

Wrongness, evolutionary debunking, public rules

Article

Accepted Version

Hooker, B. (2016) Wrongness, evolutionary debunking, public rules. *Etica and Politica*, 18 (1). pp. 135-149. ISSN 1825-5167
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/55507/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10077/12708>

Publisher: Edizioni Universita di Trieste

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Wrongness, Evolutionary Debunking, Public Rules

Brad Hooker

University of Reading

Philosophy Department

B.W.Hooker@Reading.ac.UK

ABSTRACT

Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's wonderful book, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*, contains a wealth of intriguing arguments and compelling ideas. The present paper focuses on areas of continuing dispute. The paper first attacks Lazari-Radek's and Singer's evolutionary debunking arguments against both egoism and parts of common-sense morality. The paper then addresses their discussion of the role of rules in utilitarianism. De Lazari-Radek and Singer concede that rules should constitute our moral decision procedure and our public morality. This paper argues that, if no one should be blamed for complying with the optimal decision procedure and optimal public rules, there are strong reasons to accept that these same rules determine what is morally permissible from what is morally wrong.

KEYWORDS

Evolutionary debunking, publicity, blame

Henry Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics* is widely and rightly acknowledged to be a masterpiece, even by those who are not persuaded of the book's conclusions.¹ Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer's new book, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*, discusses all of Sidgwick's main arguments and often reaches agreement with them.² De Lazari-Radek and Singer's book also advances new arguments. My focus here will be on de Lazari-Radek and Singer's evolutionary debunking arguments against egoism and parts of common-sense morality and on their argument for act-utilitarianism over rule-utilitarianism. But first I will need to outline the conceptual framework that de Lazari-Radek and Singer take over from Sidgwick.

Wide versus Narrow senses of the term "Ethics"

Henry Sidgwick took the fundamental question of ethics to be "What ought I to do?" Sometimes Sidgwick equates that question with the question "What is it

¹ Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, Macmillan, first edition 1876, seventh edition 1907.

² Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. All further references to this book will employ the initials *PVU*.

rational to do?” De Lazari-Radek and Singer equate “What ought I to do?” and “What is it rational to do?” with “What is there decisive reason to do?” They take “ethics”, in the wide sense of that term, to be about decisive reasons.³

De Lazari-Radek and Singer take “ethical” and “moral” to be synonymous, and thus for there to be no difference between, for example, “ethically required” and “morally required”. So, for de Lazari-Radek and Singer, the concepts of decisive reason for action, “ought”, moral demand, and rightness go hand in hand. They write,

Once we accept the indispensability, for ethics, of the concept of what we ought to do, or what we have most reason to do, ideas of “right” or “demanded by morality” come trailing close behind, and it doesn’t really make sense to try to separate them. If there is something we ought to do, it is demanded by morality, and right to do it.⁴

One objection to taking ethics to be about what one has decisive reason to do is that this approach accords egoism more respect than it deserves. Rational egoism holds that one always has decisive reason to do what is best for oneself. Although Sidgwick took egoism to be a method of ethics, and de Lazari-Radek and Singer follow Sidgwick in this, there is a strong argument for not identifying egoism and ethics.⁵ This argument starts with the commonplace that ethical considerations often conflict with egoistic ones. Now, if ethical or moral reasons often conflict with egoistic reasons, there must be at least some non-egoistic ethical reasons. Admittedly, even if there are some non-egoistic ethical reasons, egoism might still be a correct theory of *some* ethical reasons. Nevertheless, if there are at least some *non-egoistic* ethical reasons, egoism cannot be the correct theory of the *whole* of ethics.

One argument that de Lazari-Radek and Singer offer for following Sidgwick in taking “ethically required” to be conceptually equivalent to “required by decisive practical reasons” is that it is strange to think that what is ethically or morally required *might* be different from what there is decisive reason to do.⁶ In response, we should acknowledge that there is some plausibility in the idea that x is ethically required *only if* x is what one has *decisive* reason to do. Even more compelling is the

³ *PVU*, pp. 18, 20.

