

UNIVERSALIZABILITY, IMPARTIALITY AND THE EXPANDING CIRCLE

MARIKO NAKANO-OKUNO

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Department of Medical Education

marikonk@uab.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the question of whether the universalizability of moral judgment, and impartiality in ethics, would require us to expand our scope of moral consideration to cover all sentient beings, human or non-human, as de Lazari-Radek and Singer wish to establish in their new volume on Sidgwick and contemporary ethics. I will argue that the former two concepts, universalizability and impartiality, may not entail the third concept, the expanding circle. De Lazari-Radek and Singer's arguments may presuppose their moral intuitions that are not entirely self-evident, and the philosophical foundation of ethics Sidgwick presented does not necessarily lead us to their version of utilitarianism.

KEYWORDS

Henry Sidgwick, universalizability, impartiality, expanding circle, objective normative truth, our cosmic insignificance, insect brain, animal ethics

INTRODUCTION

In their thought-provoking book, *The Point of View of the Universe*,¹ Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer (LRS) aim to advocate utilitarianism as an objectively true normative theory by referring to Henry Sidgwick's arguments in *The Methods of Ethics*.² For LRS, an objective normative truth means what must hold for everyone, independently of our desires or of the attitudes of

¹ Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics (PUV)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics (ME)*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981; originally published 1907).

our culture or community,³ what all rational beings must recognize as true, and what dictates a certain act even if we have no desire to do that act.⁴ The authors support utilitarianism as a normative theory deduced from certain objective truths in that sense.

LRS's main argument can be reconstructed as follows:

- i) Objective normative truth provides a normative reason for action, regardless of desires or motivations.⁵
- ii) The Axiom of Rational Benevolence is a self-evident objective normative truth.⁶
- iii) The Axiom of Rational Benevolence requires the impartial treatment of the goods of individuals, seen from the point of view of the universe.⁷
- iv) This principle of “universal benevolence,” presented in iii), involves “altruism towards distant and unrelated members of our species, and even to sentient members of other species.”⁸
- v) When combined with another plausible claim, hedonism, claims iii) and iv) yield utilitarianism.⁹
- vi) Therefore, there is a utilitarian obligation of “expanding the circle” (i.e. expanding the scope our moral consideration so as to cover all sentient beings), which determines what we ought to do, whether we like it or not.

In claiming i), the authors contend that our *normative* reason (i.e., “a dictate” issued by our faculty to grasp self-evident fundamental principles) should have authority over our *motivating* reason (i.e. non-rational grounds that prompt us to do a certain act). To further support claim ii), the authors argue that the Axiom of Benevolence cannot be explained as the direct product of contingent evolutionary forces,¹⁰ but would rather be explained as what our faculty of reason di-

³ *PVV*, 43, 135.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43-4, 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chap.2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, chap.7, sec.3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, chap.5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹ *Ibid.*, chap.8, sec.1; chap.9, sec.8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

rectly grasps.¹¹ Therefore, the authors argue, we have a purely normative reason to accept the Axiom of Benevolence, whether or not we have any preexistent or present desire to accept it. Once we appreciate that the Axiom of Benevolence is self-evident, we are, in the authors' opinion, led to endorse a form of consequentialist maximization principle, which requires us to attain the greatest sum total of goods for all sentient beings. The principle will easily entail the classical utilitarian principle, simply by adding the argument that this good must be understood as pleasure, or the surplus of pleasure over pain.

LRS seem to agree with most of Sidgwick's major points. The authors admit, however, that they have made one significant revision to Sidgwick's moral philosophy: They deny the self-evident reasonableness of self-love,¹² which Sidgwick himself considered one of his major claims in *The Methods*. Their abandonment of the reasonableness of self-love has enabled LRS to construct their strong case for utilitarianism. We should also note that, when LRS thus "extract" what appears to them plausible parts of Sidgwick's argument, they incidentally reach a conclusion that favors the version of utilitarianism which the authors have long espoused, namely, utilitarianism which demands us to consider people in remote places, and even to treat all animals equally.

