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## **John Paul II and Christian Personalism vs. Peter Singer and Utilitarianism: Two Radically Opposed Conceptions of the Nature and Meaning of Suffering<sup>1</sup>**

**By Peter J. Colosi**

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### **Abstract**

*Although Christian ethics and contemporary utilitarianism both employ terms such as "love" and "compassion", they are in fact polar opposite ethical views. This fact is not at all easy to discern. One key to perceiving the radical opposition between them lies in clarifying their respective concepts of suffering. In the Christian view, suffering is always understood as the suffering of individual persons, while in utilitarianism suffering is primarily understood as a quantifiable entity detached from the individuals who experience it. The paper attempts a primarily philosophical elucidation of this difference, including some theological points, by taking as its point of departure John Paul II's presentation of the three-fold sense in which suffering has the potential to "unleash of love." Following a presentation of the utilitarian view, it then proceeds to explore the relation between suffering and love by probing the public statements on the experience of Peter Singer in the struggle with his mother's debilitating illness. The paper concludes with the presentation of a premise built into the structure of contemporary utilitarian ethics rendering it inherently self-defeating with respect to its own stated goal.*

### **1. The Meaning of Suffering According to Pope John Paul II**

From time immemorial humanity has sought to discover a meaning in suffering, and many deep answers have been given, some partial and others more full. For example, The Book of Job teaches that while suffering is rightly understood as punishment due in justice to a wrong-doer, nonetheless, the innocent suffer also, as a test of their faithfulness.<sup>ii</sup> In more recent times, we have the profound work of Viktor Frankl who told us that hidden in the depths of the worst types of suffering there is a task to be discovered related to the fulfilment of one's unrepeatable earthly vocation.

In asking the question, "What is the reason for suffering?" one could understand the word "reason" in two senses. First, one could mean by "reason," "cause." In this sense the question is searching for what it is that

brought suffering into existence at all. I think there are two answers to the question in this sense; one is accessible with faith, and the other is understandable to all persons of good will. Faith teaches that the combination of demons and original sin account for suffering, and on a natural level one sees the fact that we human persons do not love each other enough as its cause.<sup>iii</sup>

Once suffering exists in the world, however, one can ask about its "reason" in a second sense. Given its existence, one can ask about the inner meaning of suffering, how it relates to other aspects of our lives, and what our response to it should be?

In this second sense of the "reason" for suffering, perhaps the most concise, straightforward answer to the question was given by Pope John Paul II when he said that "Suffering is...present in order to *unleash love*."<sup>iv</sup>

This "unleashing" is meant by the Pope in a three-fold sense: 1) In the *interior* life of persons as the opening of a certain interior disposition of the heart, a *sensitivity* of heart which has an emotional expression unique to it,<sup>v</sup> 2) *Externally*, giving birth to works of love towards neighbor,<sup>vi</sup> 3) and *culturally*, transforming the whole of human civilization into a civilization of love.<sup>vii</sup>

Many authors of recent times, including John Paul II, have developed the point that persons ought never to be conceived of as a means to an end, no matter how noble that end.<sup>viii</sup> Responding to another person as an end, in the minds of these authors means respecting another person for that other's own sake, because of their inner worth and preciousness. Related to that is the interesting relationship that if one person does respect another as an end, it also happens that, as a surprising fruit of such respect, moral values and happiness spring up in the inner life of the one who shows such respect. This is sometimes expressed in the surprise of volunteer health care aids when they say, "I received so much more from those whom I served than I could ever have given to them!" Along these lines, John Paul II perceives something internal to the very nature of suffering itself that is conducive to the realization of love; in fact, he goes so far as to say that "...man owes to suffering that unselfish love which stirs in his heart and actions."<sup>ix</sup> Thus, we might want to say that although persons ought never to be conceived of as mere means to the achievement of any end (even love and happiness), it nevertheless seems that there is some sort of mysterious ordination within suffering to achieve the end of the flourishing of love. Incidentally, we ought not be too quick to assume that those who *help* the suffering are the only ones who grow in this interior experience of love. Indeed, sometimes it is a more difficult

challenge for the suffering one to grow in love towards the one who helps him – this presupposes, for example, a profound humility to accept the help and to be thankful.