⁴ *PVU*, p. 335.

⁵ Some influential philosophers who juxtapose egoism and ethics, or egoism and morality, include H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 85; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), p. 117; J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 106; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 12; even Sidgwick himself, *Methods of Ethics*, 1907, p. 25.

⁶ *PVU*, pp. 20–21.

idea that if *x* is ethically required then there must be at least *some* (even if not decisive) reason to do *x*. After all, if *x* is ethically required, then there is at least an ethical reason to do *x*.

Be that as it may, Sidgwick's terminology is committed not only to "x is ethically required *only* if x is what one has decisive reason to do" but also to "x is ethically required *whenever* x is what one has decisive reason to do". The second commitment seems to me nearly impossible to accept.⁷ Suppose you are choosing among alternative possible actions each of which would have no impact on the welfare of others, would not infringe anyone's moral rights, and would not harm the environment. (An example might be your choice between eating strawberry sorbet and eating toffee sorbet.) Suppose one of the alternatives would be more beneficial to you. So you have *egoistic* reason to choose that alternative and this reason is decisive (indeed, presumably, unopposed). But there is no *ethical*, or *moral*, requirement that you choose this alternative.

Hence, even if there is some plausibility in the proposition "x is ethically required only if x is what one has decisive reason to do", there isn't plausibility in the proposition "x is ethically required whenever x is what one has decisive reason to do". Of course, if we deny that x is ethically required whenever x is what one has decisive reason to do, we cannot logically accept the proposal that "ethically required" is conceptually equivalent to "required by decisive practical reasons".

The other argument that de Lazari-Radek and Singer offer for following Sidgwick in taking "ethically required" to be conceptually equivalent to "required by decisive practical reasons" starts from the premise that the ultimate practical question is "what does one have decisive reason to do?" If the ultimate practical question is "what does one have decisive reason to do?", then morality (or ethics) is about the ultimate practical question only if it is about what one has decisive reason to do.

However, we can take the question of what morality requires to be extremely important without going so far as to take the question "what does morality require?" to be the question "what does one have decisive reason to do?" As I mentioned, there can be decisive reasons to do one thing rather than another though no moral reasons come into play. And there is a real question whether, when moral reasons conflict with reasons of other kinds, the moral reasons always outweigh the other kinds of reasons. That question should not be eliminated by conceptual fiat. (Taking "morally required" to mean "what there is decisive reason to do" turns "there is decisive reason to do what morality requires" into a tautology.)

⁷ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), vol. 1, p. 166.

Can Evolutionary Explanations Debunk Egoistic Intuitions and Common-sense Moral Intuitions?

Although de Lazari-Radek and Singer use “ethically required” in such a broad sense that egoism is not conceptually ruled out as the foundational ethical requirement, de Lazari-Radek and Singer think they have a novel non-conceptual argument against egoism. Consider the supposition that *all* ethical intuitions could be explained by evolutionary explanations.⁸ The supposition here is that people who have these ethical intuitions are more likely to behave in ways that produce surviving descendants and thus more likely to have their genes survive than people who either have no ethical intuitions at all or who have different ethical intuitions. If all ethical intuitions could be explained in this way, would this explanation “debunk” ethical intuitions by suggesting that they are really nothing more than illusions with an evolutionary advantage?

There is no prospect of evolutionary explanations *debunking* all ethical intuitions *unless* evolutionary explanations can *explain* why all of these intuitions exist. Any ethical intuition that cannot be explained as the direct or indirect product of evolutionary forces cannot be debunked by evolutionary explanations. And there certainly do seem to be at least some ethical intuitions that cannot be explained as the product of evolutionary forces.

