

# Oversimplification in Philosophy

Randall S. Firestone

Department of Philosophy, El Camino College, Torrance, CA, USA

Email: Randyfirestone@verizon.net

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## Abstract

This paper maintains that oversimplification has been a common and recurring problem in philosophy that has not only been ignored, but has also gone largely unnoticed. The paper sets forth various examples of oversimplification which include the one sentence moral tests proposed by Kant and Mill, moral ideas such as psychological egoism and Nietzsche's will to power which oversimplify the complexity and variety of moral motivations, the Naturalistic Fallacy whereby it is claimed that what is natural is thereby good, various monisms beginning with the pre-Socratics and including Hegel, and our modern-day preferred method of oversimplification by the use of analogical arguments. The paper argues that these oversimplifications have come at considerable expense as they have often kept us trapped in dead-end and counterproductive theories and perspectives which have taken us away from truth and understanding instead of toward them.

## Keywords

Oversimplification, Kant's Moral Theory, Categorical Imperative, Utilitarianism, Critiques of the Categorical Imperative, Psychological Egoism, Will to Power, Naturalistic Fallacy, Monism, Analogies, Analogical Arguments, Watch Analogy, Violinist Analogy, Drowning Child Analogy

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The division into wolf and man, flesh and spirit, by means of which Harry tries to make his destiny more comprehensible to himself is a very great simplification ... and even the most spiritual and highly cultivated of men habitually sees the world and himself through the lenses of delusive formulas and artless simplifications... (Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, 1929: pp. 111-112)

## 1. Philosophical Oversimplifications Have Often Stymied Philosophical Progress

The world is populated by a myriad of objects, forces, and living beings which interact in a vast variety of ways. Simplification allows us to better understand

our complex world. It also assists in our survival since simple rules help one quickly react to emergency situations which require split-second judgments and actions.

Simplification is the hallmark of academics in all fields as it allows us to see the forest from the trees, as the saying goes, as it omits details that can obscure the bigger picture or hide more salient lessons and facts. We often learn from simplifications. They are not merely convenient to use, they often expand our knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

We can say that the goal of simplicity in academic fields is to bring us closer to knowledge and the truth. Simplicity is a necessity. Nicholas Rescher, Co-chairman of the Center for Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh, emphasizes the practicality of simplicity. He explains that “simpler (more systematic) answers are more easily codified, taught, learned, used, investigated, etc.” (Rescher, 2015: p. 41) Rescher explains about simplification in science: “As science takes us into ever deeper thickets of complexity, we face the reality of our limitations. Simplification not only becomes desirable; it becomes necessary... And we use the least cumbersome viable formulations because they are easier to remember and more convenient to use.” (Rescher, 2015: pp. 58, 61).

I am concerned here, however, with the problem of oversimplification, which I define as simplification which brings us away from knowledge and truth instead of toward it. While proper simplification aids and furthers our understanding, oversimplification undermines and often stymies it. Oversimplification involves the omission of *relevant* details. Rescher explains as follows:

Oversimplification always involves errors of omission. It occurs whenever someone leaves out of account features of an item that bear upon a correct understanding of its nature... Whenever we unwittingly oversimplify matters we have a blind-spot where some significantly-relevant facet of reality is concealed from our view.

Oversimplification involves the loss of information. And this in turn involves the incapacity to understand and explain phenomena (Rescher, 2015: p. 66).

Simplifications have been utilized in all scientific and academic fields to our great benefit. On the other hand, oversimplifications have produced the reverse in all academic areas, i.e., they have been employed in such a way as to impede

<sup>1</sup>Edison Barrios explains in detail how simplification is often more than merely being instrumental in making information easy to use as it can be substantive as it expands our knowledge of a subject. He states as follows: “For one thing significant unification and uniformity tend to bring new information into the picture, which at the very least includes knowledge of hitherto unnoticed or unexplored commonalities and connections in the domain of phenomena, as well as novel perspectives and conceptual systems that differ significantly—sometimes to the point of incompatibility—from those previously available. Thus, they contribute additional information, not merely an efficient way of deploying or accessing old information.” (Barrios, 2016: p. 2277). He concludes: “Nevertheless, it is clear that... there are genuine notions of simplicity apart from the notion ‘simple to use’, which are not pursued for the sake of reducing labor... It was also noted that simplicity was a requirement for our *understanding* of phenomena, by making previously opaque phenomena *intelligible* or by being an essential factor in the search for *deeper* explanations and more *unified* accounts.” (Barrios, 2016: p. 2302).

our understanding of the world<sup>2</sup>. Be that as it may, oversimplifications are unavoidable<sup>3</sup>.

In science, oversimplifications have temporarily taken us away from the truth, but those oversimplifications have often been stepping-stones on the way to a greater understanding. Rescher explains how science has progressed: “Those old theories oversimplified matters: new conditions call for new measures, new data for more complex theories. It lies in the rational economy of sensible inquiry that the history of science is an ongoing litany of oversimple old theories giving way to more sophisticated new ones that correct their oversimplification of the old.” (Rescher, 2015: p. 62).

As such, in many instances scientific oversimplifications can be said to have been only temporarily bad as they have often served as vehicles to new and improved theories. This is because scientific theories have first and foremost tried to best explain how the world really is. Their goal is that their theory “fit” with reality. Simplicity has never been the goal of good science. One favors a simpler theory only when there are two competing theories that seem to have equal explanatory power<sup>4</sup> or it is understood that the simplification is being used due to our cognitive limitations. Scientists usually are well aware that the simplicity brings some level of inaccuracy at the same time.

Philosophers, on the other hand, seem to too often go with a simplified explanation or theory without also recognizing the significant mischaracterizations of the world which the simplification creates. Indeed, there has been less of an emphasis on ensuring that our philosophical ideas match or fit the facts of reality. A simple theory often is viewed as meritorious for its own sake. It seems enough if it *sometimes* works well or *sometimes* provides true information. One need not be too concerned that there are situations which the theory or idea does

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<sup>2</sup>One common oversimplification is scientific reductionism which attempts to reduce all descriptions of the physical world to the language of physics. There has been much written on this problem. It seems to overlook interactions and further ignores emergent properties such as life and consciousness. Carlos Gershenson states that “reductionism neglects interactions, and these are relevant for the description of complex systems... The novel information generated by interactions can be described as emergent. (Bedau and Humphreys 2007) This implies that novel properties arise from the interactions between components of a system. i.e., emergent properties are not present in the components and cannot be reduced to them.” (Gershenson, 2013: pp. 784-785).

<sup>3</sup>Rescher explains as follows: “Inadvertent oversimplification occurs because we are not omniscient. In the final analysis oversimplification is inevitable for limited intelligences seeking to come to grips cognitively with an endlessly complex world. As beings whose actions are guided by thought we constantly have questions that require to be answered in real time, in circumstances where acquiring and processing the requisite information simply takes too long. To get from where we are to where we need to be demands shortcuts across an informational vacuum. Oversimplification is the only way to manage this (Rescher, 2015: p. 44).

<sup>4</sup>Edouard Machery explains this point quite well: “Second the kind of context in which simplicity, elegance, and other alleged virtues play a role in theory choice suggests that their role is at best limited to peculiar epistemic situations. The controversy between the Copernican and Ptolemaic astronomies is telling here (as is Newton’s rule): The alleged theoretical virtues were involved in theory assessment because the then available data was unable to distinguish the competing theories. I conjecture that in real scientific contexts the alleged theoretical virtues are almost only appealed to when underdetermination prevails (a situation typically temporary). This is an abnormal scientific situation—not the kind of situation where science is making progress—and it is at least questionable whether criteria of theory choice that are primarily used in abnormal situations in science should govern philosophical methodology (Machery, 2017: pp. 202-203).

not adequately explain or fit. But this, unfortunately, has kept us wedded to inadequate theories<sup>5</sup>.

It is my contention that many oversimplifications in philosophy have not ultimately led us to a greater understanding of our world, and as such are counterproductive and much more pernicious than the oversimplifications in science. They have misled us at the outset and continue to mislead us. What's more, the philosophical literature has not only neglected and failed to scrutinize the problem of oversimplification, but it has also failed to even notice it as a problem. This is true in spite of the *scope and ubiquity of philosophical oversimplification*.

This paper will set forth examples of oversimplification in the following areas: Moral theory, moral ideas, a variety of monisms which maintain that the world ultimately consists of only one substance or thing, and analogical arguments. I have tried to include enough examples covering well over two thousand years of philosophy so that the scope, breadth, magnitude, and seriousness of the problem can be appreciated, but with the caveat that due to limited space, this paper will give only a relatively brief exposition of each example—although it should be sufficient to illustrate the danger present in each oversimplification.

However, even though significant problems have previously been pointed out by numerous scholars regarding each of the oversimplifications to which I will refer, they continue to be used and, what's more, commonly still form the bases of current philosophical views. For example, modern day moral philosophers still call themselves Kantian or Utilitarian even though those positions are based on oversimplifications which take us away from a better understanding of morality instead of toward it, as will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

## 2. Oversimplification in Moral Theory

Of the three leading moral theories, which include virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and utilitarian or consequentialist ethics, only virtue ethics does not suffer from patent oversimplification. Our most famous versions of Deontological and Utilitarian ethics each give us a one sentence test to determine right from wrong actions. On its face, it is surprising that anyone would think that we could differentiate right from wrong with a simple and abbreviated formula that is supposed to suffice for all the complex moral situations we find ourselves in, including all the different relationships (familial, personal, professional, etc.) we must consider.

