



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Harming others : universal subjectivism and the expanding moral circle

Berg, F. van den

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1. Introduction to Universal Subjectivism

1.1 Harming Others

We harm others. With the possible exception of a vegan living a frugal life trying hard to reduce his or her harmful impact on others and the environment, we all harm others. Harm is institutionalized in our society. Our way of life - consumerism and an economic system dependent on growth and depletion of nonrenewable natural resources - is based on harming and exploiting others. We harm people in developing countries, we harm animals, we harm future generations and we even harm ourselves. We are usually not aware of this. When we look with blinkers, our liberal open welfare society, which respects human rights, seems to be a morally justifiable society. But when one pulls away the blinkers, the gruesome picture of the inconvenient truth appears. A moral lesson taught by many parents to their children is 'Don't harm others'. That is a decent moral lesson - but who are others? That same parents, for example, usually cook food for their children that contains animal products, for which animals have been harmed tremendously. And they probably own and drive a CO2 emitting car, and fly. The western throwaway consumeristic, greenhouse gas emitting life style, which uses non-renewable scarce natural resources, now endangers all of us, including many animals and animal species. Destroying the planet is written into our system. We are rapidly on our way to destroy ourselves. Is it possible to live a life without harming and destroying others? Even if it were impossible, doesn't it seem a worthwhile ideal to strive towards a life style that harms as little as possible? Our life style and our institutions are a long way from that 'no harm utopia'. 'Can we live a life without harming others?' That is the question.

1.2 Overview of *Harming Others*

Harming Others develops the theory of, what I call, *universal subjectivism* trying to find out how we should live and how we should arrange our societies in order to live without causing harm, because, as philosopher Michael A. Fox puts it: 'Harming others is bad because it's harmful, and what's harmful is bad.'¹ *Harming Others* is also an exercise in expanding the moral circle and moral empathy. Morality, like many other cultural practices, can be improved by exercise. This study is a self-help book on 'How to Improve My Empathy and What to Do?' The introduction starts with the exposition of the political and moral theory of universal subjectivism in a nutshell. 'Practical Ethics' reflects on the role of moral philosophy and its applications. 'The Enlightenment Project' places this study in the tradition of the Enlightenment in trying to make the world a better place. Chapter two presents the preliminaries to universal subjectivism on what are the most urgent moral problems of our times. 'Moral Nausea' follows George Monbiot's analysis of present day liberal democracies from a moral perspective and shows that there is far more wrong than one would expect. Moral scrutiny reveals many inconvenient truths. 'Why moral theory?' deals with the meta-ethical question of the role of moral theory, and I will explain the basic concepts of universal subjectivism: naturalism, constructivism,

¹ Fox, (1999: 298).

universalism and subjectivism. Then I will look into the most important building blocks of universal subjectivism: John Rawls and Peter Singer in 'Universal subjectivism: Rawls + Singer'. First I focus on Rawls in 'A Broad Interpretation of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*', and Singer in 'Singer's Utilitarian Meta-Ethics'. 'Reflective Equilibrium' is a concept in Rawls' theory of justice, which is applied to universal subjectivism. Political philosophy has three basic questions: 'for whom?', 'by whom?' and 'what for?' To each question there is a paragraph. The chapter ends with outlining 'Two Principles of Universal Subjectivism'. Chapter 3 'Universal Subjectivism and the Expanding Moral Circle' is the extended version of universal subjectivism. Universal subjectivism is used in order to try to expand the moral circle as far as possible. The expansion starts with 'One World' about global justice, then 'Mentally and Physically Handicapped'; 'Non-human Animals'; 'Future Generations'; 'Nature', and lastly the past ('Judging the Past'). Not all expansions get equal attention. Most attention is given to 'Non-human Animals' in which a pathocentric version of social contract theory is developed, which puts the ability to suffer on a scale. In chapter 4, 'Application of Universal Subjectivism', looks at the different uses of universal subjectivism on three levels: 'Political Theory', 'Ethical Theory', and 'Social Criticism'. In political philosophy the expansion towards non-human animals and the environment is recent. The paragraph 'Environmental Ethics' shows how the application of universal subjectivism yields the important precautionary principle ('better safe than sorry'). The chapter ends with a reflection on how to set priorities ('Setting Priorities') and what those priorities are. Chapter 5 is devoted to obstacles and problems of universal subjectivism ('Problems of and Obstacles to Universal Subjectivism'), most notably cultural relativism. Chapter 6, 'Clarifications', positions the theory of universal subjectivism against a host of competing political and moral theories and fundamental normative assumptions. The concluding chapter, chapter 7, translates universal subjectivism in a moral code for 'Living within Limits', that is to say living without causing harm to others and living sustainably. The book ends with a pessimistic gloomy afterthought, 'Deep Pessimism or Desperate Optimism', about the state of the world and our chances to save ourselves. A mediagraphy shows the traces of this quest for living sustainably and without harm.