This point, that the flourishing of love is a kind of side-effect, is important because if one held that the *ultimate* meaning (in the sense of *raison d'être*) of suffering were its ability to cause love to flourish, then it seems that one comes too close to reducing persons in their suffering to a mere means to the achievement of other ends, and also to the view that love ultimately depends on the existence of evil.<sup>x</sup> The character of Ivan, in *The Brother's Karamazov*, rightly rebels against this notion when he wants to give back his ticket into heaven if it depends on the suffering of a child.<sup>xi</sup> For example, if little children who are sexually abused, tortured and then killed, end up in heaven, then pointing to that *result* as an *exhaustive* explanation for the child's suffering is not acceptable.<sup>xii</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that the Pope says that the mystery of suffering is "an especially impenetrable one."<sup>xiii</sup>

While I see no easy solution to the problem of innocent suffering, it seems that we are able to give an answer, even if not exhaustive, to the question about the inner meaning of suffering if we relate it to love: In the care and respect generously given to those who suffer, and generously accepted by them, it seems there is a power that has as its fruit the flourishing of love. With respect to innocent suffering, one could say, I think, that if this side-effect of the flourishing of love were to become wide-spread, certainly deliberate hurting of the innocent would tend towards extinction.<sup>xiv</sup>

## 2. The Utilitarian Conception of Suffering

Another attempt at an answer to the question about the meaning of suffering, this one from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, has been given by the ethical movement known as utilitarianism. This ethical theory found its first well worked-out defense in Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). Subsequently, John Stuart Mill developed a vigorous philosophical defense of utilitarianism against Bentham's critics in his *Utilitarianism* (1863) and also, to a lesser extent, in his earlier *On Liberty* (1859). This view has its most famous and perhaps most logically consistent contemporary proponent in Professor Peter Singer of the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, and for this reason I will primarily analyse his thought as representative of this view.

Although Christian ethics and utilitarianism both employ terms such as "love" and "compassion", they are in fact polar opposite ethical views. This fact is not at all easy to discern.<sup>xv</sup> Yet, it seems that the key to

perceiving clearly the radical opposition between them lies in clarifying the concept of suffering in each view. In the Christian view, suffering is always understood as the suffering of individual persons, while in utilitarianism suffering is primarily understood as a quantifiable entity detached from the individuals who experience it.

Three basic principles make up utilitarian ethics. *The consequentialist principle*, which states that "the rightness, or wrongness, of an action is determined by the goodness, or badness of the results that flow from it."<sup>xvi</sup> Secondly, the *hedonist principle*, which states that "the only thing that is good in itself is pleasure and the only thing bad in itself is pain."<sup>xvii</sup> Finally, *the principle of extent*, which takes into account the number of people affected by the action.<sup>xviii</sup> The following simple formulation of ethical utilitarianism emerges: *the rightness of an action is determined by its contribution to the happiness (pleasure) of the greatest number of people affected by it.*

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

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

Peter Singer is committed to these principles, though he does not speak of "pleasure fulfillment," as classical utilitarianism does, but rather of "preference fulfillment,"<sup>xx</sup> and "interest fulfillment," saying, "we define 'interests' broadly enough, so that we count anything people desire as in their interests".<sup>xxi</sup> Of all people who can experience the desire to have their preferences fulfilled, a calculation ought to be made in order to discern which act will result in the satisfaction of the most preferences. That action *ought* to be chosen.<sup>xxii</sup> Singer sees all other considerations, which propose not doing that act which would increase the overall welfare, as either selfish, or constraining true morality.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Singer accepts as morally relevant<sup>xxiv</sup> what we could call "suffering as a quantifiable entity." Suffering in this sense is morally relevant because it is

the contrary opposite of the only good: pleasure – or as Singer would say, preference fulfillment. His view, I think, could be represented by saying that if we could stick a thermometer into the world which would measure the amount of over-all suffering, then a right action is *any* one which makes the needle go down. His commitment to this view leads him to make assertions that seem shocking to some. For example, he thinks that concern for one's own leisure or enjoyment,<sup>xxv</sup> and concern for one's own family<sup>xxvi</sup> often constitute moral failure, since actions based on these concerns do not maximize preference fulfillment for the greatest number of people. In addition, action based on the criterion of the absolute moral norms of traditional ethics may also constitute moral failure, since such actions at times do not maximize preference fulfillment. Singer boldly states,

...from trite rules against lying and stealing to such noble constructions as justice and human rights...when the debunked principles have been scrutinized, found wanting, and cleared away, we will be left with nothing but the impartial rationality of the principle of equal consideration of interests.<sup>xxvii</sup>

This view also leads Singer to draw the surprising conclusion that the behavior of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta was irrational, indeed he might say immoral,

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

It seems to me that Singer perceives a mutually exclusive and competitive relationship between the following two types of love,

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

The nature of the competition seems to be that love A, if practiced, saps time, energy and resources from love B. Thus, the perceived irrationality of practicing A is grounded in the utilitarian principle of extent: this axiom-like principle assumes that reducing the quantity of suffering trumps all other ethical concerns; and, staying with the traffic law scenario, since Mother Teresa is not, for example, spending her energy calculating auto accident rates against various speed limit options, she is not as rational as she might be.

As it becomes clearer that utilitarian ethical theory tends to relegate individual love to the sidelines, the question sometimes arises why it is that this ethical view has such a large following.<sup>xxix</sup> There is a plausibility to it grounded in a kernel of truth: We *do* all hope that large scale suffering diminishes. We all hope rightly, for example, that when a natural disaster hits that as few people as possible are harmed. But as John Crosby points out, the flaw in this view is that it does not distinguish between personal causes and natural causes,

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

This is the reason for which utilitarian ethics tosses all absolute moral laws out of ethics: it sees no difference between a boulder killing a person and one person killing another person so long as in both cases some greater good resulted – and the ultimate result of this is the theoretical rejection of the specifically personal and inner dimension of morality, including the type of love exhibited by Mother Teresa.