### 2.1. Kant's One-Sentence Morality Test

Immanuel Kant's duty ethics is our first example. The categorical imperative is

<sup>5</sup>Edouard Machery makes this point: "This is the second reason why it would not do to hold that the use of simplicity, elegance, or scope in science suggests that these are genuine virtues that can be imported to theory choice in philosophy. First, fit and the alleged theoretical virtues are lexicographically ordered and fit comes first. Even when scientists' methodological rules involve simplicity, its role is secondary to fit. (Woodward, 2014): The point of Newton's rule is to exclude theoretical complications that do not increase fit; it does not allow to prefer simpler, but less fitting theories to more complex, but better fitting." (Machery, 2017: p. 202).

his moral test. Interestingly, Kant has several versions of the categorical imperative—so one might argue that he actually has more than one test, but Kant did not think so. His first version known as the Formula of Universal Law states that one should “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (Kant, 1785: p. 84). Kant explains that maxims are the principles or rules that we should follow and that these principles must apply to all people on an equal basis. Moreover, Kant’s examples seem to disallow for any exceptions to the maxims. This version of the categorical imperative is notoriously hard to apply as it seems that reasonable and rational persons could disagree as to what laws or rules should be universal.

Kantian expert Barbara Herman freely admits that this one sentence test of the Categorical Imperative (CI) is unclear as experts cannot even agree on how it is to work. This is not at all surprising as one would not expect a one sentence test to contain the precision necessary to be adequate for application to all possible scenarios calling for ethical analysis and action. Herman further claims that even the role that Kant intended for the categorical imperative to play has been uniformly misinterpreted<sup>6</sup>.

The second version of the categorical imperative, known as the Formula of the End in Itself, is easier to apply: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” (Kant, 1785: p. 91). Kant believed that rational nature was of absolute value and since virtually all human beings have this nature, their autonomy was to be respected. As such, Kant seemed to believe we should never lie to or deceive another person because this would always be disrespecting their autonomy to make their decisions with knowledge of the truth or facts. Kant states that “the man who has a mind to make a false promise to others will see at once that he is intending to make use of another man merely as a means to an end he does not share.” (Kant, 1785: p. 92). In fact, in various writings Kant finds three problems with lying: it disrespects the autonomy of others, it disrespects humanity in general, and it disrespects the liar himself.

According to most peoples’ reading of Kant, the categorical imperative, with the use of either formula, ends up giving us a list of things we should never do, such as lying, stealing, killing innocent persons, etc., because these actions either cannot rationally be willed as universal laws and/or they disrespect the autonomy of innocent rational persons. So according to Kant, certain types of actions are never morally permissible.

Numerous commentators have pointed out how poorly this prevailing understanding of Kant’s categorical imperative works in real life. For example, suppose you lived during WWII and were hiding your Jewish family from the Nazis. If a Nazi soldier asked you where your family was, according to Kant it would be

<sup>6</sup>“Interpreters and critics of Kant’s ethics are heavily invested in the Categorical Imperative as a principle of moral judgment. There is endless discussion about how or whether the CI works, about whether the results it would give if it did work are acceptable, and so on. A question that is much less frequently asked is: what role does the CI have in moral judgment? This is supposed to be obvious. I am increasingly sure it is not.” (Herman, 1993: p. 132).

immoral to lie to the Nazis—even though the truth would lead to the concentration camps and a probable death for your loved ones. Indeed, if we followed Kant then one would be morally compelled to never lie to a tyrant even when it would result in the deaths of millions of good and moral people.

While it certainly makes sense to have a general rule of telling the truth, to not allow one to lie under any circumstances seems to most people to be unduly inflexible and extreme. The fact is, some people do not deserve to be told the truth. They simply become too dangerous as they can be expected to exploit the truth to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of innocent others. Moreover, it seems evident that life should be valued more than truth for without life one cannot engage in truth-telling or anything else of moral or other value<sup>7</sup>.

Realizing the weakness of the majority interpretation of Kant's view, several Kantian apologists have argued that we should interpret Kant differently and conclude that Kant would have in fact allowed for some exceptions. Barbara Herman heroically tries to rescue Kant by arguing that Kant's position has been misinterpreted by virtually all other commentators. She admits that under most circumstances one cannot lie even to save an innocent life:

Deceiving to save a life involves an assault on the integrity of a rational will. This fact is deliberatively determinative unless failing to give aid is also incompatible with respect for rational agency. And it is not: we may fail to aid... To the bare question. "May I deceive to save a life?" the answer seems to be that one may not. It is not clear that there is good reason to find this conclusion objectionable. "But," someone will ask, "suppose what was necessary was only a small deception?" I'm not sure there is such a thing (Herman, 1993: p. 156).

Notwithstanding her admission, Herman has proposed that we should interpret Kant in a novel way to conclude that under some circumstances one can lie to save an innocent life<sup>8</sup>. She argues that the categorical imperative is only addressing general maxims, and that Kant's prohibitions should only be viewed as "deliberative presumptions" which can be overcome in some circumstances (See Herman, 1993: pp. 116-117). Herman asserts the following: "One might then offer a different ground of justification, arguing that a maxim of deception to repel or prevent aggression has as its object A's abandonment of his impermissible maxim. The deception would then be in the service of a morally necessary purpose..." (Herman, 1993: p. 157).

There are reasons to question Herman's conclusions. First, Kant himself never wrote that the categorical imperative should be limited to only general maxims,

<sup>7</sup>One would think that Kant would notice this moral dilemma or conflict in duties and submit a hierarchy of values, but he declares that a "collision of duties and obligations is inconceivable." (Kant, 1797b: 6:224: p. 16).

<sup>8</sup>Herman explains her novel views of Kant as follows: "It is my intention in offering this account to be faithful to Kant. But much of what I introduce as essential to his theory will seem alien to what is familiar from both friendly and critical discussions of Kant's ethics. This is to some extent natural with any new interpretation of familiar theories or texts... We might think of this project as a normative reconstruction of Kantian ethics..." (Herman, 1993: p. 73).

nor that its prohibitions should be viewed as merely deliberative presumptions which could be overruled or superseded. Moreover, we should note that Herman's advocacy for a Kantian exception to the duty to avoid deception still fails to allow for adequate flexibility because in many situations the actor would still have no moral right to lie in order to save an innocent person from death.

In support of Herman's views, other Kantians have reached a similar conclusion. They have often done so in spite of the fact that Kant himself seems to continually reiterate his position of accepting only exceptionless maxims. For example, in Kant's short 1797 essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy" Kant notes that the French philosopher Benjamin Constant condemned his position and characterized that position as not allowing for exceptions to telling the truth. Kant notes that Constant stated that "a German philosopher [Kant]... goes so far as to maintain that it would be a crime to lie to a murderer who asked us whether a friend of ours whom he is pursuing has taken refuge in our house... To tell the truth is therefore a duty, but only to one who has a right to the truth. But no one has a right to a truth that harms others." (Constant, 1797: pp. 123-124; Kant, 1797a: p. 425). Not only does Kant not deny Constant's charges, Kant actually doubles down on his position.

Truthfulness in statements that cannot be avoided is the formal duty of man to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise therefrom for him *or for any other*... For a lie *always* harms another; if not some other human being, then it nevertheless does harm to humanity in general... (emphasis added) (Kant, 1797a: p. 8).

In spite of this, several Kantian defenders have interpreted Kant's response as limited to a *legal* response regarding whether one could be *legally* liable for lying as opposed to a statement of a position on lying as an ethical wrong. So, for example, Helga Varden argues the following: "To start, it seems clear that an interpretive approach that focuses on issues of general morality is wrong, because Kant explicitly says throughout the essay that he is limiting the argument to a discussion of justice or what Kant calls 'right.'" (Varden, 2010: p. 406). Allen Wood takes a similar approach and states that Kant's response is limited to legal rights and duties, not ethical ones (See Wood, 2011).

It is certainly true that Kant does in fact address the legal ramifications in lying to the murderer, although he makes a mess of the legal analysis<sup>9</sup>, but he does

<sup>9</sup>Kant says as follows: "However, if you told a lie and said the intended victim was not in the house, and he has actually (although unbeknownst to you) gone out, with the result that by doing so he has been met by the murderer and thus the deed has been perpetrated, then in this case you may be justly accused as having caused his death." (Kant, 1797a). Here we can see that Kant's legal analysis of lying is as poor as his ethical analysis of lying. In America, a person is held to the reasonable person standard and is only liable or guilty for the foreseeable harm that results from one's negligence. I am quite confident that no American court would bring any charges against one who lied to a would-be murderer in order to save an innocent life as the reasonable person would not tell the truth in these circumstances, nor does it seem foreseeable that the innocent victim would leave the safe confines of the house to go outside where the murderer is located. As Kant himself has pointed out, the protector/"liar" has exhibited a good will and it should not matter that the resulting consequences were (unforeseeably) poor. Moreover, under the criminal law it would be said that there was no intentional wrongdoing or *mens rea*.

much more than this as he also addresses his views on lying in general—specifically affirming that there are no exceptions to this duty. Kant declares that “truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties founded on contract, and the laws of such duties would be rendered uncertain and useless if even the slightest exception to them were admitted... the duty of truthfulness (which is the only thing under consideration here) makes no distinction between persons to whom one has this duty and to whom one can be excused from this duty; it is, rather, an unconditional duty which holds in all circumstances.” (Kant, 1797a). Varden argues that Kant is not addressing his general view of lying here, and she states that “Kant never discusses first-personal ethics (universalizable maxims and actions from duty) in this paper” (Varden, 2010: p. 406), but in fact Kant does address the universalizability in the closing sentence of his paper when he concludes as follows: “This is because such exceptions would destroy the universality on account of which alone they bear the name of principles.” (Kant, 1797a: p. 429).