1.3 Universal Subjectivism in a Nutshell²

In order to distinguish the theory expounded in this book from neighboring theories of justice, I have given it a name: *universal subjectivism*. These two words will bring up philosophical associations. However, I stress that I use these words in a somewhat idiosyncratic way. I could have chosen to name the theory 'Rawlsing' (Rawls + Singer), but I did not. I chose to denote the theory 'subjective', because it starts with the subjective preferences of each individual. In that sense, it is the opposite of 'objective'. In an objective moral theory, there is considered to be objective moral knowledge, whether or not an individual knows about these or chooses to live

² See also: Floris van den Berg, 'Proposal for a Moral Esperanto. An Outline of Universal Subjectivism', *Think*, No. 24, vol. 9, Spring 2010, p. 97-107, and 'Het morele belang van de toevalligheid van het bestaan. Een samenvatting van de theorie van universeel subjectivisme', in: *Tijdschrift voor Humanistiek*, no. 30, July 2007, p. 72-76.

accordingly. 'Morality is subjective in that rules, principles, and judgments are ultimately validated by reference to the welfare of individual beings'³, writes philosopher Dale Jamieson. It is in the sense that Jamieson uses 'subjectivism' that universal subjectivism is a subjective theory. Using a thought experiment, which simulates and stimulates trading places (or changing positions), the subject is (hypothetically) moved from one place to another and experiences the world from the perspective of the other.

The theory of universal subjectivism is 'universal' in that it claims to generate moral outcomes, which are universal, and not relative to cultures, individual preferences or time. The outcome of the thought experiment of universal subjectivism will render a specific form of justice,⁴ namely universal subjectivist justice, which could be different from our moral intuition. There is a paradox between subjectivism on the one hand, and universalism on the other: how can a subjective moral theory generate universal moral outcomes? That is what I will explain in this study.

Imagine that you are beamed up from your existence on planet Earth from where you can look at the world from 'the point of view of the universe'. You are sitting alone at a control panel with which you can arrange all social institutions in a society. You are free to set them as you please. From this position (the so-called 'original position') you know you will go back to planet Earth, but you do not know what kind of being, capable of suffering, you will become. You can be 'born' in any possible form of existence. What you *can* do is create the institutions, laws, rules, customs of the world in which you know you are going to be 'born'. You are the lawgiver. You are in the 'original position', that is the position from which you have to decide what the institutions and laws will be like. From here you look at the world through a 'veil of ignorance' as John Rawls calls it in *A Theory of Justice*: you do not know what your position will be in the world. When you are done, you will be beamed back to the real world and you will find yourself in the society you have arranged. You have been beamed back in a random position. You may be a man or woman, handicapped, hetero- or homosexual, smart or not, having rich parents or be an orphan. Now, imagine if you are in a worst-off position. Imagine being a woman in a misogynist society. It is not just any woman; it is you. Can you voluntarily want to live as a woman in misogynist⁵ society? If not, then you let yourself be beamed up again and change the social arrangements in society in such a way that it is friendly to women. This way you can check any worst-off position. By using the hypothetical social contract theory, you can work your way in optimizing all worst-off positions.