The utilitarian view of suffering, then, can be understood to split suffering off from the individual who suffers in order to obtain an entity which can be measured. Then, ethical decisions are arrived at by determining which action would reduce the overall amount of suffering on earth; including the killing of an innocent person when that single death will reduce overall suffering.

### 3. The Interior Unleashing of Love

The Christian view, on the other hand, does not accept the severing of suffering from the individual who undergoes it. On the Christian view there are two, not just one, morally relevant factors: suffering and individual persons who have a lofty worth. As Dietrich von Hildebrand summarized well, *both* of these factors motivate moral action,

We see a poor man in great need. The need of this man, his sufferings and troubles, are a disvalue. We grasp the call to do away with this disvalue. Our value response of love for this suffering man is at the basis of the negative response to his sufferings. Our will to help him is really motivated by the value of a human person, and the disvalue of his sufferings.<sup>xxx1</sup>

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

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

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Scheler points out that,

When the rich youth is told to divest himself of his riches and give them to the poor, it is really not in order to help the



“poor” and to effect a better distribution of property in the interest of the general welfare...The order is given because the act of giving away, and the spiritual freedom and abundance of love which manifest themselves in this act, ennoble the youth and make him even “richer” than he is.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Scheler’s point is that in the Christian view, full cognizance is taken of two incomparable goods that come about in morality: the moral good of the benefactor and the objective good of the recipient.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The help given, he points out, can be small while the love is great or the help great while the love is small, remarking that love is not a mere “institution of charity.”<sup>xxxv</sup> And John Paul II states that,

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

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

The notion that one can only understand suffering through personal experience relates to one such personal experience of Peter Singer, written about in a profile piece on him.<sup>xxxix</sup> In a rare but complete break with his entire philosophical corpus, Peter Singer himself glimpsed the deepest source of the intrinsic worth of persons. Singer’s mother, who became ill with Alzheimer’s disease, reached a point in her life where she no longer recognized Singer, his sister, or her grandchildren and she had lost the ability to reason. She was in a state in which, according to Singer’s theory, she did not meet the definition of a person.<sup>xl</sup> According to his ethical theory, she ought to have been killed, or been left to die, and certainly no

money should have been spent on her survival, since the moral calculus would require that such money be spent increasing the preference fulfillment of the greatest number of people. Instead, Singer and his sister hired a team of health-care aids to look after her, spending tens of thousands of dollars in the process.<sup>xlii</sup> Michael Specter, the author of the piece, asked Singer about this, who first responded, in an attempt to remain consistent with his views, that this was “probably not the best use you could make of my money....”<sup>xlii</sup> However, on further probing, Singer said to Specter: “I think this has made me see how the issues of someone with these kinds of problems are really very difficult.... Perhaps it is more difficult than I thought before, because it is different when it’s your mother.”<sup>xliii</sup> Now this experience of Peter Singer with his mother can be analyzed philosophically, and the first thing to point out is that *his actions* coincide with the Christian view for, it is precisely when Singer gets into the position of reuniting suffering with a specific individual person (one whom he loves) that *he reverses in his actions what he insists upon in his books*.

The difference, when it is your mother, is that you love her, and this is a highly relevant fact for a theory of ethics. Love opens one’s eyes to the true source of the worth of persons: their uniqueness.<sup>xliv</sup> It is precisely a glimpse of the unrepeatable uniqueness of another person which inspires love (the grasp merely of the blunt fact that another person has consciousness, for example, cannot inspire love for them). Once this glimpse is achieved and love springs forth in the soul – as it does like a surprising gift – that love then has the remarkable power of allowing one to see more clearly and deeply both the humanity and the unique preciousness of the person you love, and then that sight in turn inspires more love. With one’s mother this process of loving and seeing has occurred quite a lot and the vision of worth and preciousness is overwhelming.<sup>xlv</sup> When that has occurred, there can be no argument concerning an inability to think about one’s future preference fulfillment (one of Singer’s favorites)<sup>xlvi</sup> that could make a person kill the one they love – or in any other way abandon her.

Of course, some hold the view that it is merciful to kill someone who is in pain; that, however, is not love, but abandonment. The request to be killed is actually a plea for two basic things: to be loved and to have pain relief. As soon as these people feel loved and/or have their pain managed, they no longer ask to be killed (and are grateful that their request was not heeded). Pain is the trump card used by pro-euthanasia activists to promote their cause, but in our high-tech world we have the ability to eliminate this reason for the request to be killed. With respect to the other reason,

feeling like an unloved nuisance, we must rise to the challenge presented by the recognition that loving each person is an infinitely higher value than cost management and perfect physical health.