Both Varden and Wood take pains to cite the *Metaphysics of Morals* and its separation of the Doctrine of Right from the Doctrine of Virtue—with “right” dealing with the legal and “virtue” dealing with the ethical or moral. It should be noted that Kant does not devote much attention to lying or deception in this book and does not even include it as a violation of a duty to others. Kant is, however, quite clear and consistent in condemning all lying in the Doctrine of Virtue—focusing on the harm it does to the liar.

By a lie a human being throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being. A human being who does not himself believe what he tells another (even if the other is a merely ideal person) has even less worth than if he were a mere thing...and such a speaker is a mere deceptive appearance of a human being, not a human being himself (Kant, 1797b: 6:429, p. 182).

Further, in his section on Casuistical Questions, Kant again is consistent in his intolerance for lying under seemingly any circumstance when he gives us the following example:

For example, a householder has ordered his servant to say “not at home” if a certain human being asks for him. The servant does this and, as a result, the master slips away and commits a serious crime, which would otherwise have been prevented by the guard sent to arrest him. Who (in accordance with ethical principles) is guilty in this case? Surely the servant, too, who violated a duty to himself by his lie, the results of which his own conscience imputes to him (Kant, 1797b: 6:431, p. 184).

Indeed, I think that Kant is consistent in his view that there are no exceptions to the moral prohibition against lying. Given how brilliant he was and coupled with the fact that he gave us several examples to demonstrate how the various forms of the categorical imperative were to be applied, it would be surprising if



Kant really were favorably disposed to exceptions for moral maxims since he never gave his readers even one example of how lying could at times be morally justified (or even required) or when any of his prohibitions could be excepted or overruled<sup>10</sup>.

However, if we go along with Herman then my point is made all the better because if Kant's categorical imperative allows for non-obvious exceptions which require the reader to engage in some academic feats of creativity, then his one sentence tests are both misleading and incomplete as stated. They would be oversimplifications that would require much sophisticated analysis to fruitfully deploy and utilize<sup>11</sup>.

Additionally, notice that Herman, Varden, and Wood have not used Kant's moral theory as a foundation for their own more advanced theory; rather, they have reinterpreted Kant's theory to overcome serious objections to it and to make it somewhat more palatable. The result is that we are left with Kantian theory as the starting and ending point—without making appreciable, if any, philosophical progress.

Not only do Kant's versions of the categorical imperative demonstrate a striking lack of flexibility, but they are far too general and simple to indicate what to do in many situations. Jean-Paul Sartre provides us with the example of his student who must decide during WWII of whether to go to fight the Nazis or stay with his mother. His father was a collaborator with the Nazis and had abandoned the family, and his elder brother had already been killed in the war. He knew if he were also killed his mother would be devastated as she would have lost her entire immediate family, but he also wanted to do his part in the war. Sartre pointed out that Kant's categorical imperative would be of little help here:

Who could help him to choose? ... The Kantian ethic says, Never regard another as a means, but always as an end. Very well: if I remain with my mother, I shall be regarding her as the end and not as a means: but by the

<sup>10</sup>Maybe the strongest support for Herman's position which would allow for Kantian exceptions to the prohibition of lying is found in Kant's statement on conflict of duties found in *The Doctrine of Right*. Kant states that "two rules opposed to each other cannot be necessary at the same time: if it is a duty to act in accordance with one rule, to act in accordance with the opposite rule is not a duty but even contrary to duty..." (Kant, 1797b: 6:224: p. 16).

<sup>11</sup>In keeping with the train of thought of Herman, Varden, and Wood, Kant's theory could be reformulated to include an exception for when it could foreseeably be expected that someone would misuse the truth to improperly harm others. In such a case, it could be argued that one should not respect the wrongdoer's rational nature and autonomy because they were misusing those abilities in a non-moral manner which was inconsistent with their own rational nature. Alternatively, it could be argued that the wrongdoer should not expect to be told the truth in circumstances where they will misuse the truth, and as such their rational nature has not been disrespected at all. Additionally, under some circumstances one might be viewed as being relieved of telling the truth when the circumstances indicate that coercion or undue influence is present. However, these types of exceptions and reasonings would seem to be quite a radical departure from Kant's philosophy, and the imprecision inherent in such a standard seems to undermine the certainty that Kant wants to bring to morality—which is why Kant insists on exceptionless maxims. Furthermore, such exceptions would greatly complicate Kant's theory and change it from its simple (and what I believe is its oversimplified) form. Moreover, when the exceptions become numerous one has to question whether the initial theory should be abandoned all-together.

same token I am in danger of treating as means those who are fighting on my behalf; and the converse is also true, that if I go to the aid of the combatants I shall be treating them as the end at the risk of treating my mother as a means.” (Sartre, 1949: pp. 212-213).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophical giant Friedrich Nietzsche specifically takes aim at Kant’s moral theories. He attacks Kant’s oversimplifications which assert that one displays moral worth *only* when their action is motivated by duty, which Nietzsche finds cold and impersonal, and that universal laws exist which one should dutifully apply to everyone and at all times.

A word against Kant as *moralist*... “Virtue”, “duty”, “good in itself”, impersonal and **universal**—phantoms...Nothing works more profound ruin than any “impersonal” duty... Kant’s categorical imperative should have been felt as *mortally dangerous!* ... What destroys more quickly than to work, to think, to feel without inner necessity, without a deep personal choice, without *joy*? As an automaton of “duty”? (my emphasis in bold) (Nietzsche, 1895, AC 11: pp. 133-134).

Indeed, Kant’s one-sentence moral test is far too short, abstract, and incomplete. It misleads one into believing that a simple formula can determine right from wrong actions in all circumstances. This it cannot do.

## 2.2. Utilitarianism’s One-Sentence Morality Test

Utilitarianism fares no better. Instead of determining right from wrong by the type of action, as Kant’s test does, Utilitarianism determines right from wrong based on the consequences which will flow from the action. John Stuart Mill, the most famous proponent of Utilitarianism, explained that the Utilitarian test for determining right from wrong is the Greatest Happiness Principle which “holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.” (Mill, 1879: p. 137). There are many problems with this test, only five of which I will mention.

First, Utilitarianism oversimplification sacrifices individual rights for the sake of the greater whole. It does not guarantee any basic human rights to anyone as the greatest overall good is all that is considered. As such, individuals are often treated unfairly for the sake of the majority.

Second, Utilitarianism oversimplifies when it assumes that the only thing, or at least the most important thing, is happiness, which many people would dispute. How about living an honorable (but difficult) life of accomplishments which include contributions to the welfare of others? Shouldn’t one at times sacrifice overall happiness for the sake of the happiness of one with whom they have a preexisting or special relationship, such as an elderly parent or spouse? Moreover, happiness seems more like the byproduct of an interesting and successful life than the goal in itself.

Third, utilitarianism oversimplifies in a way that it at times compromises

personal integrity, as the English moral philosopher Bernard Williams has pointed out. For example, in some situations we would be morally required to kill an innocent person in order to foster the greater good. However, we would have become a Utilitarian because we care about morality and doing the right thing, and presumably we would also not believe that the killing of innocent persons is the right thing, but we may find ourselves compelled to do so if we follow the Utilitarian calculus (See [Smart & Williams, 1973: pp. 82-117](#)).

Fourth, Utilitarianism oversimplifies at the expense of personal relationships. It is just too impartial. Mill writes that “as between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.” ([Mill, 1879: p. 148](#)) So, for example, if two people were drowning and you had time to save only one of them, and one was your spouse who is an average person and who will probably never do anything to greatly affect others in the world but whom you love very much, and the other person was a famous medical scientist who had found cures for major diseases and would likely find more in the future, under utilitarianism you would be compelled to save the scientist. In fact, saving your spouse would be the immoral choice. However, I think most of us would feel that there was something wrong with you if you did not save your spouse. We believe, and I think rightfully so, that the emotional attachment and preexisting relationship should count—and count a lot.

Fifth, Utilitarianism oversimplifies the difficulty in predicting the future consequences of our actions. Utilitarianism requires one to accurately predict consequences, but this is often quite difficult if not impossible to do. We can again look at Sartre’s example of his student who must choose between staying with his mother or going off to war. If he knew ahead of time that he would survive the war, then going off to war would seem to be the morally right choice. On the other hand, if he knew ahead of time that he would be killed in the war, then staying with his mother would seem to be the morally right choice. But how could he predict either one? At the time of his decision he does not know who will win the war, how long the war will last, how many people will be killed on each side, where he will be sent to fight, etc. He simply has no basis on which to fashion a prediction about his chances of survival. As such, utilitarianism seems to be unhelpful in making his decision, much like Kant’s deontological theory was.

One could claim that I have been pointing out problems with Utilitarianism, not oversimplification, but the two are inextricably intertwined. It is precisely because Utilitarianism’s one sentence test is so brief and simplistic that it runs into these problems. The simplification itself ensures that the theory will not be comprehensive enough to adequately deal with all the situations and relationships that need to be considered when making moral decisions.