For the sake of setting up a contrast, let us start by considering intuitions that are commonly said to be explained as the product of evolution. A common thought is that evolutionary forces favor the prevalence of egoistic behavior over altruistic behavior (and over mutually destructive behavior). Egoistic behavior is more likely in populations of people who have the egoistic intuition that one always has decisive reason to do whatever is most beneficial to oneself than in populations of people who do not have this intuition. So, the thought is, evolutionary forces will favor people’s having this egoistic intuition.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer argue that, even if there is a very widely shared intuition that there is decisive reason to do what is best for oneself, such an intuition can easily be explained as the product of evolutionary forces. De Lazari-Radek and Singer think that, at least in the case of egoism, there is no good reason to believe that an ethical intuition produced by evolutionary forces tracks objective truth. Egoism is thereby debunked, de Lazari-Radek and Singer conclude.⁹

They seem to think that part of common-sense morality suffers the same fate. This is the part of common-sense morality that is constituted by duties of special concern and responsibility for those with whom one has special connections, such as family members and friends. At first glance, the duties of special concern for

⁸ The argument I am about to discuss is presented by de Lazari-Radek and Singer, *PVU*, pp. 179–85, with references to influential literature.

⁹ *PVU*, pp. 190–97.

family members can be explained in evolutionary terms. Individuals who give priority to their family members over others are more likely to have surviving descendants than those who give no priority to their family members over others. Individuals with the intuition that there is a moral duty of special concern for family members are more likely to give priority to their family members and teach this intuition to their children and grandchildren. As a result of this teaching, the intuition will spread across the generations to the point of becoming nearly ubiquitous.

Contrast, on the one hand, egoism and the duties of special concern for family members with, on the other hand, act-utilitarianism, the view that the ethically right thing to do is always and only whatever would maximize aggregate welfare assessed impartially. Let us refer to the intuition that one always has decisive reason to do what produces the greatest aggregate welfare as *the fundamental act-utilitarian intuition*. The relevance of the intuition that act-utilitarianism is correct is that this intuition cannot be the product of evolution. For this intuition can lead us to sacrifice our own good for the benefit of those with no special connection with us. Indeed, this intuition will push us to make such sacrifices whenever we perceive that the benefit to others of our helping them would be greater than the aggregate cost to us and those closely connected to us such as our children.¹⁰

Sidgwick concluded his great book with a “dualism of practical reason”, in which egoism and act-utilitarianism are left standing as intuitively compelling “methods of ethics”. Sidgwick also acknowledges that egoism and act-utilitarianism are in regular conflict (unless there is a divine agent to structure rewards and punishments so as to eliminate the conflict between promoting one’s own good and maximizing the overall good).¹¹ De Lazari-Radek and Singer take themselves to have overcome Sidgwick’s dualism of practical reason by showing that evolutionary explanations debunk egoism but do not debunk act-utilitarianism.

Of course there are lots of possible explanations of an intuition’s being widely shared other than its being favored by evolution. For example, the intuition might have been fostered by a religion that was imposed by an emperor on a spreading population. Or an intuition could have been made popular by its association with someone who was immensely charismatic. Or the intuition’s becoming widespread could have been the result of a common conflation of ideas. In each of these kinds of case and in many others, an intuition’s proliferation is explained as being the result of a non-truth-tracking process.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer recognize that the prevalence of an intuition could be the result of some cause other than evolution. So they acknowledge that the fact that an intuition (e.g., the fundamental act-utilitarian intuition) is widely shared but cannot be explained as the product of evolutionary forces does *not* establish

¹⁰ *PVU*, pp. 185–96.

¹¹ Sidgwick, Bk II, ch. V.

that the intuition is true.¹² The methodological proposal that de Lazari-Radek and Singer make is thus that, where there are two conflicting but widely shared ethical intuitions and one of these can be explained as a result of a non-truth-tracking process (e.g. evolution) and the other cannot, we have a good reason to rank the intuition that cannot be explained as a result of a non-truth-tracking process over the one that can be explained as a result of a non-truth-tracking process.