Though I am a supporter of a version of utilitarian ethics, I oppose several of LRS's claims. In this paper, I will focus on one missing link found in LRS's argument— I will argue against LRS's transition from point iii) to point iv) and question their conclusion vi). Sidgwick's ideas of universalizability and impartiality do not necessarily entail our obligation to "expand the circle" as the authors believe. Though it remains important for us, for various reasons, to foster compassion for non-human beings in our minds, the self-evident axioms themselves do not dictate that we indefinitely expand the scope of our moral consideration.

1. THE AXIOMS

To start with, we need to articulate what LRS understand as the foundational principles of the ethics Sidgwick presented, namely, the Axioms of Justice, Prudence and Benevolence. When they introduce these three axioms,¹³ LRS seem to

¹¹ Ibid., 182.

¹² Ibid., ix, 197, 378.

¹³ *PUV*, 115-20.

precisely formulate them; the Axiom of Justice dictates that one should be ready to apply the same ethical judgment to all similar situations, unless there is any relevant difference other than different individuals being involved in each situation; the Axiom of Prudence dictates impartiality in the weighing of goods over time; and the Axiom of Rational Benevolence dictates impartiality in weighing the goods of different individuals, seen from a viewpoint that goes beyond one individual's particular viewpoint. According to Sidgwick, all three axioms provide a substantial guide for determining what one ought to do, and the Axiom of Benevolence in particular is the essential component of the doctrine of utilitarianism.¹⁴ We should note, however, that the Axiom of Benevolence only requires us to give equal weight to the same amount of good when seen from an impartial viewpoint.

LRS's subsequent explanations of the Axiom of Benevolence, however, contain at least two peculiar aspects. First, in several places LRS seem to regard this axiom as implying a maximization principle. In one place where they are supposedly discussing the Axiom of Benevolence, they suddenly start to discuss the maximization principle, and in several other places they refer to an ultimate principle that we should "do what is *best* for the well-being of all [emphasis added]."¹⁵ In their preface, LRS even more clearly refer to "the axiom of universal benevolence that tells us to *maximize* the good, impartially [emphasis added]."¹⁶ (Here LRS seem to mean the same thing by the Axiom of Benevolence and "the axiom of universal benevolence.") However, there is a difference between giving equal weight to all good, or impartially weighing good, and maximizing the good that has been so impartially weighed. LRS may have in mind one of the two intuitions that formed the Axiom of Benevolence, that is, the self-evident intuition that "as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally . . . not merely as a particular part of it."¹⁷ Aiming at a whole, and not at its particular part, is, however, different from maximizing that whole. There are different ways to aim at good generally: egalitarians seek to bring about equal good for all, and Rawlsians seek to main-

¹⁴ *ME*, 406.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 178, 180-1, 190. This exact phrase never appears in *ME*, or in Sidgwick's review article that LRS refer to in their discussion. See Henry Sidgwick, "Miss Cobbe's Darwinism in Morals, and Other Essays," *Academy* (15 June 1872): 231-2.

¹⁶ *PUV*, xii.

¹⁷ *ME*, 382, cited in *PUV*, 119.

tain a well-ordered society by focusing on the circumstances of the most disadvantaged, for example. Such theorists have a kind of “good on the whole” in mind, but they attempt to aim at it generally in ways different from utilitarian maximization.

More importantly, LRS seem to assume that the Axiom of Benevolence directly dictates that we consider not only the good of our own species, but also the good of all sentient beings. When they examine possible evolutionary accounts of group- or species-specific altruism, they denounce this limited version of altruism because “the principle of universal benevolence bids us to have concern not only for the good of our own species, but for all sentient beings.”¹⁸ As we will see, we should ask whether “impartial weighing of goods for *all*” demands us to have “an equal concern for *all sentient beings*,” for there may be some reflective persons who accept the former but not the latter.

I have to admit, at this point, that my own arguments will contain something at variance with some of Sidgwick’s claims in *The Methods* and elsewhere. Sidgwick himself did seem to believe that utilitarians would naturally take into account the happiness of “all the beings capable of pleasure and pain whose feelings are affected by our conduct” because this view “is obviously most in accordance with the universality that is characteristic of their principle” and “it seems arbitrary and unreasonable to exclude from the end, as so conceived, any pleasure of any sentient being.”¹⁹ Sidgwick does not specify, though, whether this expansion requirement comes from his Axiom of Justice, from his Axiom of Benevolence, from hedonism, or from some combination of them. Despite Sidgwick’s self-identification with a utilitarianism encompassing all sentient beings, there are some ambiguities lurking in his arguments, especially in his axioms,²⁰ which allow us to interpret Sidgwickian ethics in different ways based on the same key texts of *The Methods*. My conclusion may suggest that not only LRS but also Sidgwick

¹⁸ *PUV*, 187.