### **2.3. The Problem with One-Sentence Moral Tests**

The point is that a one-sentence test to determine right from wrong most likely

could never provide adequate guidance for the many and complex moral situations in which we find ourselves. Instead of helping our moral deliberations, they actually hinder them by causing us to ignore pertinent aspects of a situation or relationship. These tests are far too simplistic to be able to be applied consistently in such a way as to obtain clear and satisfactory results. Despite this, these theories continue to be cited and utilized by philosophers. They actually shape the majority of philosophical discussions on morality—I believe to the detriment of philosophy itself. In my opinion they have trapped us in a false dichotomy since both the type of action and the consequences of the action should be considered when making a moral decision.

Of course, we could present many additional criticisms of Kant’s and Mill’s competing theories<sup>12</sup>, but I think it is unnecessary to do so here. Now this is not to say that Kant and Mill are not onto something worth considering. It seems to me that we should consider the type of the action *and* the consequences of an action when deciding what we should do. However, I doubt there will ever be a satisfactory one-sentence test which can tell us when the type of action should dictate our decision and when the consequences should do so. Personally, I think most of us usually start off with a Kantian disposition in that we have ready-to-use rules such as “I should tell the truth,” but when following the rule would result in very poor or dire consequences we then switch to Mill’s formula and allow those consequences to trump the rule. Unfortunately, I trust that no rule will be able to prescribe when the consequences are so adverse that it is the correct time to abandon the initial moral rule.

Nietzsche condemned the oversimplifications he saw in the leading Western ethical systems. He notes that there are a great variety of cultures and major differences between people—so we should not expect that one simple theory would apply to all people and societies. He asserts in his usual bombastic style:

Let us consider finally how naive it is altogether to say “man *ought* to be thus and thus!” Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the luxuriance of a prodigal play and change of forms: and does some pitiful journey moralist say at the sight of it: “No! Man ought to be *different*?... He even knows *how* man ought to be, this bigoted wretch...” (Nietzsche, 1889, TI 6: p. 56)

One might argue that “once we have an unrealistic model, we can start worrying how to construct less unrealistic models.” (Williamson, 2007: p. 291) Yet, this does not seem to be what has happened regarding moral theories. We cannot construct less unrealistic models unless and until we stop striving for and

<sup>12</sup>For example, one common objection to Utilitarianism is that there is a difference between virtue and maximizing happiness, and morality deals with virtue. The claim is that at times doing the right thing makes people unhappy. As Kant pointed out, “making a man happy is quite different from making him good.” (Kant, 1785: p. 103) Moreover, another Utilitarian problem is that it is not clear how we should compare pleasure to pain. If an action would please one person but upset another person to roughly the same degree, should the one person’s pain be given more weight than the other’s happiness?

accepting overly simplistic ethical models or tests in the first place. *Indeed, instead of being stepping-stones to better theories, the moral tests propounded by Kant and Mill and the debate of whether the type of action or the consequences of the action should be considered are still consuming philosophical discussions on moral theory.* This can be seen in that virtually every Introduction to Philosophy and Introduction to Ethics book contain Kant's and Mill's/Bentham's theories. Even the articles in more advanced philosophy texts are usually limited to reinterpretations and reworkings of these theories to make them more palatable. Truly new theories using Kant's and Mill's theories as their foundation are conspicuously absent. The result is closer to stagnation than to progression.

### 3. Oversimplification in Moral Ideas

It is not just moral theories which have presented us with oversimplification problems which lead us away from truth. Philosophy is rife with moral ideas and concepts which do the same. These ideas often engage in a type of reductionism which conflates two or more ideas into one and thereby ignore important distinctions. In this section we will examine three such moral ideas: psychological egoism, the will to power, and the idea that natural equals good.

#### 3.1. Psychological Egoism

One prominent moral theory known as psychological egoism stands for the view that the motive behind everything that we do is our own self-interest. We act solely to obtain our own gratification or to avoid harm to ourselves. Thomas Hobbes championed this view in his seminal work *Leviathan*: "For no man giveth, but with intention of good to himself; because gift is voluntary; and of all voluntary acts, the object is to every man his own good." (Hobbes, 1651: p. 515) We might challenge Hobbes by asserting that when we have compassion for or pity someone else then our motivation is for an improvement of the other person's position and not our own, but Hobbes argues that we pity others because we imagine ourselves in that situation, so the pity is really about ourselves and not them. Hobbes states: "Grief for the calamity of another is PITY, and arises from the imagination that the like calamity *may befall himself*; and therefore is called also COMPASSION..." (emphasis in italics) (Hobbes, 1651: p. 500).

We might first note that Hobbes had to go through some significant contortions to try to explain away the apparently obvious fact that people sometimes act in order to benefit others and at their own risk. Indeed, there are two inter-related problems with the Hobbesian view. First, Hobbes conflates the actions of Hitler and Mother Teresa as both being motivated by the same desire, namely, to satisfy the actor or self. This is a reductionism that seems to miss the very significant differences in their motivations and actions. The second problem is that the argument assumes that we have only one motivation, or only one primary motivation, and that motivation is self-interest. Even if it is true that Mother Teresa was partially motivated by self-interest, it seems clear that one of her mo-

tivations, and probably her primary motivation, was the welfare of others. Unlike Hitler, Mother Teresa was focused on helping the poor and oppressed, the innocents of the world.

Another problem with psychological egoism is that it is an unfalsifiable theory. No matter what the evidence, the psychological egoist will insist that the motive behind the action is the actor's own self-interest. But what about when someone sacrifices their own life for the sake of others? The egoist claims that even that action was motivated by self-interest—perhaps the self-interest of maintaining a good reputation after death. However, if no amount of evidence will ever be considered sufficient to change the egoist's mind, then the evidence no longer matters, and one has to question if there is really any reason to believe such a theory.

### 3.2. Nietzsche's Will to Power

Our second and third examples of oversimplifications regarding moral ideas come from Nietzsche—even though he harshly criticized oversimplifications committed by earlier philosophers<sup>13</sup>. To begin, it seems to me that Nietzsche's notion of the “will to power” is a gross oversimplification, although admittedly there is some disagreement as to what Nietzsche intends to convey by this term. Arthur Danto states that “this expression appears spontaneously in Nietzsche's writings without much explanation of what he means by it” (Danto, 2005: p. 196) and Robert Solomon declares that it is sometimes “virtually impossible to ascertain what (if anything) is being asserted” and it is “entirely unclear what Nietzsche believes about it.” (Solomon, 2003: p. 23) In spite of these assertions we can say something about what Nietzsche had in mind when using this term.

In a previous article I argued that Nietzsche's will to power is often misread as its natural interpretation would be that the will is the means to achieve the goal of power (See Firestone, 2017). However, I think the will to power is best interpreted as the means to achieving whatever end one wishes or chooses to achieve. One uses their will to power to accomplish their aims. Power can be, but need not be, the goal. The goal or end might be artistic achievement, the writing of an inspiring book, or to help others. Danto correctly asserts that it “must be a pitfall

<sup>13</sup>We have already noted how Nietzsche condemned Kant for oversimplifications regarding morality. Nietzsche further decried the oversimplification which asserts that our will is unified. He states: “But now let us notice what is strangest about the will—this manifold thing for which the people have only one word: inasmuch as in the given circumstances we are at the same time the commanding *and* the obeying parties ... on the other hand, we are accustomed to disregard this duality...” (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE 19: p. 216) One possible oversimplification I will not be addressing here is Nietzsche's distinction of two types of societal moral systems—those of either master morality or slave morality. This would seem to be an oversimplification by way of a false dichotomy, but to be fair to Nietzsche he acknowledged that he was simplifying in order to help us understand certain dangers regarding the direction in which society was heading. Nietzsche explains as follows: “There are *master morality and slave morality*—I add immediately that in all the higher and more mixed cultures there also appear attempts at mediation between these two moralities...and at times they occur directly alongside each other—even in the same human being, within a *single* soul.” (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE 260: p. 394) So this is probably better characterized as an example of simplification and not oversimplification.

for the casual or superficial reader to assume that the Will-to-Power designates merely a power drive.” (Danto, 2005: p. 197)<sup>14</sup>.

Nietzsche’s mistake is not in introducing the will to power; rather, it is in using the concept to explain so much. He sets forth his idea that the will to power is the driving force and dominant instinct behind *all* our actions. He goes so far as to declare that “life simply *is* will to power” and “the will to power, which is after all the will to life.” (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE 259: p. 393) He asserts that we can explain not only all human behavior, but also all evolution and even the world by the single concept of will to power:

Suppose, finally, we succeeded in explaining our entire instinctive life as the development and ramification of *one* basic form of the will—namely, the will to power, as *my* proposition has it; suppose all organic functions could be traced back to this will to power and one could also find in it the solution of the problem of procreation and nourishment—it is *one* problem—then one would have gained the right to determine *all* efficient force univocally as—*will to power*. The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its “intelligible character”—it would be “will to power” and nothing else (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE 36: p. 238).

Nietzsche’s unpublished writings are just as uncompromising regarding the almost unlimited scope of the will to power. He claims “that the will to power is the primitive form of affect, that all other affects are only developments of it...that all driving force is will to power, and that there is no other physical, dynamic or psychic force except this” (Nietzsche, 1883-1888, WTP: p. 366) and “[*T*]his world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!” (Nietzsche, 1883-1888, WTP: p. 550).