While agreeing with de Lazari-Radek and Singer that the act-utilitarian intuition is not subject to an evolutionary debunking, I note that the spread of act-utilitarian intuitions might be explained as a result of some other non-truth-tracking process, e.g., by its connection to the idea of a perfectly impartial and benevolent god, as opposed to a god who is partial and peevish. However, rather than speculate about why act-utilitarian intuitions spread, I want to return to the question of whether egoism and common-sense morality can be debunked by evolutionary explanations.

One immediate problem is that, on the face of it, one wouldn't expect evolution to produce both egoistic and common-sense moral intuitions if these are in conflict. And yet of course egoism and common-sense morality can conflict. Common-sense morality consists of (a) prohibitions on doing certain kinds of act, such as physically harming others, stealing, breaking promises, lying, etc., (b) duties of special concern and responsibility for those with whom one has special connections, such as family members and friends, (c) a general duty to do good for others and especially to prevent disasters where possible, and (d) permissions to give one's own good somewhat more or less weight than the good of others when one is deciding what to do.¹³ There is room for conflict between egoism and each of (a), (b), (c), and the part of (d) that grants one the permission to give priority to others over oneself.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer do not assert that all of common-sense morality can be debunked by evolutionary explanations. Their attack targets that part of common-sense morality that requires partiality towards those with whom one has special connections, such as family and friends. And, as de Lazari-Radek and Singer point out, there is considerable congruence between egoism and duties of partiality:

Evolution explains altruism towards kin by seeing it as promoting the survival of the genes we carry. We can do this in many ways, but in normal circumstances, we will do it best by living a long life, finding a mate or mates, having children, and acquiring the resources, status, or power that will improve the prospects of our children and other close kin surviving, reproducing, and in turn promoting the survival of their children. Most of this looks remarkably similar to what an egoist would do anyway, at least

¹² *PVU*, p. 195.

¹³ Here I am assuming common-sense morality permits—and, within limits, even praises—the sacrifice of larger benefits for oneself for the sake of smaller benefits for others.

on standard conceptions of self-interest. Moreover, because most humans care about their children, it is normal to think that whether a person's children are flourishing is a significant component of how well that person's life is going. Thus the behaviour we would expect to result from kin altruism will overlap very considerably with the behaviour that would result from following the principle of egoism.¹⁴

Without gainsaying these important insights, we should recognize that there remains room for conflict between egoism and the part of common-sense morality that calls for altruism towards kin. In order to illustrate this, I offer the following example. Imagine a man named Jack who is past the age of being able to father more children. Jack finds himself in a situation where he could *either* (i) come to the aid of his very elderly mother, *or* (ii) come to the aid of his 33-yr old daughter, *or* (iii) do what is most beneficial to himself.¹⁵

What would common-sense morality say about this case? The sizes of the benefits at stake matter. Also potentially pivotal are other kinds of considerations, such as whether Jack has made a relevant promise to one but not the other of his mother and daughter, or whether one or other of them has broken off relations with him. If such considerations do not come into play or are equally balanced, then the sizes of benefits at stake determine whom Jack should benefit, according to common-sense morality. If the benefit to his mother would be significantly greater than to himself or his daughter, then he should benefit his mother. If the benefit to his daughter is significantly greater, then he should benefit his daughter. If the benefits to himself are greater, then he is allowed—not required—to benefit himself, according to common-sense morality.

For the sake of illustrating the relevant points, let us assume that the benefit to Jack's mother would be significantly greater than the ones he could direct to himself or to his daughter, and no other other-regarding considerations count against his doing this. So common-sense morality holds that here he should benefit his mother. But egoism says he should instead benefit himself. This case thus illustrates how egoism and common-sense morality can conflict.

Evolutionary explanation must be comparative. There can be an evolutionary explanation of why characteristic A spread in comparison with (and perhaps in competition with) characteristic B and yet why characteristic C spread in comparison with (and perhaps in competition with) A. For example, there is an evolutionary explanation of why egoistic behavior would be selected for over act-

¹⁴ *PVU*, p. 194.