It is very important to point out that while the love you have for someone is one reason why you would never kill that person, it is not the deepest reason. The deepest reason is the *inner* worth of the person. Your love for another is inside of you, but the humanity, uniqueness and preciousness of others are inside them. What happens when you love someone is that you can see more clearly the inner worth of the other person. Other persons have this inner worth whether or not they are loved, so no one should kill them – but unless love is in the picture one might have trouble knowing about their inner worth.

This experience of Singer has the possibility of revealing to his mind a truth that until now has been completely lost on utilitarians so concerned about the masses: the deepest source of the worth of every person lies in the very fact that there is no one else in existence, nor ever was, nor ever will be, nor could be, who is the same as another person, and among the reasons for the absolute inviolability of each person, this is the highest. Love has the power to make one know this truth about the persons one actually loves, but it also has the power to make one know *that* this is true of every person.<sup>xlvii</sup> It seems to me that this knowledge about the intrinsic worth of persons which is gained through love is accessible to believers and non-believers in God.

In a 2004 book chapter<sup>xlviii</sup> Singer responded to the reactions generated by this conflict between his life and his theory in the following way. He notes that, "My critics have claimed that, by paying for home care for my mother after she began to suffer from dementia, I have violated the standard of impartiality that I advocate."<sup>xlix</sup> He proceeds to point out that R.M. Hare offered him an idea that might lead to the view that Singer's action towards his mother was morally right, "R.M. Hare has suggested that because I know my mother well, and can see that the money being spent on her care does mean that she gets excellent health care, and does not suffer, the money is well-spent."<sup>l</sup> Singer quickly rejects this offer and, surprisingly, joins the ranks of his critics – against himself:

Suppose, however, that it were crystal clear that the money could do more good elsewhere. Then I would be doing wrong in spending it on my mother, just as I do wrong when I spend, on myself or my family, money that could do more good if

donated to an organization that helps people in much greater need than we are. I freely admit to not doing all that I should; but I could do it, and the fact that I do not do it does not vitiate the claim that it is what I should do.<sup>li</sup>

This answer is sophistical because he implicitly equates two unequal ideas: on the one hand, donating money to the poor in the form of tithing, and on the other hand, killing someone and then donating the money you gained from that to the poor.

Also, Singer himself admits that this position leads to “the further question of whether it makes sense to ask why we should act morally, and if it does, what kind of an answer it is possible to give...”<sup>lii</sup> Although he has written on this question elsewhere,<sup>liii</sup> the following set of questions comes to mind here,

1. Has he learned from this experience and made a firm intention not to make this moral error in the future. For example, when his wife, children or sister become debilitated, will he do what he believes to be the “right thing” and kill them?
2. If it is the case that his action towards his mother, while in direct opposition to his written work, does not negate his theories, how many such actions of his would it take to negate them?
3. If he is convinced that he did an objective wrong against the greater good when he cared for his mother, does he also think that he has thereby incurred moral guilt by caring for her?<sup>liv</sup>

Most people do not respect a teacher who doesn't live according to the demands he makes on others. If Singer had said in this paragraph: “I want to apologize to all my followers for my error, and to assure them that if this same situation happens with any other family members of mine, I will not let you down again,” then I would in one sense be harder pressed to write against him now. But, since instead he wrote, “The fact that I do not do it [the right utilitarian act] does not vitiate the claim that it is what I should do,” we can conclude, I think, that he has no firm resolution not to err again; that is, he very well may act in just the same way with other ill family members; he may care for them - only time will tell. And so, why is it, we could wonder, that the leader of this movement is allowed to do the exact opposite of what he preaches - and boldly admit it - adding that none of this undercuts his theoretical assertions?

I must note one further point concerning his remark that “the fact that I do not do it [the right utilitarian act] does not vitiate the claim that it is what I should do.” That remark is meant to blunt *his critics* who hold up his care for his mother against his theory as a blatant contradiction, but in the opening lines of *Practical Ethics* Singer himself asserts that “...ethics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect...”<sup>lv</sup> Singer is famous for following his first principles all the way to their (extreme) logical conclusions, well, it seems that it is not only his critics who think that his action towards his mother vitiates his ethical theory, he does too! Will he follow *this* text to its logical conclusion and drop his theory, since it is no good in his *very own* practice?

These questions and the contradictions in Singer’s thought are important, but even they do not approach the real problem. The real problem is expressed in the following question,

4. Why can’t Singer take the step from his experience with his mother to see that Mother Teresa’s way of life is the most rational? She acted in the same way he did towards his mother with every person she met.

I grant that this would be a hard task for most of us to achieve, but her noble effort never to abandon anyone springs from an insight that Singer rejects over and over again: no person is replaceable, and no person ever loses their worth. Love, which clarifies the vision of the beloved, is an experience common to believers and non-believers alike, and so even though Singer is an atheist, these insights, which guided Blessed Mother Teresa’s life, are available to him through his experience with his mother.