¹⁹ *ME*, 414.

²⁰ For different approaches to these ambiguities found in Sidgwick’s axioms, see Robert Shaver, “Sidgwick’s Axioms and Consequentialism,” *Philosophical Review* 123(2), 2006, pp. 173-204; J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick’s Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 290 ff.; Roger Crisp, *The Cosmos of Duty*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 115 ff.; and John Skorupski, “Sidgwick and the Many-sidedness of Ethics,” in Bucolo, P., Crisp, R. and Schultz, B. (eds.) *Henry Sidgwick: Happiness and Religion*, Catania University Press, 2007, pp. 410-42, among others.

himself, for all his cogent claims developed in *The Methods*, lacks a crucial piece of argument needed to justify an all-encompassing version of utilitarianism.

In the following, I will examine whether the foundational components of ethics, which Sidgwick presented, logically entail the expansion requirement, namely, an obligation to expand the scope of our moral consideration to cover all sentient beings. I will make the following two points:

- 1) The universalizability of ethical judgments does not require us to consider all sentient beings.
- 2) “The impartial weighing of goods for all” does not specify what “all” encompasses. And “taking the point of view of the universe to see a greater whole” does not specify what kind of “whole” I should have in mind when I take such a viewpoint.

I would also briefly add that Sidgwick’s proof of hedonism does not entail the expansion requirement either. Let us look into these points in turn.

2. UNIVERSALIZABILITY IN THE AXIOM OF JUSTICE

My first point is that the universalizability of ethical judgments, which is required by one of Sidgwick’s self-evident foundations of ethics, i.e. the Axiom of Justice, does not directly require us to consider all sentient beings. This is because, in the context of this Axiom, the notion of “universal” or “universality” does not necessarily refer to what is applicable to all sentient beings, or even to all humans.

In Sidgwick’s own words, the Axiom of Justice stipulates that “it cannot be right for A to treat B in a manner in which it would be wrong for B to treat A, merely on the ground that they are two different individuals, and without there being any difference between the nature or circumstances of the two which can be stated as a reasonable ground for difference of treatment.”²¹ This axiom is a substantial normative principle, usually expressed in the logic of moral judgment, which is now called the universalizability requirement of moral judgment. As LRS rightly point out, Sidgwick presents this axiom not as a mere logical requirement of ethical judgments, but as a substantial principle that has practical

²¹ Ibid., 380.

importance. We can see this axiom as stating the substantial commitment implied in our making ethical judgments. In making an ought-judgment honestly, I am showing my substantial commitment that I am ready to prescribe the same thing in all similar situations, including the ones in which different individuals occupy different positions. To be consistent in this substantial commitment in making an ought-judgment, I have to consider whether I am ready to apply the same ought-judgment to anyone in a similar situation. Here “anyone” means any individual who can take over my position or someone else’s position mentioned in my ought-judgment. A question arises: who can be this “anyone”? Can it be any human being, or can it be any conscious or sentient being?

Let us look into Sidgwick’s own analysis. In his explanation of the universalizability of moral judgment, which provided the basis for his Axiom of Justice, Sidgwick writes:

Even when a moral judgment relates primarily to some particular action we commonly regard it as applicable to any other action belonging to a certain definable class: so that the moral truth apprehended is implicitly conceived to be intrinsically universal, though particular in our first apprehension of it.²²

