian ethics misses this dialectical relationship because of its exclusive focus on the successful relief of suffering as the sole bearer of ethical values. See Mill ([1863] 1987, 288): “A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it [the utilitarian morality] considers as wasted.” The intrinsic and inviolable worth of persons is the reason why we owe them this love, whereas utilitarianism ends in commodifying persons because it roots all moral action in a weighing or measuring of degrees of suffering, reducing individuals to one more item on the moral calculus scale to be exchanged for a potential decrease in overall suffering.
14. It should be noted that the charge of hypocrisy applies more strongly to Singer than to other thinkers in light of this assertion, on page 2 of his *Practical Ethics*: “[E]thics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice.” Singer himself, then, holds the view that hypocrisy—not actually putting into practice one’s ethical theory—is reason enough to reject the theory.

- Nonetheless, he did not reject his theory, which proved useless in his very own practice. Still, hypocrisy is, in fact, not the main point in the discussion of his remark; rather, the connection between love and ethics is.
15. In Colosi (2017), I attempt a definition of “dignity” and an overview delineation of the sources of dignity within persons as expounded from the time of the ancient Greek philosophers to the present, including philosophical and theological sources.
 16. I have developed the concept of the intrinsic and invariable dignity of persons against Singer’s view that there are no facts within persons capable of grounding their equal dignity in Colosi (2003).
 17. John Crosby, with great originality and philosophical depth, has explored and defended the uniqueness of persons, which he calls their “incommunicability,” as the most important intrinsic source of personal worth, and the one that more than any other is the ground of moral norms related to the absolute respect due to persons (see Crosby 1996, esp. chap. 2; 2004, chap. 1; Colosi 2008b).
 18. The idea of the almost infinitely greater value awareness that occurs in love between persons which can never arise without love is developed by Crosby (1996, 49–53, 65–67).
 19. This receptive cognitive power of love and its relation to morality is the point I try to bring out against what I call hyperrationalist ethical theories in Colosi (2010).
 20. For the distinction between *the fact of the incommunicability (uniqueness) of persons and the really existing and unique essential content of some person*, see Crosby (1996, 67), Crosby (2004, 19–20, pts. 2 and 3), and Colosi (2008b). The idea is that each person is unique, and so that *fact* is common to them all (i.e., not unique), but what constitutes the very uniqueness of a particular person is not common because of the unrepeatability of persons.
 21. One key point made by John Crosby is that while philosophers who defend the dignity of human persons have rightly pointed to their common nature as a source of this worth, they have often overlooked their uniqueness. Crosby maintains that although our rational nature is a source of high worth, unless we bring to the discussion also the incommunicability of persons, a complete defense against Singer’s contention that newborns may be killed will not be possible (see Crosby 1996, 65–66; 2004, 9–13; also Colosi (2003, 2017).
 22. The striking autobiography *Ghost Boy* tells the story of Pistorius (2013) who lived through the following four stages: (1) healthy childhood up to age twelve, (2) two years in an unconscious comatose state, (3) ten years in locked-in syndrome fully conscious and aware but unable to express himself, and finally, (4) now able to communicate and living life as a married man. In all four of those stages, the person Martin Pistorius was fully present. Reading that book, and in particular the part where he describes the abuse he experienced, fully aware of it in the locked-in stage, by some few of his caregivers, provides an experiential entranceway to grasping the idea that persons are present no matter their state of consciousness.
 23. It is important to note that one of the few saints mentioned in *Salvifici Doloris* (1984, 26) is Saint Francis of Assisi who loved Lady Poverty not primarily as a form of sacrifice but because of love: love for Christ who was poor and love of the poor with whom he wanted to be.
 24. The Dutch experience proves this point; for a detailed analysis of that development, see the chapter titled “Dutch Treat” in Smith (2003, 107–39).
 25. My thanks to Maria Scarnecchia Montagnini for this formulation.
 26. In one response to his critics, Singer wrote, “Suppose, however, that it were crystal clear that the money could do more good elsewhere. Then I would be doing wrong in spending it on my mother, just as I do wrong when I spend, on myself or my family, money that could do more good if donated to an organization that helps people in much greater need than we are. I freely admit to not doing all that I should; but I could do it, and the fact that I do not do it does not vitiate the claim that it is what I should do” (Singer 2004, 29). But this admission of hypocrisy is precisely the kind of answer that avoids explaining the motive for his behavior in choosing to care for his mother.

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