¹⁵ These really are alternatives. Jack's coming to the aid of his mother would not also end up being best for himself. His coming to the aid of his daughter would not somehow end up being best for himself. And his coming to the aid of his mother would not somehow be coming to the aid of his daughter.

utilitarian behavior. But would egoistic behavior be selected for over making sacrifices for the benefit of one's descendants?

Contrast two (of the very many) different intuitions people might have come to have. One is the egoistic intuition that one should always do what is best for oneself even when this conflicts with doing what will promote the survival and multiplication of one's descendants. The other is the intuition that one should give overriding weight to doing whatever promotes the survival and multiplication of one's descendants. I cannot see that there is a compelling evolutionary explanation of the egoistic intuition once this is juxtaposed with the alternative possible intuition that people should sacrifice their own good only for the sake of promoting the survival and multiplication their descendants.

Having seen that an evolutionary explanation of the egoistic intuition will fail if this intuition is compared with certain possible alternatives, we should think carefully about what comparisons with common-sense morality should be posed by an evolutionary explanation of common-sense morality. Common-sense morality holds that Jack might be obligated to pass up what is best for himself in order to aid his mother or his daughter. Is passing up what is best for himself in order to aid his mother or his daughter the choice that evolutionary advantage would favour? Presumably, evolutionary pressures would favour the intuition that Jack should do what is best for the individual most likely to pass on Jack's genes, namely his daughter.

Common-sense morality certainly does not always come down on the side of helping the younger generation instead of the older generation. Suppose that the benefit that Jack could provide to his old mother is large and the benefit that he could provide to his 33-yr old daughter is small. Suppose that in this case Jack has made no promise that is relevant to what he should do here, that his relationships with his mother and his daughter are fine, and other potentially relevant considerations are roughly equal. In this case, common-sense morality favors his helping his old mother. Moreover, in play here is not merely an intuition about a specific case but also a somewhat more general intuition that, other things being at least roughly equal, one should provide a *large* benefit to an old and now infertile relative rather than a *small* benefit to a young and fertile relative. Such intuitions seem to me ones which evolution cannot readily explain.

De Lazari-Radek and Singer take the evolutionary explanation of egoistic intuitions to discredit egoism and evolutionary explanations of at least some components of common-sense morality to cast doubt on common-sense morality. If evolutionary debunking arguments against egoism and common-sense morality worked, then the only theory left on the table of the theories that Sidgwick seriously considered would be act-utilitarianism. Let me stress that I do not find egoism intuitively compelling. I have not argued in its favor. I have argued merely that there is not a sufficiently good evolutionary explanation of belief in egoism. I have also argued that there is plenty of scope for conflict between common-sense

morality's requirements and doing what is most advantageous in terms of multiplying one's genes. Evolutionary debunking arguments do not, it seems to me, sweep either egoism or common-sense morality off the table.

Rules, Wrongness, and Reactive Attitudes

Sidgwick's investigations of egoism and act-utilitarianism have almost never been equaled. His discussion of common-sense morality is also impressive, though marred by his operating without W. D. Ross's idea of *pro tanto* duty.¹⁶ A view Sidgwick didn't investigate, because it had not yet been clearly formulated, was rule-utilitarianism.

For over a century before Sidgwick wrote, the idea had been circulating that the best means of maximizing utility is normally to apply such familiar rules as "Don't physically harm the innocent", "Don't steal", "Don't break promises", "Don't lie", etc. Sidgwick developed this idea at much greater length and sophistication.¹⁷ Later R. M. Hare further developed the idea that utility is likely to be maximized by our having very firm dispositions of character that will lead us to stick to the rules except in rare and extreme circumstances.¹⁸ Of course, we are *often* unable to calculate the consequences of various courses of action open to us. Even where we could make a stab at calculating the consequences, we are often unlikely to calculate accurately, because of cognitive errors and emotional interference. Moreover, aggregate welfare is more likely to be achieved if people *generally rely* on others not to physically attack them, not to steal, not to break promises, not to lie, etc., even when others think that a bit more aggregate welfare would be achieved by doing such an act. How much confidence would you have that others wouldn't attack you or steal from you or break their promises to you or lie to you if you knew that they felt permitted to do any of these acts whenever they could convince themselves that the act would benefit them or someone else more than it would harm you?