A key phrase in this explanation is “applicable to any other action belonging to *a certain definable class* (emphasis added).” What Sidgwick has in mind here is not that a single ethical judgment should be applicable to an indefinite number of actions that occur in an indefinitely broad range of situations, but that a particular ethical judgment should apply to *any* other action belonging to *a certain definable class*. Sidgwick confirms this point more clearly when he discusses an act which could be wrong if all people simultaneously did it, but which would not if only a limited number of people did (he takes celibacy as an example). To those who wonder if such a limited application of one’s maxim would be contrary to the Kantian universalizability principle, Sidgwick responds that this reasoning does not contradict Kant’s universalizability formula (which Sidgwick frequently equates with his Axiom of Justice), and says: “For this principle, —at least so far as I have accepted it as self-evident—means no more than that an act, if right for any individual, must be right on general grounds, and therefore for some class of persons; it therefore cannot prevent us from defining this class by the above-

²² Ibid., 34.

mentioned characteristic of believing that the act will remain an exceptional one.”²³

So, “applicability to all members of a certain definable class” is what he means by the notion of universalizability in the Axiom of Justice. Then the question is, who defines this class, and how? Some may define this class as “the class of actions done by any moral agent to any sentient being.” Others may define it as “the class of actions of the people, by the people, for the people.” Here, the point is that whatever class one defines, one can proudly say that one’s ought-judgment is universalizable if one is ready to make the same ought-judgment to any action of one belonging to the class one defines. When I say that “I ought to care about this person,” and when I am ready to say the same thing about any other person who belongs to the class I define, I am showing no logical inconsistency, or any inconsistency in my substantial commitment to the universalizability of my ethical judgment, even if I also say that “Oh, but I don’t have to care about this bed bug because it is not covered by the class I have defined.”

Universalizability of our moral judgment simply requires us to apply our judgment to any constituent of a certain definable class, and that is all there is to it. Whether we should expand the class size is another question that is yet to be answered.

3. IMPARTIALITY IN THE AXIOM OF BENEVOLENCE

Besides the Axiom of Justice, Sidgwick presents two other self-evident fundamental principles of ethics, one of which is the Axiom of Benevolence. This axiom dictates *impartial* weighing of the goods of different individuals. When you take an impartial point of view that goes beyond your personal viewpoint to see a greater whole, or “the Point of View of the Universe” to use Sidgwick’s metaphor, a good of one individual has no greater or lesser importance than the good of any another individual.

When they first present Sidgwick’s Axiom of Benevolence in Chapter 5 of their book, LRS directly cite from Sidgwick’s original text, which reads:

²³ Ibid., 486-7.

each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him.²⁴

As LRS explain, this axiom is actually derived, in the *Methods*, from two self-evident intuitions, one stating that any individual's good is not more important than any other's good from the point of view of the universe, and the other asserting that a rational being is bound to aim at good generally and not merely its particular parts.

The Axiom of Benevolence, thus formulated, simply requires impartiality over the goods of different individuals, seen from the point of view of the universe. This impartiality requirement is not equivalent to a maximization requirement, as we saw before.²⁵ In any case, I already developed my own argument as to how such a maximization requirement can be derived elsewhere,²⁶ so I will not delve into this point in the present paper.

A more important point is that, whether it be understood as “the impartial weighing of all individuals' goods” or as “the maximization of all individuals' goods”, the Axiom of Benevolence itself says nothing about the content of “the whole good” or the exact extension of “all individuals' goods.” From this axiom, however, LRS seem to jump to their next claim, which is that this “universal benevolence” involves pure altruism towards distant and unrelated members of our species, and even to sentient members of other species. We must question how this leap is possible.

3.1. “Like Our Ability to Do Higher Mathematics”

At this point, it should be remembered that Sidgwick says that the Axiom of Benevolence is self-evident in much the same way as addition facts in mathematics are self-evident. Sidgwick says: “the propositions, ‘I ought not to prefer a present lesser good to a future greater good,’ and ‘I ought not to prefer my own lesser good to the greater good of another,’ do present themselves as self-evident; as

²⁴ *ME*, 382, cited in *PUV*, 119.

²⁵ As for another self-evident axiom, the Axiom of Prudence, LRS admit that impartiality and maximization are two different things. See *PUV*, 118-19n.