Singer dubs the view that all humans have equal and lofty worth, regardless of their cognitive abilities, “speciesism,” and holds that it has never been shown to be true by philosophers.<sup>lvi</sup> But his argument against (what he calls) speciesism in favor of killing those humans who have lost much of their cognitive abilities denies the deepest source of love intrinsic to persons: their uniqueness. Were he to reflect on his experience with his mother, he would see that no aspect of our species membership alone could be the intrinsic aspect of another which inspires love.<sup>lvii</sup>

#### **4. The Exterior and Cultural Unleashing of Love**

Does this emphasis on the interior growth of love mean that Christianity neglects the exterior goal of actually reducing suffering, and in particular

on a large-scale? I think the many examples of Christian charitable organizations and hospitals illustrate just the reverse. Also, in the document we are considering, the Pope spends a series of paragraphs reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, which

...witnesses to the fact that Christ's revelation of the salvific meaning of suffering *is in no way identified with an attitude of passivity*. Completely the reverse is true. The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering.<sup>lviii</sup>

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

Finally, I would like to mention the third way in which suffering is meant to unleash love: the bringing into existence of a *civilization of love*. In a civilization of love, large scale suffering would be greatly reduced, yet the realization of such a civilization is inseparably linked to the first of the three-fold senses in which suffering exists to unleash love: an interior, affective love of individual persons whom one faces. The following text from a daily meditation book concisely expresses this idea:

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

This idea suggests that the solution to worldwide suffering lies in the heart of each person. This inner life of persons is precisely that dimension of morality which is relegated to the sidelines in utilitarian ethics, and for this

reason it is incapable of achieving its own stated goal: the elimination of worldwide suffering.

I said above, with Scheler, that this love in the inner life of persons for individuals, the love that Christ was hoping would blossom in the heart of the rich young man, can only blossom through concrete acts of self-giving, and for this reason it did not blossom in the heart of the rich young man. But I also think that the relief of suffering on a large scale will not occur on earth unless such love in the inner life of persons is present there.

This point brings up the very difficult question concerning the emotional involvement of health care providers with their patients. It seems to me that the two extremes are, on the one hand, an exaggerated or unhealthy degree of personal involvement in the lives of patients, and on the other, a complete suppression of any and all affective relating to patients. Neither of these two extremes is appropriate. But, I do not think that the solution to the hardship on healthcare providers who feel appropriate emotions in their work can be the recommendation of extreme stoicism.

With respect to interior love as the main source of the relief of suffering on earth, the Catholic tradition goes so far as to say that the completely cloistered religious, who appear to be doing nothing, actually bring about more good in the world, even in the form of concrete benefits to persons who are suffering. For example, in the following text of St. John of the Cross, he expresses just this view in his advice to persons who achieve the deepest form of union with God:

It should be noted that until the soul reaches this state of union of love, she should practice love in both the active and contemplative life. Yet once she arrives, she should not become involved in other works and exterior exercises that might be of the slightest hindrance to the attentiveness of love toward God, even though the work be of great service to God. For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works put together.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Yet, even on a more natural level, the cold-hearted calculating method presented by contemporary utilitarianism will fail. Only love, the kind that is present when two persons face each other in an attitude of care and respect, as opposed to a cold assessment of units of pain and preference

fulfillments, could lead to a society that truly cares for the suffering as persons.

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

## **5. Conclusion: The Inherently Self-defeating Structure of Utilitarian Ethics**

Since utilitarian ethics allows for the killing and abandonment of individual persons to achieve its stated goal of reducing overall suffering, it has actually doomed itself to failure from the outset. The link between the legalization of euthanasia and large-scale killing is not correctable through "guidelines," but follows from an inner and unavoidable logic.<sup>lxv</sup> Not only has large-scale killing followed on the coattails of legalized euthanasia historically, but also the logical connection between the two can be demonstrated. I would formulate that reason like this: *to kill or abandon one single human person, is in a certain sense just as horrible as killing or abandoning thousands.* Since persons are irreplaceably precious, killing one of them represents an infinite crime, and so killing many is not a "greater" evil in a quantitative sense, such that when you reach a certain number (say 100,000) only then does it become an immoral state of affairs.<sup>lxvi</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Maria Fedoryka for the following formulation: "killing many persons should be understood as a 'greater' evil in the sense that it is repeating many times over an already infinite crime of violating a unique person." And so, if the killing of any person becomes allowed, then the only foundation on which one could oppose mass killing has been stripped from the equation. Only a person who understands this can truly bring about a civilization of love.