The debate between act-utilitarians (such as Sidgwick, Hare, and de Lazari-Radek and Singer) and rule-utilitarians is over the status of these rules. Act-utilitarians say that the rules of common-sense morality are *very useful*, and should be deeply internalized in our moral characters, and should then structure our decisions about what to do, and should be departed from only with the greatest reluctance. But act-utilitarians go on to say that what makes an act ethically right is *solely* whether the act maximizes aggregate welfare. Act-utilitarians acknowledge

¹⁶ See Thomas Hurka, "Sidgwick on Consequentialism and Deontology: A Critique", *Utilitas* 26 (2014) 129–152.

¹⁷ Sidgwick, Bk III, and Bk IV, chs. III and IV.

¹⁸ R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Method, Levels, and Point* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), especially chs. 3, 8, 9.

that the common-sense moral rules should be public knowledge, taught in homes and schools, cited in public evaluations of conduct, etc. But act-utilitarians then add that perhaps publicity should not be given to the fact that what makes an act ethically right is not whether it complies with those rules but rather only whether the act maximizes aggregate welfare.

Rule-utilitarians agree that the rules of common-sense morality are *very useful* and should be deeply internalized in our moral characters and should then structure our decisions about what to do. Rule-utilitarians go on to hold (i) that these rules also determine what is morally required, merely permissible, or wrong and (ii) that the moral wrongness of an act is always a necessary condition and usually a sufficient condition for the appropriateness of moral reactive attitudes such as indignation and moral blame.

Act-utilitarians deny not only (i) but also (ii). Act-utilitarians say that whether I should be blamed is determined not by whether I have failed to maximize aggregate welfare. Act-utilitarians say that whether I should be blamed is instead determined by whether blaming me will maximize aggregate welfare. Indeed, whether I should be punished by the law, other people's opinion, or my own conscience, is, according to act-utilitarianism, determined not by whether I have done wrong, but by whether such punishment will maximize aggregate welfare.¹⁹

Such contentions are consistent within act-utilitarianism. But such contentions conflict violently with our moral intuitions about how wrongness and blame, indignation, guilt, and punishment are connected. For our moral intuitions hold that whether or not someone is to blame or is to be punished is not really a matter of whether on this occasion blame or punishment would produce good consequences but instead a matter of whether the blame or punishment is warranted by the person's conduct.

Three of the positions de Lazari-Radek and Singer take might seem to soften the conflict between, on the one side, their account of the relation between moral wrongness and punishment (including punishment by reactive attitudes such as feelings of blame, guilt, and indignation) and, on the other side, our intuitions about such matters. First, they accept that utility is likely to be promoted by the promulgation and acceptance of rules such as "Don't physically harm the innocent", "Don't steal", "Don't break promises", "Don't lie", etc., as public moral rules. These public moral rules should establish shared expectations about how

¹⁹ Notoriously, this act-utilitarian doctrine about how the wrongness of behavior can part company from the appropriateness of punishment conflicts with John Stuart Mill's "We do not call anything wrong unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way for doing it; if not by law, then by the opinion of his fellow creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience." (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 5) The conflict here between Mill and the act-utilitarian approach to punishment is the usual ground for denying that Mill was consistently act-utilitarian. For de Lazari-Radek and Singer's position on the relation between wrongness and punishment including blame, see *PVU*, pp. 309, 316, 320–21, 331–35.

people will behave and should serve as people's "decision procedure" for moral thinking.²⁰ De Lazari-Radek and Singer accept that people's feelings of indignation and blame should also be guided by these public rules. De Lazari-Radek and Singer write,