²⁶ Mariko Nakano-Okuno, *Sidgwick and Contemporary Utilitarianism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99-100, 112-13.

much (e.g.) as the mathematical axiom that ‘if equals be added to equals the wholes are equal.’”²⁷ LRS directly cite this passage from *The Methods* and claim that our capacity to reason “enables us to grasp *a priori* truths in general, including both the truths of mathematics and moral truths”²⁸ and that “Like our ability to do higher mathematics, it [i.e., the principle of universal benevolence] can most plausibly be explained as the outcome of our capacity to reason.”²⁹ Does our capacity to reason, then, enable us to realize the moral truth that we ought to consider the goods of all sentient beings, in much the same way as we grasp the mathematical truth that adding equals to equals brings about equal wholes? To me this reasoning seems invalid. Our mathematical capacity to reason may make us realize the moral truth that we ought to impartially measure the goods of a certain whole, but it does not make us realize that we ought to think of such “a whole” as including all sentient beings.

To see why “impartial measurement” and “altruism toward all sentient beings” are two different things, let us examine an analogical example. Suppose I am asked to count the number of mountains, weigh each mountain, and then measure the overall size of all mountains combined. From an impartial viewpoint, it seems obvious to me that I should count one mountain as one, not as more or less than one, mountain. I should also count a unit of weight, say 1t, as 1t, from an impartial viewpoint. So if there is one mountain and there are two other mountains, then I have to conclude that there are three mountains. In addition, if one mountain weighs 100t, another 150t, and the third one 200t, then I have to conclude that those three mountains weigh 450t in total, weighing 1t as 1t. This is what my reason tells me as if it is a self-evident mathematical truth. And I expect that all other reasonably rational minds would see this as self-evident, too. In that sense, we can call this measuring principle an objective truth. However, my reason tells me nothing about what I should count as “a mountain” — It is we who define it. The impartial measuring principle stated above does not tell me wheth-

²⁷ *ME*, 383, cited in *PUV*, 120. The mathematical axiom Sidgwick refers to is known as Euclid’s second common notion (*Euclid’s Elements*, book 1). With the advent of non-Euclidean mathematics, the objective truthfulness of this and other Euclidean axioms has been called into question; for simplicity’s sake, however, I will tentatively assume that we commonly treat such mathematical axioms as self-evident objective truths. My point is that LRS’s claim to consider all sentient beings does not have the same level of self-evidence as the mathematical axioms do.

²⁸ *PUV*, 185.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

er or not I should count a certain huge bump on the ground, a bump with a peak or multiple peaks, a bump with a gentle slope, or a tableland-shaped bump, as “a mountain.” I have to determine, or I have to reach some consensus with other people, as to what sort of geographical bump is a mountain.

A similar argument applies to the Axiom of Benevolence, which requires the impartiality over goods of different individuals. From an impartial viewpoint, it seems obvious to me that I should count one individual as one, not more or less than one. It seems also self-evident to me that a good of one individual should be weighed not more or less than the same amount of good of another individual, when seen from an impartial viewpoint. Thus if I find a certain amount, say 10 units, of good in person A, 12 units of good in person B and 15 units of good in person C, I have to conclude that I have found 37 units of good in total, weighing 1 unit as 1 unit. And as long as I regard them as goods to be pursued, I morally ought to pursue those goods impartially. This is the essence of the Axiom of Benevolence. And this is what my reason tells me, as if it is a self-evident mathematical truth. However, this impartial weighing principle tells me nothing about what we should regard as goods, or as “individuals whose goods should be taken into account” — it is we who define them. The impartial weighing principle of goods does not tell me whether or not I should regard some internal phenomenon of a mosquito or a rooster as a good. I have to determine, or I have to reach some consensus with other people, as to what sort of being is an individual whose good is to be counted.

This is why we need the proof of hedonism as a separate argument, though Sidgwick’s proof of hedonism is imperfect, as discussed later (LRS are aware of the incompleteness of Sidgwick’s proof of hedonism which, as they admit, is not stating a self-evident truth, but only appealing to what seems more plausible to us³⁰). If LRS continue to claim that the Axiom of Benevolence automatically requires us to consider the goods of all sentient beings, I suspect they are appealing to their own intuition that such beings are to be included in the category of individuals whose goods are to be counted.