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

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



Suffering is an unavoidable and overwhelming fact of life, yet John Paul II believes that one of the deepest meanings to be found within it, is its ability to “unleash love,” which if realized in individual cases, will eventually result in an entire civilization of love. There is, however, a strong temptation to think that people who are sick have lost their worth and do not deserve love and care. It is for this reason, it seems to me, that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* insists that “Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect;”<sup>lxviii</sup> not because they are worth more than the healthy, but because it is too easy for the healthy to forget that they still have all of their personal dignity. As soon as love comes into the picture, however, the right attitude towards individuals returns. Despite his experience with his mother, Peter Singer has yet to admit this in writing. His answer that he did wrong when he cared for his mother, as one of my students put it, “excuses his action, but does not express the motive for it.”<sup>lxix</sup> His critics are looking for that motive, and so I will suggest one: he did not kill his mother because he loves her, and this love made him see the reasons within her being for which she should not be killed.

If utilitarians are sincere in their desire to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people, let them strive to achieve a civilization of love on the only basis possible: the inviolable preciousness of every person.

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> This paper was originally presented on November 14, 2003 at a conference titled *The Ethics of Suffering*, sponsored by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Roma Via Marco Minghetti, 17 – 00187 Roma. It was also presented at the 3rd Global Conference, *Making Sense of: Health, Illness and Disease*, July 5 – 9, 2004 held at St Catherine’s College, Oxford. Sections of this paper appeared in a book chapter thematizing family: Peter J. Colosi, “Mother Teresa, John Paul II and Christian Personalism vs. Peter Singer and Utilitarianism: Two Radically Opposed Conceptions of the Nature and Meaning of Family,” chapter 4 in *The Family in the New Millennium: World Voices Supporting the “Natural” Clan*, vol. 3, edited by S.A. Loveless and T.B. Holman, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2007): 49-65. I gratefully acknowledge reprint permission from ABC-CLIO, LLC. A much shorter, popular version of the present article can be found here:

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/euthanasia/eu0034.html> (accessed July 23, 2009).

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering (Salvifici Doloris)*, Vatican translation, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media 1984), ¶ 10-11.

<sup>iii</sup> For an excellent summary presentation of this idea as developed in the thought of Max Scheler, see John F. Crosby, “Max Scheler on the Moral and Religious Solidarity of Persons,” in *Personalist Papers* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), Ch. 8.

<sup>iv</sup> John Paul II, 1984, ¶ 29.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 28.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 30.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 30.

<sup>viii</sup> Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2009), 16-17, n.2, 101-22 and Josef Seifert *Was ist und motiviert eine sittliche Handlung*, (Salzburg: Universitätsverlag Anton Pustet 1976), 70-77 have worked out with great precision, through their notions of primary and secondary motives for action and superabundant relationships, that in personal love and moral action, persons are never

a means to happiness and goodness, although relating to them because they are *worthy of* respect and love leads to the realization of happiness and moral goodness in the one who so relates. Here is a concise definition of this relationship, which these authors name a superabundant one:

With „superabundant“ or „superabundant relation“ the type of relation meant is that in which one reality follows logically and meaningfully after another. And also, the first reality, it can be said, „serves“ the one that follows, yet not in the sense of being a mere means. In many cases the „first“ reality within a superabundant relation is not just worthy in its own right to be respected (i.e., is not a mere means), but, in fact, is even more important than the second reality, which flows from it. E.g., the moral value of morally good actions and virtues is a higher value than the happiness which results in the person who is good. [My translation of Josef Seifert, *Was ist und motiviert eine sittliche Handlung*, (Salzburg: Universitätsverlag Anton Pustet 1976), 72, n.102a].

Max Scheler also, in his analysis of Eudaimonism (*Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 329ff.), draws out the notion that if one were to conceive of persons as a mere means to one's direct pursuit of happiness, the very goal of happiness would be thwarted. One cannot become deeply happy or morally good if one conceives of persons primarily as a means to those goals; only in respecting persons because they deserve it, since they are worthy, is it possible for these other values to come into existence. For a closely related idea in the work of Viktor Frankl, consider the following text: "...happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to "be happy." Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically," Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984) 162. Frankl works out a notion of self-transcendence in which persons relate to realities for *their own sake* because they have their own objective meaning, and this results in the fruit of happiness on one's inner life. For one of the many texts of John Paul II (Wojtyla) on this point see *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 95-100, where he discusses the notion of betrothed love as primarily consisting in the spouses making a genuine and *complete gift* of themselves to each other and how this results, almost paradoxically, in an enrichment of the one who gives himself.

<sup>ix</sup> John Paul II, 1984, ¶ 29. (Emphasis added).

<sup>x</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Maria Fedoryka for more clarity on the points surrounding the distinction between the ultimate reason for the very existence of suffering and the meaning that is found in it *once it exists*.

<sup>xi</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brother Karamazov* (New York: New American Library, 1980), 225-26.

<sup>xii</sup> However, love on the inner life of persons, when it exists, results in persons not treating each other in this way – and thus, the lack of such love is seen clearly to be a cause of such horrors. Such love *can* exist; thus, it ought to be striven for, and encouraged in others.

<sup>xiii</sup> John Paul II, 1984, ¶ 31.