What about when we help others, surely this is unrelated to the will to power, isn’t it? Even this, Nietzsche believes, is motivated by the will to power. Nietzsche believes that we help others to feel good about ourselves. It is an expression of our power and superiority over another. When we help others it is really not about the others, but, rather, about ourselves. He declares that “the noble human being, too, helps the unfortunate, but not, or almost not, from pity, but prompted more by an urge begotten by excess of power.” (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE 260, p. 395)

<sup>14</sup>Although they do not characterize the will to power in the precise manner which I have, Solomon and Kathleen Higgins are largely in agreement. They explain the will to power in the following manner: “None of this points to anything resembling political power, or, for that matter, power over other people. Indeed, what Nietzsche most often celebrates under this rubric is self-discipline and creative energy, and it is not so much having power or even *feeling* power that Nietzsche cites as the motivation of our behavior as the need to increase one’s strength and vitality to do great things—for example, to write great books in philosophy”. (Solomon & Higgins, 2000: pp. 17-18) “[Will to Power] might be best understood as personal strength rather than political power. It does not mean ‘power’ in the nasty, jackbooted sense that still sends flutters up the European spine. The term means something like effective self-realization and expression. Nietzsche stresses that when a person is successful in pursuing such ‘power’, aggressive and domineering methods are not necessary” (Solomon & Higgins, 2000: p. 220).

We can see how similar Nietzsche's oversimplification is to Hobbes' view. Both interpret all other-directed actions as actions about us and our own interests and not truly about other people. They leave no room for genuine concern and affection for others that transcend an exclusive focus on oneself. Certainly, while some of our actions can be explained by will to power, much of our behavior cannot.

What Nietzsche is doing, at least in part, is disputing the ideas that human behavior is solely or at least primarily motivated by pain or pleasure, as many English philosophers had advocated, or that human behavior could be adequately explained by reason, as the Enlightenment asserted<sup>15</sup>, or that the will to live or survive was our primary motivation, as had been asserted by Arthur Schopenhauer<sup>16</sup>.

All of the above assertions regarding the primary or sole motivation of our behavior, it seems to me, are oversimplifications as human beings are far too complex to attribute only one instinct or motive behind all our behavior. It is undoubtedly true that at times our behavior is motivated and guided by the will to survive, at other times by our reason, at times by the seeking of pleasure or the avoidance of pain, and still on other occasions by the will to power to have things our own way or to achieve a specific result. It can also be motivated by many other things, such as a love of other people or nature. No one motivation adequately explains the complex and myriad motivations human beings display.

Further, it has always seemed to me that Nietzsche's will to power exhibits a male perspective and bias. I am confident that few women would have made the blunder of declaring that all of life can be explained as a will to power as so much of many women's lives, especially from an historical perspective, has been substantially if not primarily other-directed. Nietzsche's oversimplified explanation of human behavior and even the world at large, in terms of one drive or force, the will to power, takes us away from truth and understanding.

### 3.3. If It Is Natural Then It Is Thereby Good

Our third moral idea that is an example of oversimplification is the idea that natural equals good. This is also known as the Naturalistic Fallacy. We will focus on Nietzsche's use of this concept and then explore other contexts in which it has been utilized.

For Nietzsche, exploitation and the will to power are natural and accordingly are good. He makes his views apparent in the following passages:

“Exploitation” does not belong to a corrupt and imperfect and primitive so-

<sup>15</sup>Solomon & Higgins articulate these points as follows: “What Nietzsche has in mind is, first of all, a rejection of ordinary hedonism, the reduction of all emotions, indeed of all human (and animal) behavior, to striving for pleasure and an avoidance of pain. Here he rejects a long line of English thinkers... Nietzsche objected to overly intellectual interpretations of human behavior in which all purposive action was immediately elevated to the status of rationality...” (Solomon & Higgins, 2000: pp. 216-217)

<sup>16</sup>Schopenhauer stated “that our whole being-in-itself is the will-to-live” and “the will-to-live, which is so powerfully active, has its root in the species...” (Schopenhauer, 1818: p. 866, 875)



ciety: it belongs to the *essence* of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will to life. (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE, 259: p. 393)

What is good?—All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. (Nietzsche, 1895, AC, 2: p. 127)

...*cruelty* constituted the great festival pleasure of more primitive men and was indeed an ingredient of almost every one of their pleasures; and how naively, how innocently their thirst for cruelty manifested itself...To see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more. (Nietzsche, 1888, GM II, 6: pp. 502-503)

To speak of just or unjust *in itself* is quite senseless; *in itself*, of course, no injury, assault, exploitation, destruction, can be “unjust,” since life operates *essentially*, that is, in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction, and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character. (Nietzsche, 1888, GM, II, 11, p. 512)

We see in the above passages that Nietzsche believes that exploitation, power, injury, violence, assault, destruction, and even cruelty are not unjust, bad, or immoral—because they are natural<sup>17</sup>. The problem is that this conflates descriptive ethics and normative ethics. What is natural describes the way things are, not how they ought to or should be. Many things that are natural are not good. Starvation is natural, cancer is natural, malaria is natural, the death of infants and young children is often natural, but that doesn’t make those things good. In looking at the history of our species, we witness a litany of violence, slavery, rape, and oppression. Though in some sense natural, that does not make these actions moral or good.

What are Nietzsche’s intentions in these passages? I think they are at least two-fold. First, they support his withering attack on the possibility of an objective morality. We see or engage in actions that are part of physical reality, but our judgments of those actions are created by us and are imputed onto those actions, and as such are not part of an objective reality. His second goal is to further his view that we should not feel guilty or ashamed of the type of beings we are, and this includes beings which are at times selfish and egoistic, and at other times even brutal and cruel. We can, however, be sympathetic to these points without going all the way to the conclusion that what is natural is good. While arguably we should not feel ashamed when we merely “feel” selfish or cruel, neither should we be excused for acting upon our inclinations and instincts when we unnecessarily injure others.

The argument that natural equals moral and that unnatural equals immoral is

<sup>17</sup>Interestingly, Nietzsche was arguably inconsistent on the point that what is natural is automatically good as he criticized the Stoics for asserting that we should live as nature operates. Nietzsche writes: “‘According to nature’ you want to *live*? O you noble Stoics, what deceptive words these are! Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power—how *could* you live according to this indifference?” (Nietzsche, 1887, BGE: 8: p. 205)

actually quite common. It has been used in the past to support racism (whites claimed it was natural for them to rule over and enslave blacks), sexism (men claimed it was natural for them to be the head of the household and for women to stay and work in the home), and the condemnation of homosexual conduct. What is ignored by those who claim that a woman's place is in the home or that only heterosexuality is natural is that what is natural for some, or even the majority, is often not natural for others.

In addition to this, it is notoriously difficult to label what is natural for human beings since it *seems quite natural for us to overrule and act contrary to our "natural" instincts*. Along these lines, the early French feminist Simone de Beauvoir explains that even if something is natural, we can change our behavior to better serve our purposes: "In truth however, the nature of things is no more immutably given, once for all, than is historical reality. If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change." (Beauvoir, 1952: p. 301)

This point is supported by the fact that what has been viewed as "natural" changes with time. Behavior that in the past had been considered natural, actions such as infanticide and slavery, are no longer viewed as moral. John Stuart Mill, when addressing the subjection of women by men, makes this point as follows: "But was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it? There was a time when the division of mankind into two classes, a small one of masters and a numerous one of slaves, appeared, even to the most cultivated minds, to be a natural, and the only natural, condition of the human race." (Mill, 1869, p. 482)

Indeed, even if the oppression of and discrimination against women is in some sense natural in the sense that most societies have tolerated if not fostered it, that does not make such behavior moral, and even if heterosexuality is natural for the majority of people it does not thereby follow that homosexual conduct is immoral.

Variants of this argument are often made by those who advocate for unregulated or lightly regulated capitalism, or for those who want limited government which would do little to help people. Although extensive government can be viewed as unnatural, a government which actively helps its citizens hardly seems immoral.

This argument has also been made to defend a meat-centered or meat-inclusive diet. It is often asserted that eating meat is natural for human beings and so is therefore moral<sup>18</sup>. However, even if meat-eating can be viewed as natural for

<sup>18</sup>This was the argument made by Jay Bost, the winner of an essay contest on the subject of the justification of eating meat. He argued that meat is part of the natural order as animals are part of the food web (Johnson, 2015). We could first reply that eating meat is arguably unnatural as our bodies more closely match herbivores and not carnivores. In support of this, there is now an abundance of evidence that eating meat increases one's risk to develop heart disease, many types of cancer, and numerous other maladies, and also decreases lifespan—and the more meat that is eaten the greater the detriment. The most comprehensive study of diet, lifestyle, and disease ever done concluded that "people who ate the most animal-based foods got the most chronic disease. Even relatively small intakes of animal-based food were associated with adverse effects. People who ate the most plant-based foods were the healthiest and tended to avoid chronic disease." (Campbell, 2006: p. 7)

humans, that does not make it moral or good since as humans we (unlike most if not all other animals) have the ability to choose to go beyond and against our natural instincts.

In fact, morality seems to be about controlling some of our natural instincts. Indeed, while many bad things we do may be natural, that does not make those actions morally acceptable or good, nor are unnatural actions thereby automatically immoral or bad<sup>19</sup>. Once more, we see a simplification take us away from truth instead of closer to it.