It is still possible for LRS to claim that if I were rational enough to see not only mathematical but moral truths, I would have realized that I should expand the circle to consider impartially the goods of all sentient beings. However, then I

³⁰*PVV*, 146n.

wonder why I have to obey such rationality when I do not have it now, with all my seemingly sound ability to do higher mathematics.

3.2. The Point of View of the Universe

When their appeal to our mathematical reasoning capacity fails, however, LRS may appeal to another key concept in the Axiom of Benevolence: the point of view of the universe. They may claim that, if I take the viewpoint that goes beyond my personal good to see a greater whole, I will realize my self-evident obligation to expand my scope of consideration to cover all sentient beings.³¹ Let us now consider whether our taking the point of view of the universe will urge us to accept the expansion requirement. My answer is, yes it urges us to expand the scope of our consideration to some extent, but that does not mean that its scope must be borderless.

It should be noted here that Sidgwick's term "the point of view of the universe" is only a metaphor, simply denoting a viewpoint that goes beyond one individual's viewpoint to grasp a greater whole. From such a viewpoint, you will notice that your existence is only a tiny part of a greater whole. So, you would have to admit that your own good has no greater or lesser importance than someone else's same amount of good. Then our question is, what kind of universal viewpoint, and what kind of greater whole, are we ready to have in our minds when we are about to make ethical decisions?

Kant seems to have imagined "the Kingdom of Ends" of ethically self-legislating rational beings as the greater whole. Kant would claim that, seen from an impartial viewpoint that grasps a greater whole called the Kingdom of Ends, the intrinsic value of one rational being has no greater or lesser importance than the intrinsic value of any other rational being. Therefore, we have to show equal respect for all rational beings. Kant believed that this viewpoint is the universal viewpoint we should take. LRS refer to the Golden Rule in Judeo-Christian tradition to indicate that many people have already been aware of the self-evidence of the Axiom of Benevolence.³² As they admit, however, the same tradition has con-

³¹ Ibid., 193.

³² Ibid., 193.

stantly focused on the sanctity of human life, and for it “the goods of all individuals” has always meant the goods of all humans. Despite this, LRS claim that we have to take a viewpoint that grasps a greater whole than Kant’s Kingdom of Ends, or the goods of all humans. Their claim may possibly be based on their conviction that we should grasp the *greatest possible* whole we can imagine. So, for the sake of argument, let us attempt to expand our scope so that our viewpoint can grasp the greatest possible whole we can imagine. Then what will happen?

The kind of a whole Singer and other animal welfarist have claimed we should see, when we take the universal viewpoint, would be one that grasps all sentient beings, including humans and nonhumans. However, such a viewpoint may still be grasping only a tiny part of our universe. The broadest possible viewpoint we can imagine would be a viewpoint that sees our entire universe, which contains billions of galaxies, which have existed for the past 13.7 billion years, and which may continue to exist for another hundreds of billions or trillions of years. The earth and our solar system will extinguish long before the entire universe comes to an end. From a viewpoint that encompasses the entire universe and its fate, our planet and its lifespan will look tinier than dust, and each individual on it would be indiscernible. Taking such a huge viewpoint, we won’t be able to distinguish my good and someone else’s good, and it would seem as if there is no point in my caring about such a microscopically small cluster of interests of all sentient beings that exist on such a tiny planet for such a short period of time. When the whole we grasp is extremely huge, the pursuit of goods of individuals itself would look trivial. To me, it appears that the pursuit of goods of sentient individuals is meaningful only when we set our viewpoint close enough to our planet. When we claim that we should consider the goods of all sentient beings, we are probably choosing where to fix our viewpoint.³³

LRS could still claim that our reason demands that we consider the goods of each and every single individual that makes up the countless number of living beings that (will) exist in this vast universe, wherever and whenever each of them lives and however hard it is for us to discern those individuals. If this is what our

³³ An interesting argument on our cosmic insignificance can be found in Guy Kahane, “Our Cosmic Insignificance,” *Noûs*, 48:4 (2014), 745–772. One of the things we can learn from his paper is that, before concluding that we have significance in this vast universe, we have to determine who are meant to be included in the category of “we,” what we mean by “significance,” and whether “we” are the only group possessing significance in the universe.

“objective normative truth” ultimately dictates, however, we may well wonder what the point of following our reason, to that extreme, is.