<sup>xiv</sup> I have attempted a further development of the relationship between love and suffering in Christian teaching here: Peter J. Colosi, "John Paul II and Max Scheler on the Meaning of Suffering," in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 12.3 Summer 2009, 17 – 32. The article is also downloadable here: <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/logos/volumes/12-3/default.html>. (accessed July 23, 2009).

<sup>xv</sup> Max Scheler's profound study in which he separates out the differences between Christian ethics and utilitarian ethics seems to have been inspired by his astonishment that Friedrich Nietzsche was unable to detect the difference. See Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), c. 4.

<sup>xvi</sup> Anthony Quinton, *Utilitarianism* (London: Duckworth, 1989), 1.

<sup>xvii</sup> Quinton, 1989, 1.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jeremy Bentham. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burt (New York, NY: Random House: 1939) 804.

<sup>xix</sup> John Stuart Mill, 1987, 288.

<sup>xx</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1993), 94.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>xxii</sup> Ibid., 94: "According to preference utilitarianism, any action contrary to the preference of any being is, *unless this preference is outweighed by contrary preferences*, wrong." (Emphasis added).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid., 13: "...to think ethically...my own interests cannot count for more, simply because they are my own, than the interests of others. In place of my own interests, I now have to take into account the interests of all those affected by my decision. This requires me to weigh up all these interests and adopt the course of action most likely to maximize the interests of those affected.... I must choose the course of action that has the best consequences, on balance, for all affected."

<sup>xxiv</sup> A morally relevant factor is an aspect of reality which makes moral claims on moral agents, but which may or may not itself be a moral value or disvalue, see Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1953), 280. For example, a baby does not possess the moral values of truthfulness or generosity, but the baby is morally relevant, since by its very existence it makes moral claims on its parents to care for it. Suffering and pain as such are not moral disvalues, like jealousy or greed are, but pain is morally relevant because it issues a type of claim to others to relieve it.

<sup>xxv</sup> Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press 1981) 159 and Peter Singer A Refutation of Ordinary Morality, *Ethics* 101.3 (1991) 625.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Singer, 1981, 101 and 159.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid., 151. For another example of a contemporary thinker who holds these views, see Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Singer, 1981: 157.

<sup>xxix</sup> Scheler has pointed out that in some cases one detects a *ressentiment* towards God, moral laws and traditions as a reason for the adoption of the utilitarian system. See Scheler, 1998, 93, 98-100.

<sup>xxx</sup> John F. Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 113.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Von Hildebrand, 1953: 260.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *The Catholic Bible, Personal Study Edition, New American Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Mark 10: 21-22.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Scheler, 1998: 71.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> For a fuller philosophical development of these two dimensions of morality and the unity between them, see Seifert (1976). I would state the basic point and its relationship to utilitarianism like this: The moral condition of the agent is determined (although not exclusively) by the material of the act, co-suffering or relieving suffering (but not by the act's actual success or failure). Also, the richness and goodness of the act of helping is greater in proportion to the richness of the love in the inner life out of which that act flows. Thus, love and happiness are both fruits of good acts as well as originating sources of them. Utilitarian ethics misses this dialectical relationship because of its exclusive focus on the successful relief of suffering as the sole bearer of ethical values. See John Stuart Mill, 1987, 288: "A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it [the utilitarian morality] considers as wasted."

<sup>xxxv</sup> Scheler, 1998: 71.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> John Paul II, 1984: ¶ 29.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Ibid., ¶ 26.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Ibid., ¶ 26.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Michael Specter, The Dangerous Philosopher, *The New Yorker*, September 6, 1999: 46-55.

<sup>xl</sup> Specter, 1999, 55. For Singer's explanation of which traits need to be present for a being to meet the definition of personhood, see his 1993: c. 4. I say "being" rather than "human being" because Singer thinks that "...there could be a person who is not a member of our species. There could also be members of our species who are not persons." (Singer, 1993, 87). It is on the basis of the latter assertion that Singer often presents his view that some animals have a greater right not to be killed than some humans. I have attempted a critique of Peter Singer, Samuel Scheffler and JJC Smart on this point in Peter J. Colosi, "The Uniqueness of Persons in the Life and Thought of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II, with Emphasis on His Indebtedness to Max Scheler," Chapter 3 in *Karol Wojtyła's Philosophical Legacy*, eds. Nancy Mardas Billias, Agnes B. Curry and George F. McLean, (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 61 – 100, here, 77 – 81.

<sup>xli</sup> Specter, 1999, 55.

<sup>xlii</sup> Specter, 1999, 55. Fr. Richard John Neuhaus pointed out to Singer in a debate that "it is a cockeyed ethical theory that is embarrassed by a son's caring for his elderly mother." Singer responded, according to Neuhaus, by explaining that "the extensive care he had provided his mother was not entirely his idea, that there were family pressures and so forth." Neuhaus commented: "The striking thing is that he was

more interested in defending his curious theory than in defending his commendable care for his mother." Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, A Curious Encounter with a Philosopher from Nowhere, *First Things*, February, no. 120 (2002), 77 – 82, here, 79.