#### 4. Oversimplifications by Monism

We have seen how moral theories and concepts have often led us away from truth and understanding and even at times stymied philosophical progress. The ultimate oversimplification is to reduce the myriad and variety of things to a single thing—which is what monisms do. Monisms attribute oneness to a concept. Nietzsche's will to power was a monism which sought to explain all human behavior (and possibly much more) by the single motivation of the will to power. There are various types of monisms and we will here be focused primarily on what is known as substance monism, which posits that the myriad of things in the world can be explained as in actuality being only one thing or substance, or in the alternative, being formed or constituted by only one thing. It takes simplification to its extreme degree.

The ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosophers, whose views we largely learned about through Aristotle, are notorious for such monisms. Thales (624-546 B.C.) believed that everything was made up of water, Anaximenes (586-526 B.C.) thought it was air, and Heraclitus (540-480 B.C.) thought it was fire. We might excuse these amateur scientists for making such conjectures because science as we know it had not yet come into existence, but monisms posited by philosophers were not confined to the ancient Greeks. Hinduism, too, has a long history of embracing various monisms<sup>20</sup>.

One might reply that the pre-Socratic and Hindu monisms were proposed long ago, but there have been more recent monisms in the Western world. For example, the Englishman George Berkeley (1685-1753) is famous for what is known as Idealism or Immaterialism, the view that the only things that exist are minds and what minds think or perceive. The physical world does not actually

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<sup>19</sup>In a sense flying in an airplane, walking on the moon, and scuba diving are quite unnatural, but that does not make those activities bad or immoral. For a very good article discussing the many ways that something could be viewed as unnatural, but even if unnatural that does not make that activity immoral, see John Corvino's article on homosexuality (Corvino, 1997: pp. 3-16).

<sup>20</sup>The most well-known is the monism that atman is brahman, meaning the individual soul/consciousness or atman is really a part of the more comprehensive world soul /consciousness or brahman. This claim, however, need not deny the reality of the physical world. However, the Hindu school of Advaita Vedanta is thought to embrace such an absolute monism. This view, associated with Adi Sankara (8<sup>th</sup> Century), is that there is a single reality without multiplicity. All of the myriad of things experienced in the world are maya or an illusion. Sankara says "salutation to the all-knowing Pure Consciousness which pervades all" and that "he who ... does not see duality ... he only is the knower..." (Sankara, pp. 93, 101)

exist. He argued that the images we see of physical things come from God, the supreme or infinite mind. So according to Berkeley the only things that actually exist are immaterial<sup>21</sup>.

The claims that the physical world does not exist and that the world is made up of only one substance or thing are not consistent with our observations. Sense experiences indicate to us that the world is made up of many things, not just one thing, and that the world is constituted by physical entities. However, we can also acknowledge that not all monisms about the physical world are wrong. For example, we could correctly state that all material things are made up of atoms. What this tells us is that while we should be cautious in making these types of claims, some monisms are undoubtedly correct.

One more recent and somewhat unusual monism comes from the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831), the most prominent European philosopher of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He claimed that everything was reason. Rocks are reason, humans are reason, and plants are reason. He even proclaimed that God was reason when he said “this *Reason*, in its most concrete form is God” (Hegel, 1837: p. 36) and “in philosophy of religion we have as our object God himself, *absolute reason*.” (Hegel, 1827: p. 96) There is nothing but reason.

What does Hegel mean by reason? He means that there is a reasoned order in the world. God uses his reason to make a “reasonable” world that is governed by natural laws that human reason can comprehend. The physical world is part of God’s reasoned or ordered plan. Hegel explains in the following words: “The movement in the solar system takes place according to unchangeable laws. These laws are Reason... Nature is an embodiment of Reason.” (Hegel, 1837: pp. 11-12)

History, too, can be explained by reason. Hegel states as follows: “It is only an inference from the history of the World, that its development has been a rational process; that the history in question has constituted the rational necessary course of the World-Spirit.” (Hegel, 1837: p. 10) Hegel believed that a study of history revealed that it displayed the inevitable march of reason to ever greater progress and freedoms, and it was the world spirit or reason which had propelled the world forward in this good and progressive way. He says that the “History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom,” (Hegel, 1837: p. 19) and concludes “that Reason governs the world, and has consequently governed its history.” (Hegel, 1837: p. 25)

My first response to Hegel is that his assertions are an incredible collection of wishful thinking. Why would a God of reason have made a universe which is chaotic, destructive, and mostly incompatible with life and especially advanced life forms like us? Why would we have a world where animals eat each other and where insects and natural disasters kill its advanced living beings? Why would

<sup>21</sup>Berkeley expresses his views as follows: “From what has been said, it follows, there is not any other substance than spirit, or that which perceives...” (Berkeley: 1710: p. 25) and “Ideas imprinted on the senses are real things, or do really exist; this we do not deny, but we deny they can subsist without the minds which perceive them, or that they are resemblances of any archetypes existing without the mind...” (Berkeley, 1710: p. 58)

we live in a world where half of all the humans born throughout history have died in childhood and those who have made it to adulthood have often led difficult lives riddled by painful diseases? Gregory Paul cogently makes this last point:

Of the hundreds of billions of human conceptions, the large majority died before birth, over half the one hundred billion born have died as children, a portion of the survivors were severely harmed, and among children the great majority suffered high and even extreme levels of discomfort, pain, and fear that qualifies as torture. This dysfunctional system can be objectively described as merciless or ruthless (Paul, 2009: p. 132).

When looking at the universe, and certainly at our planet, we could describe it many ways, but one of them certainly would not be rational or “reasonable.” Moreover, if our scientists are correct and our planet suffers significant degradation due to pollution and global warming, or should we have a sizeable nuclear war, our future may not turn out as rosy as Hegel has projected. Instead of increasing freedoms, we may see a world of desperation and ruthlessness.

As for Hegel’s claim that reason *inevitably* ensures that humanity has a future filled with increasing personal freedoms, we can note that in the almost 200 years since Hegel’s writings we still see significantly restricted freedoms in much of the world. For example, the freedom of speech which allows one to question their own government is absent in many if not most countries in the world today, including the most populous state, China, and numerous other countries, including Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, to name a few<sup>22</sup>.

I think Martin Luther King, Jr., who studied Hegel’s philosophy, had a strong reply to Hegel’s view, pointing out that Hegel’s idea is actually irrational since it relies on the assumption of what King calls the myth of time:

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time... All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively... We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men... (King, 1963: p. 328)

Indeed, Hegel’s all-encompassing “reason” with its meager supporting evidence is another example of a simplification which distorts reality instead of illuminating it.

## 5. Oversimplification by Analogical Argument

We have seen how several moral theories, moral ideas, and monisms have at-

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<sup>22</sup>We should also note that if we have free will then the claim of an *inevitability* better future for humanity in terms of personal freedoms seems implausible if not impossible because free will means that we have the ability to make things better or worse.

tempted to simplify in order to aid our understanding, but instead, have often resulted in our misunderstanding. There is a more subtle type of simplification used extensively in modern times which is just as culpable for misleading us and taking us away from truth and understanding—analogue arguments.

We must first distinguish an analogy from an analogue argument. A simple analogy is just a comparison. Analogies are quite useful tools in teaching because a comparison to something the student is familiar with or is easier to grasp can aid in the understanding of a new and/or more difficult concept. An analogue argument, however, is more complex and contains at least two comparisons. Analogue arguments claim that two things are similar in one or more ways so we should conclude they are similar in another way too. They are arguments used to persuade or convince.

Analogue arguments are particularly effective because we like to find similarities as it is emotionally pleasing to do so. For example, we can all recall times when we have gone somewhere for the first time or experienced something for the first time, and then said how it reminded us of something else we had done or experienced before. I believe that we are hardwired to do so—to find similarities, because we are rewarded with a pleasurable feeling when we do so<sup>23</sup>. This familiarity brings peace, calm, and emotional security to our lives. This is why these arguments are so effective and used so often.

In spite of their appeal, analogue arguments as a whole are quite weak and poor arguments for several reasons<sup>24</sup>. First, they often cite only one similarity to draw their conclusion. One similarity is not much as it can be found between virtually any two things. A chair and a person have the similarity of both existing. A unicorn and a tree have the similarity that they can both be thought in a human mind. The point is that the use of only one or even several similarities to draw a conclusion is very similar to a hasty generalization fallacy in that a very small amount of evidence is being used to draw a conclusion.

A second problem to notice is that *every analogue argument is a one-sided argument that has ignored all differences as if they did not exist between the things being compared*. We know there are differences because they are two different things, but the argument proceeds as if there are none—and yet those dif-

<sup>23</sup>Finding similarities would seem to confer an evolutionary advantage. For example, suppose that an ancient human lived in Africa and knew from experience that rhinos were dangerous, and then when venturing away from home and familiar surroundings for the first time encountered a hippo. It would certainly foster survival to notice that the hippo was big like a rhino and therefore might likewise pose a danger. In a similar vein, suppose that the traveler saw a type of fruit for the first time and noted that it looked very similar to fruit which had nourished him in the past. Noting the similarity could allow that person to be safely fed. Since finding similarities help us survive and flourish it would not be surprising that in many situations in which we notice similarities our bodies would release hormones such as dopamine which produce a pleasurable feeling.