It may be objected that such a thought experiment is irrelevant because Sidgwick’s point of view of the universe is only a metaphor, and he does not necessarily mean the actual universe. Sidgwick may have simply indicated that we should take a viewpoint that encompasses all sentient beings but can discern each individual. However, I do not see why I should take such a decently limited bird’s-eye view rather than a much broader creator’s view, unless it is explained to me that we should take the former viewpoint because we should care about beings that are closer to us. Then, using the same logic, I may be justified in further narrowing my viewpoint so that it encompasses all human beings (or any group of individuals) but not necessarily all sentient beings that are not close to us.

3.3. Arbitrary Line Drawing

Still, it may be possible that I haven’t understood the authors’ point. LRS may perhaps be claiming that, when we consider the good on the whole, we should extend our consideration to all sentient beings because there is no reason to draw an arbitrary line between those who belong to our group and those who do not. In one place, LRS state that they are suspicious of “the claim that the broader biological distinction of species gives us moral reasons for discounting the interests of those sentient beings who lie on the other side of that boundary.”³⁴ Why, LRS ask, should we defend speciesism if we reject discrimination based on nationality, gender and race?³⁵

³⁴ Ibid., 343.

³⁵ To this last question, I believe Thomas Hobbes as well as Steven Pinker has already given partial explanations (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651; Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2011, esp. 647-8, 660-8). Discriminatory treatment of human individuals will cause hostilities and distrust against each other, which will lead to an unprofitable and miserable situation for all, which make those with a decent level of reasoning capacity realize that it is beneficial to abandon the biased treatment and to start to cooperate in a well-ordered society. This reasoning does not apply to our possible discriminatory treatment of nonhuman sentient beings. LRS attempt to refute the Hobbesian contractarian argument when they respond to David Gauthier’s defense of morality, but their argument seems to beg the question. They reject Gauthier’s contractarian morality because “we have obligations to nonhuman animals and to future generations that do not depend on our emotional ties to them” (*PVU*, 171-3). They don’t examine how precisely Sidgwick’s ethics dictate such obligations.

But even LRS, and many contemporary animal welfarists, seem to be drawing an arbitrary line between two kinds of sentient beings.

Today, many animal welfarists and nonhuman rights activists are ready to expand their moral consideration to all warm-blooded vertebrate animals. And some utilitarians are ready to consider all living beings that have a central nervous system (CNS) because, according to them, the existence of a CNS is the sign of clear and cohesive consciousness. Nowadays, however, it is well documented that even arthropods have meticulously structured, highly-functional nervous systems,³⁶ and it is now known that fruit flies or cockroaches can differentiate smells or places they like from smells or places they hate, which means that they do have certain preferences. They also have certain memories—researchers have shown that cockroaches can learn to move from an uncomfortable place to a comfortable place faster by memorizing the landscape they travelled before, in a surprisingly similar way to the learning process of mammals.³⁷ Additionally, transient receptor potential (TRP) ion channels, known as “sensors” located on the cell membrane to convert signals associated with pain, heat, cold and stress sensation,³⁸ are found in a broad range of animals including insects – in fact, these channels were first discovered in *Drosophila*.³⁹

The structure of arthropods’ nervous system is quite different from that of vertebrates, but animal welfareist utilitarians have claimed that mere differences in bodily structure cannot constitute a proper reason to discriminate against a certain group of sentient beings, and LRS even claim that, whenever there is moral uncertainty, we should err on the side of fewer moral risks, by avoiding killing or injuring those sentient beings whose mechanism of consciousness is still unknown to us.⁴⁰ It seems to me that if we take their words literally, we would have a moral

³⁶ See, for instance, Kei Ito et al., “A Systematic Nomenclature for the Insect Brain,” *Neuron*, 81(4)(2014):755-65.

³⁷ Makoto Mizukami, Josette M. Weibrecht and Nicholas J. Strausfeld, “Mushroom Bodies of the Cockroach: Their Participation in Place Memory,” *Journal of Comparative Neurology*, 402(4)(1998):520-37.