Sidgwick's argument, and ours, is that there are situations in which the right thing to do is to breach a widely held moral rule, but to do it in secret. If, as a result of unforeseeable bad luck, the breach of the rule becomes known, then, at least in some of these cases, the agent ought to encounter a hostile public reaction to the breach, for in the absence of such a reaction, people will come to believe that the rule does not hold at all, which will have bad consequences.²¹

So people should "encounter a hostile public reaction" if their breaches of good public rules become known. Furthermore,

[...] it is hard to see how it can have good consequences to blame someone for acting in accordance with the best decision procedure.²²

Here, de Lazari-Radek and Singer concede that no one should be blamed for complying with the optimal decision procedure (which consists in following the optimal public moral rules).

De Lazari-Radek and Singer do not take their concession that no one should be blamed for complying with the optimal decision procedure and optimal public moral rules to commit them to accepting that moral *wrongness* should likewise be tied to optimal decision procedures or optimal public moral rules. De Lazari-Radek and Singer hold that moral wrongness is equated with what there is decisive reason to avoid. And they hold what there is decisive reason to avoid should not be assumed to be determined by optimal public rules.

I concede that, *if* moral wrongness is equated with what there is decisive reason to avoid, then we should not assume that moral wrongness is determined by optimal public moral rules and optimal procedures for making everyday decisions. But, again, it is a mistake to equate moral wrongness with what there is decisive reason to avoid (and moral rightness with what there is decisive reason to do). Recall the example about which flavor of sorbet to choose. The agent has decisive reason not to choose the flavor she likes least. But it would not be morally wrong of the agent to choose the flavor she likes least. As this example shows, we cannot equate moral wrongness with what there is decisive reason to avoid.

²⁰ *PVU*, pp. 312–13.

²¹ *PVU*, p. 309.

²² *PVU*, p. 316.

We should now consider the second position de Lazari-Radek and Singer take that might seem to soften the conflict between their account of the relation between moral wrongness and punishment (including indignation and blame) and our intuitions about such matters. According to de Lazari-Radek and Singer, the connection between wrongness and punishment by the opinion of others is sufficiently loose that hostile *public* reaction to a utility-maximizing breach of a widely held rule can be appropriate even though act-utilitarianism maintains that the breach was not morally wrong. But they observe that the connection between wrongness and punishment *by one's own conscience* is very tight. They write, “we can then ask, ‘for what ought we to be reproached by our own conscience?’ and the obvious answer is ‘when we have done something wrong’.”²³

This is a position that I do not think de Lazari-Radek and Singer can occupy without being inconsistent. Their basic position is that blaming is appropriate when but only when blaming maximizes utility. And, just as blaming *others* for doing acts that fail to maximize utility might not maximize utility, blaming *ourselves* for doing acts that fail to maximize utility might not maximize utility.

To take an extreme case, suppose I am paralyzed on my deathbed, incapable not only of acting but also of communicating with others, and yet I have finally understood that most of my behavior has failed to maximize utility. In such a situation, blaming myself will do no good but rather make my few remaining days even more miserable than they were already. So act-utilitarianism condemns my blaming myself in these circumstances. What this extreme case illustrates is that consistent act-utilitarians cannot assume that one should always blame oneself for having done something wrong. For consistent act-utilitarians, having behaved wrongly is not a sufficient condition for its being right to blame oneself.

Likewise, those who hold everything is to be assessed morally in terms of its utility cannot insist that having done moral wrong is a necessary condition for its being morally right to blame oneself. True, typically the benefits of blame come when blame is correlated with moral wrong. But in some notorious cases it is supposed there is utility in blaming someone who didn't do wrong according to act-utilitarian standards.

Let us now turn to the third position that de Lazari-Radek and Singer take that might seem to soften the conflict between their account of the relation between moral wrongness and punishment (including indignation and blame) and our intuitions about this relation. De Lazari-Radek and Singer follow Sidgwick in holding that it would not maximize utility to blame a person who has done more good than people normally do—even if what this person has done falls short of maximizing utility.²⁴

²³ *PVU*, p. 309.