<sup>xliii</sup> Specter, 1999, 55.

<sup>xliiv</sup> John Crosby, with great originality and philosophical depth, has explored and defended the uniqueness of persons, which he calls their "incommunicability," as the most important intrinsic source of personal worth, and the one that more than any other is the ground of moral norms related to the absolute respect due to persons. See his 1996, esp. c. 2; and 2004, c. 1. I have attempted a concise summary the views of Crosby and Singer in this context and set them against each other in, Peter J. Colosi, "The Intrinsic Worth of Persons: Revisiting Peter Singer and his Critics," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. XV (1/2), 2003: 3-22.

<sup>xliiv</sup> Also this idea of the almost infinitely greater value awareness that occurs in love between persons which can never arise without love is developed by Crosby in his 1996, 49-53, 65-67.

<sup>xlivi</sup> Singer, 1993, 86-100.

<sup>xliiii</sup> For the distinction between *the fact of the incommunicability (uniqueness) of persons* and the *really existing and unique essential content of some person* see Crosby, 1996, 67 and Crosby, 2004, 19 – 20, pts 2 and 3. The idea is that each person is unique, and so that *fact* is common to them all (i.e., not unique), but what constitutes the uniqueness in a particular person is not common in that sense, because it can never be found in another person.

<sup>xliiii</sup> Peter Singer, "Outsiders: Our Obligations to Those Beyond our Borders, in *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy*, edited by Deen K. Chatterjee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11 – 32.

<sup>xlix</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>l</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>li</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>lii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>liii</sup> For example, Singer 1993: c. 12 and Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live?*, Prometheus, Amherst, NY, 1995.

<sup>liii</sup> A fourth question, which might sound a bit outlandish although it is grounded in a historical fact, would run as follows. Since Jeremy Bentham developed utilitarianism primarily for the practical purpose of having a method to calculate which legislative proposals should be enacted into law, would Singer hold the view that a law should be enacted against the sort of unethical behavior he committed? In other words, if he is convinced that he did an objective wrong against the greater good when he cared for his mother, does he think should be punished?

<sup>liv</sup> Singer, 1993, 2.

<sup>lii</sup> Peter Singer, "A Response," in *Singer and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 1999), 296.

<sup>liii</sup> One key point made by John Crosby is that while philosophers who defend the dignity of human persons have rightly pointed to their common nature as a source of this worth, they have often overlooked their uniqueness. Crosby maintains that although our rational nature is a source of high worth, unless we bring to the discussion also the incommunicability of persons, a complete defense against Singer's contention that newborns may be killed will not be possible. See Crosby, 2004, 9 - 13; 1996, 65-66. This is also one of the main points I developed in Colosi, "The Intrinsic Worth of Persons," op. cit.

<sup>lviii</sup> John Paul II, 1984, ¶ 29.

<sup>lix</sup> *Ibid.*, ¶ 29.

<sup>lx</sup> It is important to note that one of the few Saints mentioned in the Apostolic letter is Saint Francis of Assisi who loved Lady Poverty not primarily as a form of sacrifice, but because of love: love for Christ who was poor and love of the poor with whom he wanted to be.

<sup>lxi</sup> John Paul II, 1984: ¶ 28.

<sup>lxii</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II, All Sixteen Official Texts Promulgated by the Ecumenical Council 1963-1965*, (New York: America Press, 1966), 223.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Francisco Fernández, Francisco, *In Conversation with God*, Vol. 2, (London: Scepter, 1989), 204.

<sup>lxiv</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, D.C.: I.C.S. Publications, 1991), 587. For a brief analysis of this teaching in the Carmelite tradition and its expression in official Church teaching, see Ruth Burrows, *Carmel: Interpreting a Great Tradition* (Starrucca, PA: Dimension Books and London: Sheed and Ward, 2000), 6ff. And, of course, the great

masterpiece in the Catholic tradition expressing the idea that fruitful external actions are only possible if they flow from a rich inner life is *The Soul of the Apostolate* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 2008) by Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard.

<sup>lxv</sup> For excellent discussions of this connection, see Wesley J. Smith, *Forced Exit: The Slippery Slope from Assisted Suicide to Legalized Murder* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2003) and Raymond L. Dennehy, Physician-Assisted-Suicide and Democracy, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* Vol. XV (1/2) (2003), 99-118.

<sup>lxvi</sup> I am grateful to the rich analysis of John Crosby of the important idea that because of a certain infinity of persons, there is a sense in which it is not possible to count them (although there is another sense in which one can count them, such as the way sociologists do) 1996, 49-53.

<sup>lxvii</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/2004/march/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20040320\\_congress-fiamc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2004/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040320_congress-fiamc_en.html) (accessed July 23, 2009). Italics in original.

<sup>lxviii</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), ¶ 2276.

<sup>lxix</sup> My thanks to Maria Scarnecchia for this formulation.

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