³⁸ See, for instance, Patrick Delmas, “Snap Shot: Ion Channels and Pain,” *Cell*, 134 (2)(2008):366-366. e1; Ardem Patapoutian, Simon Tate and Clifford J. Woolf, “Transient Receptor Potential Channels: Targeting Pain at the Source,” *Nature Reviews Drug Discovery* 8 (2009):55–68.

³⁹ D. J. Cosens and Aubrey Manning, “Abnormal Electroretinogram from a *Drosophila* Mutant,” *Nature* 224 (5216) (1969): 285–7.

⁴⁰ *PUV*, 347-8.

obligation to consider the interests of insects as well. Their interests may be micro-small individually, but arthropods are the most flourishing species on this planet, trillions of them being alive at any one time, so the aggregation of their interests could be humongous. Following this logic, animal welfare societies would have to post videos to raise our awareness of the existence of pains in insects, and to accuse termite control companies of their slaughtering practices, just for the sake of convenience in our lives. Then, something similar to the dualism between egoism and altruism will resurface — the dualism between “us”-centralism versus pure altruism. We would have to face the question of whether we ought to sacrifice the greater goods of billions of mosquitos or Tsetse flies in order to save a relatively small number of humans from the diseases the insects transmit. If we reject this idea of morally considering insects’ goods, and claim that we should draw a line somewhere between those with CNS and those without, or between those with higher-cognitive functions and those without, what would the theoretical grounds for this rejection be? I cannot think of any plausible explanation except that “that is because those with higher-cognitive functions or those with CNS are *closer* to us.” If we admit this, we are drawing an artificial line between those who are closer to us and those who are not. LRS can still refuse such an artificial line-drawing and claim that we should accept the possibilities that we humans must at times sacrifice ourselves for the betterment of flourishing pests. If that is what our rationality ultimately demands us, however, we may well start questioning the meaning of following such rationality.

*

It may still be possible for LRS to claim that it is not the axioms, but hedonism, that is relevant to the expansion requirement. They may argue that Sidgwick must have inferred, after he argued that the ultimate good is pleasure, that we ought to regard *any* pleasure as an intrinsic good, whether it is felt by a human or a nonhuman sentient being.⁴¹ Sidgwick’s proof of hedonism may be construed as what simultaneously defines the moral standing of different beings. However, Sidgwick’s proof of hedonism is rather too weak to convince us to believe that the ultimate good we should morally consider must be all kinds of positive internal feelings of all sentient beings. In his proof of hedonism, Sidgwick proceeds by ask-

⁴¹ LRS refer to this line of reasoning by referring to Henry Sidgwick, “The Establishment of Ethical First Principles,” *Mind* 4 (1879):106-7, cited in *PUV*, 338.

ing himself and us what we, upon reflection, would regard as ultimately desirable. It seems to me that, during this process, I could claim that I cannot regard the presumably positive conscious state of insects, amphibians, birds and probably swine as ultimate good, simply because I cannot really imagine what it is like to feel like them. I might be able to better imagine and represent in my mind the internal feelings of such communicative animals as primates and dolphins, as well as pets such as dogs and cats, but I can hardly imagine what it is like to feel like a fly or a cockroach, so I would possibly exclude the internal feelings of arthropods from the category of desirable feelings; then following the same logic, I may possibly exclude the internal feelings of fish, whose brains seem also simple enough, by refusing to regard them as desirable, and then those of birds, reptiles, and so on. Thus Sidgwick's proof of hedonism will not help us attain the expansion requirement that LRS hope to attain.

CONCLUSION

Despite all the arguments presented, it does not follow that the main components of utilitarianism – the universalizability of ethical judgments (the Axiom of Justice), the impartiality requirement in weighing goods (the Axiom of Benevolence), and hedonism—completely collapse. I simply pointed out a missing link between these self-evident components and LRS's version of utilitarian consideration for all sentient beings. This link, if it exists at all, needs to be explained. De Lazari-Radek and Singer's *The Point of View of the Universe* should be read not simply as a precise explication of Sidgwick's ethics, but rather as an enterprise that reflects the authors' strong determination to promote their version of utilitarianism, which should be critically analyzed before being accepted.⁴²

⁴² I thank Bart Schultz, Peter Singer and Roger Crisp for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article. I am, of course, solely responsible for all the claims I made in this paper.