<sup>24</sup>David Hume pointed out why any and all analogue arguments can be challenged: “But observe, I entreat you, with what extreme caution all just reasoners proceed in the transferring of experiments to similar cases. Unless the cases be exactly similar, they repose no perfect confidence in applying their past observation to any particular phenomenon. Every alteration of circumstances occasions a doubt concerning the event, and it requires new experiments to prove certainly, that the new circumstances are of no moment or importance.” (Hume, 1779, pp. 21-22)

ferences may be more relevant to the conclusion being drawn than are the similarities.

A third problem with analogical arguments is that the similarity pointed out is often irrelevant to the conclusion the reader is being asked to draw. In analyzing analogical arguments, the handy method is “relevant similarities make an analogy and relevant differences break an analogy.”

What is interesting is that most philosophers know that analogical arguments are quite weak—and yet we love to use them. In fact, one way to gain notoriety is to think of an appealing analogical argument to which other philosophers will then respond by pointing out that relevant differences have been ignored.

We should also note that analogical arguments add an extra and often arguably unnecessary layer of analysis. When presented with an issue, we could go directly to analyzing the arguments on each side. What an analogical argument does is to introduce another thing into the picture which we need to analyze. We then may be caught up in arguing how similar or different the two things being compared are instead of the pros and cons for the original position. Although we have presented the analogy to simplify the argument, when a critical thinker points out the relevant differences, the analysis has become more complex—usually thereby sidetracking and harming the original position instead of helping it.

In this section we will look at three examples of quite famous analogical arguments: Paley’s Watch Analogy used to argue for the existence of God, Thomson’s Violinist Analogy to support the pro-choice position on abortion, and Singer’s Drowning Child Analogy to convince us to be immensely charitable.

### 5.1. Paley’s Watch Analogy

William Paley (1743-1805) argued that just as if we found a watch, we would conclude it had a maker/creator because of its organized complexity for a purpose, we should likewise conclude that the universe has a maker/creator due to its organized complexity. The claimed similarity is that both a watch and a universe are organized or ordered, and since we know the watch has a maker, we should likewise conclude that the universe has a maker<sup>25</sup>. This argument is the most famous version of the Teleological Argument for God’s Existence, also known as the Argument from Design. It is an emotionally appealing argument,

<sup>25</sup>Paley argues and then concludes as follows: “For this reason, and for no other; viz., that, when we come to inspect the watch we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose... the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker... Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.” (Paley, 1802: pp. 667-669) Notice the weakness of Paley’s argument that is apparent on its face: Paley admits that the stone is a part of nature and has no obvious purpose, unlike a watch. Therefore, although the watch’s purpose gives us a good reason to conclude it has a maker, it seems that we have no similar basis to conclude that the stone has a maker. As the stone is a part of nature/the universe, the reasonable conclusion by analogy would be that the rest of nature/the universe likewise has no purpose, and therefore we likewise have no reason to presume a conscious designer or maker of nature or the universe.

as most analogical arguments are.

The first problem is that to say the universe is ordered or organized does not mean the same thing as to say a watch is ordered or organized, so we probably do not even have the one basic similarity claimed in the argument<sup>26</sup>. However, even if we grant for the sake of argument that the words “order” and “organized” mean the same thing for a universe and a watch, we will see that there are still significant and relevant differences that are being totally ignored. First, we are comparing a little watch to the entire universe. It is hard to think of many things that are more unlike than these two. A watch is small, the universe is very big. A watch lasts only a relatively short time, while the universe has existed billions of years. We have experience in the formation and creation of watches, but, as David Hume pointed out, we have no experience in the creation of universes<sup>27</sup>. In fact, we know that a watch is created by humans. We do not know how the universe was created. A watch has a purpose—to tell time. The universe has no obvious purpose. A watch is clearly organized, but the universe is not clearly organized. In fact, the universe has a lot of chaos, seeming disorganization, destruction, and species extinction that seem to make it questionable as to whether it had an organizer. Stars crash into other stars, black holes gobble up solar systems, earthquakes destroy, meteors have caused mass extinctions of plants and animals on earth, people and animals kill each other, and evil and suffering are present everywhere.

Moreover, most physicists today believe that our universe began with a big bang which displayed no initial order whatsoever. One would expect, on the contrary, a creator to start with order, not chaos. Without such initial order, there is no reason to believe there was a conscious “Grand Designer” such as God. Physicist Victor Stenger elucidates as follows:

If the universe were created, then it should have possessed some degree of order at the creation—the design that was inserted at that point by the Grand Designer... [However], the universe began with no structure. It has structure today consistent with the fact that its entropy is no longer maximal. In short, according to our best current cosmological understanding, our universe began with no structure or organization, designed or otherwise. It was a state of chaos (Stenger, 2008: pp. 117, 121).

<sup>26</sup>What do we mean when we say that the universe is organized? I think all that we mean is that it operates a certain way. The natural laws are just the way it works. They are not truly organized like the things that people organize. Why not? All things that exist have attributes or characteristics. We would expect that in any universe the way that any given things and attributes interact would be the natural laws of that universe. That does not mean that any of these universes are organized by a conscious organizer. It only means that they work a certain way—that there are facts of the matter about their attributes and the way those attributes interact. So what we call organization is in reality just the interactions of the attributes of the things in the universe. There is thus no reason to presume that the universe was the purposeful organization by a conscious entity, which, on the other hand, we know to be true regarding the creation and organization of the watch.

<sup>27</sup>Hume substituted houses made by men instead of watches. He stated: “Can you pretend to show any such similarity between the fabric of a house and the generation of a universe?... Have worlds ever been formed under your eyes?” (Hume, 1779: II: p. 26)



We can see my points here. The Teleological Argument for the Existence of God is an emotionally appealing argument. It answers a difficult question with a familiar and simple example, a watch and its maker. But let us take a step back. The question we are asking is whether this complex and arguably organized universe has a creator. Instead of going to arguments for and against the proposition that God created the universe, we bring in another thing to analyze—a watch. Now we need to analyze if a watch and a universe work in the same way. We have introduced a new layer of analysis and can get caught up in an analysis of the merits of the analogy instead of in arguments and evidence for the existence of God. The analogy, moreover, points out just one similarity between a watch and a universe, namely, their “organized” complexity, and fails to address any of the quite significant differences between the two things. The analogy has not seemed to get us very far. On the contrary, it has arguably sidetracked us away from the real issue at hand, which is whether the universe is really organized, and whether that organization could occur naturally or would need a supernatural and conscious creator. What was intended to simplify has actually introduced unneeded complexity—and in a way that does not aid understanding, but rather, sets us off in the wrong direction.

## **5.2. Thomson’s Violinist Analogy**

Our second example is from the very famous analogy offered by Judith Jarvis Thomson which argues for the position that at least some abortions are morally permissible:

But now let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist’s circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, “Look, we’re sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you--we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist is now plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it’s only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you.” Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it? What if it were not nine months, but nine years? Or longer still? What if the director of the hospital says “Tough luck.” I agree. But now you’ve got to stay in bed, with the violinist plugged into you, for the rest of your life. Because remember this. All persons have a right to life, and violinists are persons. Granted you have a right to decide what happens in and to your body, but a

person's right to life outweighs your right to decide what happens in and to your body. So you cannot ever be unplugged from him." I imagine you would regard this as outrageous, which suggests that something really is wrong with that plausible-sounding argument I mentioned a moment ago (Thomson, 1971: p. 184).

For the sake of argument, Thomson concedes that a fetus is a person, a position that she does not actually believe. She argues that even if the fetus is a person and is dependent on your body, it does not follow that the fetus has a right to your body—similar to how the violinist needs the kidnapped person's body but is not entitled to it. The responses to this analogy have been numerous<sup>28</sup>.

Initially we should note that most pregnancies are from voluntary sexual encounters, not from a forced encounter, so this analogical argument would seem to have persuasive force only in the approximate 1% of pregnancies due to rape—although Thomson explicitly does not restrict it as such. However, even in rape cases the analogy has problems as there are relevant differences that are being ignored.

First, being plugged into the violinist is a much greater restriction on one's autonomy than being pregnant—in fact, almost a total loss of autonomy. One cannot go see their friends, take a vacation, go to work, play tennis or engage in yoga, go to a concert, or be with their loved ones in privacy. Except in exceptional circumstances, pregnant women can do all of these things during the greater part of their pregnancies.