²⁴ *PVU*, pp. 321, 326.

However, the proposal that a person who has done more good than people normally do should never be blamed won't stand up to careful scrutiny. Consider a world in which people normally behave very badly. It is highly counterintuitive to suggest that anyone who behaves better than a very low average shouldn't be blamed. Intuitively, in order to be blameless, someone must avoid behaving wrongly, not merely do better than the average.

There is one more argument of de Lazari-Radek's and Singer's I should address here. My version of rule-utilitarianism takes wrongness to be determined by rules whose widespread internalization would produce the highest expected welfare, calculated impartially. In effect, this kind of rule-utilitarianism aspires to have everyone internalize and then follow the same public rules. De Lazari-Radek and Singer ask us to think about a world where people are very different from one another.

Thus, imagine a world with a million imbeciles and one genius.²⁵ The rules whose general acceptance in this world would produce the best consequences would have to be geared for use by the imbeciles, since the imbeciles here outnumber the genius a million to one. Rules geared for use by the imbeciles need to be extremely simple and easy to interpret, since these imbeciles cannot understand or apply rules that have complexity or nuance or qualifications in them. Now comes the objection: no plausible morality could require the genius to follow rules geared for the imbeciles.

Admittedly, the idea that morality requires us all to follow the *same* rules, namely the ones whose general acceptance would maximize utility, is less compelling when we imagine a world populated by people very dissimilar from one another in terms of intelligence. The question, "What is morally required of an agent who has far more intelligence than everyone else?" is very different from the question, "What is morally required of an agent who is roughly *similar* to most others in intelligence?" Certainly, rule-utilitarians have thought of themselves as addressing the second of these questions. It is hard enough to find a plausible morality for a population of people who are broadly similar in intelligence.

Conclusion

De Lazari-Radek and Singer take ethics to be about what one has decisive reason to do. And they take evolutionary debunking arguments to discredit egoism and the parts of common-sense morality that require partiality. But de Lazari-Radek and Singer argue that evolutionary debunking arguments do not discredit act-utilitarianism. I countered by arguing that evolutionary debunking arguments fail against egoism and the parts of common-sense morality that require partiality.

²⁵ *PVU*, pp. 303–308, 310. As de Lazari-Radek and Singer acknowledge, this example was originally put forward by Margaret Little.

Then I moved on to the role of moral rules. Act-utilitarians and rule-utilitarians agree with one another that rules should be embedded deep in our characters, employed as our decision procedure for making everyday moral decisions, and established as a public code. Rule-utilitarians go on to hold (i) that these rules also determine what is morally right or wrong and (ii) that the moral wrongness of an act is always a necessary condition and usually a sufficient condition for the appropriateness of indignation and moral blame. Act-utilitarians deny both (i) and (ii).

Denying (ii) is highly revisionary and counterintuitive. The best explanation of the fact that denying (ii) is highly counterintuitive comes from the thought that there is a close conceptual connection between an act's being morally wrong and its being appropriately met with indignation and moral blame. If there is this close conceptual connection and if the moral rules under discussion determine which kinds of act are appropriately met with indignation and moral blame, then we have an argument for thinking that these same rules also determine which acts are wrong.²⁶

²⁶ Versions of this paper were presented at Reading, Warwick, and Oxford. For comments on those occasions, I am grateful to Max de Gaynesford, David Oderberg, Charlotte Newey, Luke Elson, Farbod Akhlaghi, Matthew Clayton, William O'Brian, Kimberley Brownlee, Ed Page, Fabienne Peter, Keith Hyams, Adam Swift, Tom Parr, Tom Sinclair, Roger Crisp, Julian Savulescu, Bill Dunaway, and Joseph Bowen. I'm also grateful for helpful written comments from Richard Rowland and Bart Schultz.