Second, being pregnant is not usually considered to be a bad situation, unlike being a captive with limited choices and options. Francis Beckwith quoted Dr. Bernard Nathanson, an obstetrician/gynecologist, who described pregnancy as follows: "Pregnancy is not a 'sickness.' Few pregnant women are bedridden and many, emotionally and physically, have never felt better. For these it is a stimulating experience, even for mothers who did not originally 'want' to be pregnant." (Beckwith, 1993: p. 205)

Third, the Society of Music Lovers committed a morally repugnant act which was also a serious crime by kidnapping a person—and acted for the sole purpose of benefitting the violinist. This is very unlike the pregnancy situation where even in the case of rape the wrongdoer did not act for the benefit of the fetus. The fetus is not only innocent, but nobody acted on behalf of the fetus as the kidnappers did for the violinist. Because of this, the violinist is not entitled to the kidnapped body. In fact, if the violinist had known and approved of the plan before the kidnapping then he might well be guilty of the crimes of conspiracy,

<sup>28</sup>For example, Francis Beckwith sets forth nine problems with Thomson's violinist analogy. (Beckwith, 1993) Peter Singer, a Utilitarian who supports abortion rights, has pointed out that if a Utilitarian used Thomson's analogy and likewise assumed that a fetus was a person (which Singer rejects), then the analogical argument would backfire as it would dictate that one reject most abortions. He explains: "The utilitarian would say that it would be wrong to refuse to sustain a person's life for nine months, if that was the only way the person could survive. Therefore if the life of the fetus is given the same weight as the life of a normal person, the utilitarian would say that it would be wrong to refuse to carry the fetus until it can survive outside the womb." (Singer, 1993: p. 149)

complicity, and/or aiding and abetting<sup>29</sup> and even if he did not approve of the plan if he knew about the intention to kidnap and did not report it then he would certainly be guilty of moral wrongdoing. Moreover, if the violinist only learned of the kidnapping after the fact but then endorsed the wrongdoing, he would be guilty of a crime akin to knowingly receiving stolen goods, but in this case it is actually much worse because the “stolen good” is a person. Indeed, it certainly seems that if he accepts the benefit of the kidnapped person’s body it is a case of unjust enrichment since he had no right to the use of a stranger’s body<sup>30</sup>. In summary, the fetus is wholly innocent, while the violinist in an important sense would not be if he were to knowingly accept the benefits which were obtained illegally—in fact, which were obtained by the commission of a serious felony involving a substantial loss of autonomy over one’s own body—with the injustice done to an innocent person who was unacquainted with and totally unrelated to the violinist.

Fourth, the violinist is a complete stranger to the kidnapped person. It would seem that the kidnapped person has no greater moral duties to the violinist than they would have to the many starving and homeless people in Africa or throughout the world. The fetus, on the other hand, has one half of the D.N.A. of the mother. Maybe this fact should not matter, but it seems to matter to most people. For example, what if you first learned that you had a brother when he showed up at your door and told you that he will die unless your body would be hooked up to his for 9 months? It does not seem that you should or likely would treat him the same as you would treat other complete strangers. He shares your genetic code and this fact would seem to make most people care more for him than for a complete stranger whose genetic code does not match their own to any significant degree. Indeed, it would seem somewhat strange to not care more about your newly found brother than for a stranger. The same would seem to hold true if you were a man who first learned that you had a child when that child approached you as a young adult and needed your help to survive. Just as a mother who does not naturally want to help their child appears to be missing an important part of her humanity and is in some ways “off,” it likewise seems to many that one would be “off” to not want to treat the fetus in *their* body who has *their* DNA as more valuable than a complete stranger. There does seem to be a special genetic relationship here and this does matter to many people. So perhaps the violinist is in a different position than the fetus—a difference based on genetics.

Fifth, there is a difference here between actively killing and not saving. To abort is to take an action to kill a living being—albeit not yet a born person. One is actually taking an action to stop the pregnancy from taking its natural course. In the case of the violinist, one merely unplugs oneself to someone they should not

<sup>29</sup>For example, under California Penal Code section 182 a criminal conspiracy takes place when one agrees with one or more other people to commit a crime, and one of them then commits an overt act in furtherance of that agreement. Note that the violinist would not have to do the actual kidnapping.

<sup>30</sup>I am not using this term in precisely the same way it is usually used under the law.

have been plugged into in the first place. In a sense, to unplug is to allow nature to take its course. So if we want nature to take its course, we should not abort but we should unplug from the violinist. More importantly, it seems in the abortion case one is actively killing, and if the fetus is a person, then it is a murder or at least some type of wrongful killing, while in the violinist case one is much more passive and is merely not saving another person. From both a moral and legal standpoint, failing to save is very different from the wrongful killing of another<sup>31</sup>.

Again, we see striking differences which appear to be more relevant than the similarities. An argument which was offered to simplify the abortion issue actually has made it more complicated by introducing an analogy to argue about. In fact, I think it has harmed better arguments supporting the permissibility of abortion by providing an easy target on which anti-abortion advocates can focus their attacks.

### 5.3. Singer's Drowning Child Analogy

Our last example comes from the noteworthy moral philosopher Peter Singer. He argues that since suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad, a moral person ought to give as much money and time as possible to prevent or alleviate this, "at least up to the point at which by giving more would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself or one's dependents." (Singer, 1972: p. 685) In order to motivate our desire to do so Singer sets forth the following analogy:

If I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out. This will mean getting my clothes muddy, but this is insignificant, while the death of the child would presumably be a very bad thing (Singer, 1972: p. 684).

So the analogical argument can be characterized as follows: A child dying in a pond or a person dying from the lack of basic necessities have the similarity of both being very bad, and just as we should do what it takes to save the drowning child we should likewise to do what it takes to save and help all of the starving people, and/or those without adequate shelter or medical care.

It is certainly an emotional and appealing analogical argument, but again, the differences which are being ignored are substantial. First, one can save the drowning child with no risk or disadvantage to oneself. It is a momentary effort that will not cost one any mentionable amount of time, money or effort<sup>32</sup>. This is

<sup>31</sup>Peter Singer, when addressing the different issue of helping the poor, tries hard to convince us that allowing someone to die and actively killing a person are moral equivalents, although he acknowledges that there are many differences between the cases. He claims those differences are extrinsic and therefore of little to no moral importance (See Singer, 1993: pp. 222-229). How well he succeeds in his argument is quite debatable.

<sup>32</sup>Of course, if you saved the drowning child then you might have to spend a small amount of money to clean your wet clothes, or at worst, to buy some new clothes if they were permanently damaged by getting wet. For many if not most people in the affluent first world countries, these expenses are clearly quite minor and trivial compared to giving everything we have to the less fortunate except what we need to survive.

not true about giving away all your money and assets beyond what you need to survive. This would be substantially detrimental to yourself and family. That money can provide you with security, a comfortable life, interesting experiences, and freedom. Without that money you will not be able to travel to another country, engage in relatively costly sports such as skiing or scuba-diving, go to live theatre or concerts, dine at most restaurants, live in a home which you own, or walk away from an unpleasant job with a tyrannical boss because you would need the money to support yourself and your family. Giving so much of your earnings to others comes at a great cost that will affect you and your family your whole life, unlike the few seconds it would have taken you to save the drowning child.

Second, there is the principle of just deserts. In the case of giving money to others which you have earned through your own hard work, you are entitled to that money. There is no issue of entitlement when it comes to saving the drowning child.

Third, stepping into the puddle to save the drowning child clearly accomplished a positive result. If we followed Singer's suggestion regarding charity, however, the results are not so clear. If everyone agreed to give away all their earnings above what they need to survive, it seems likely that people would not work as hard, thereby actually generating less money to help those in need. This seems to be what happened when Russia became Communist because the incentive to work hard and innovate was taken away, with the result that the Russian economy did not keep pace with the other first world industrial economies of the world. John Arthur explains this point as follows:

Perhaps people would stop working as hard, feeling that it is no longer worth the effort to help strangers rather than themselves or their family since they are morally required to give away all but what they can use without imposing a greater evil on anybody else. Suppose, to make it vivid, that the tax system enforces the greater moral evil rule, taking away all income that could be used to prevent a greater evil's befalling somebody else. The result would be less work done, less total production of useful commodities, and therefore a general reduction in people's well-being (Arthur, 1996: p. 806).

Fourth, I think everyone would agree that anyone who did not save the drowning child had acted immorally. In fact, anyone who did not do so would be thought to be a moral monster. This is not the case with refusing to give away all your earnings above your requirements for the basic necessities. Contrary to Singer's assertions, such extreme giving is usually thought to be supererogatory or beyond duty<sup>33</sup>.

Again we see a rather weak analogical argument drive the discussion. Instead of dealing with the issue of what is the extent of our duty to be charitable, we end up arguing over the relevant similarities and differences between helping a

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<sup>33</sup>Kant made the distinction as follows: "If someone does *more* in the way of duty than he can be constrained by law to do, what he does is *meritorious*; if what he does is just exactly what the law requires, he does *what is owed*..." (Kant, 1797: 6:227, p. 19)

drowning child and saving starving people throughout the globe. Perhaps Singer is correct or at least helpful in bringing to light a current failure regarding our moral obligations to the unfortunate, but he creates problems for his position when he compares substantially different circumstances. An argument meant to simplify has given us an extra layer of analysis to consider. In the name of simplicity, the opposite has actually occurred: a complexity that obscures and takes one away from the truth.

Now this is not to say that all analogical arguments are weak. However, we can see that they should be utilized with extreme caution—keeping the differences in mind. Unfortunately, this caution has not been manifested in the philosophical literature. Indeed, instead of simplifying the matter in order to make it more understandable, analogical arguments more often than not oversimplify—leading us away from insight instead of towards it.

## 6. Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that oversimplification has been a common and recurring problem in philosophy. We have seen oversimplifications throughout philosophy's history. They include the overly simplistic one-sentence moral tests proposed by Kant and Mill, moral ideas such as psychological egoism and Nietzsche's will to power which oversimplify the complexity and variety of moral motivations, the Naturalistic Fallacy which is utilized to argue that what is natural is thereby good, the various monisms proposed by the pre-Socratics and those asserted by more recent philosophers such as Hegel, and our modern-day preferred method of oversimplification by the use of analogical arguments.

Moreover, this problem has not been acknowledged, let alone adequately addressed. I think it has come at a significant expense. It has often kept us trapped in dead-end theories and arguments. Until we take this problem seriously, we will not be adequately fulfilling our role as teachers and philosophers. It is high time that we come to grips with this far-reaching blind spot. It is long overdue to do so.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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