1.4 Worst-Off Positions

For example, imagine yourself being born into the world *physically handicapped*. You find yourself in a world with institutions, which you yourself from 'up there' had invented, but there are no ramps to get into malls, shops, and buildings. For you in a wheelchair this is a serious problem. There *could* be a world in which this problem was solved by the availability of wheelchair ramps. Therefore – hypothetically – you

³ Jamieson (2002: 33).

⁴ Rawls calls the outcome of his theory of justice 'justice as fairness'. See Rawls (1999:10)

⁵ See Holland (2006) on misogyny.

go back up there, change the institutions to include ramps, and go down again. You cannot exclude the possibility of ending up in a wheelchair, because there *are* people in the world who are physically disabled. Hypothetically it could have been you. What you can do is to try to help society accommodate as best as possible the needs of the physically disabled. In a utopia one could imagine no people being disabled, but that's not how reality is. The second best option – optimizing the conditions and accepting the contingencies of fate – is the most rational thing to do.

This time you find yourself as a *woman*. More specific, you find yourself as a woman in a misogynist society, like Saudi Arabia. You probably want to get out of this position as soon as possible and change the conditions again in order that no society will oppress women.

Imagine yourself being born into a *deeply religious family* who impose the religious dogma's, traditions, taboos and customs on you, whether you like it or not, because you are born into that family. According to Islam scholar and critic Ibn Warraq no one could freely and rationally want to be a Muslim, especially when you are a woman. If you – from behind the veil of ignorance – would want to exclude positions in which there is religious indoctrination, then this tells us that there is something deeply wrong with parents and teachers trying to impose a particular religion upon a child. If you think this is over the top, then imagine yourself to be born in a fanatical (fundamentalist) religious position and imagine you yourself to be someone who happens to hate this religious environment without escape routes. Or imagine yourself being a homosexual, a woman, an apostate, a libertine, a freethinker et cetera, being stuck in a fundamental religious social setting.

You happen to enter the world as a *homosexual*, but you 'created' a society in which homosexuality is forbidden and socially disapproved of. It is not somebody else, but it is *you* who happens to be a homosexual. Society therefore should not discriminate against homosexuals. The denial of one's emotional and sexual flowering as a person does have severe consequences for psychological wellbeing and happiness. For die-hard homophobics, who hate or fear homosexuals, it will be hard to go through this thought experiment because they would have to imagine themselves to be a homosexual.

One should also include in the thought experiment the option that you yourself happen to be a fervent anti-homosexual for whom it is not seen as a problem that homosexuality is forbidden. But it is those who discriminate against homosexuals who interfere with the life of homosexuals, not the other way around. The homo-discriminator will probably reply that he is personally deeply offended by the homosexuality of others. In liberal theory that's just how it is: you might be upset, offended and grieved by how others behave, but as long as they do not directly interfere with your life, you will have to cope, and be grieved and offended. Just like Muslims will have to cope with cartoons and critique which they find offensive.

Imagine you see the world through the eyes of a *cow*. This cow is confined to harsh and cruel conditions in factory farming. It might stretch the imagination to think of yourself as a cow, but it makes moral sense, because cows too have an ability to suffer and the ability to suffer is what makes an entity fit for moral concern. I am not sure if I can vividly imagine what it is like to be a cow, but I *can* imagine the difference of being a cow in a lush meadow and a cow kept in dark confinement. So

you probably go back and change the world into a world without factory farming. And I can also try to imagine what it would be like to be a dolphin that is entangled in a fishing net and fighting for its life thereby breaking its nose. If I were a dolphin, I would want to have fishing methods that would leave me, and whales for that matter, alone. Peter Singer writes: 'The question, "What is it like to be a possum drowning?" [due to a dam build in a river – FvdB], at least makes sense, even if it is impossible for us to give a more precise answer than "It must be horrible".'⁶

Now take into account *future generations*: there will be more people in the future than there are now. Imagine being born into the future, on a barren planet. The chances of being what you are here and now in this comparably privileged position are tiny.

In the previous example I presumed there was a future, but if we do 'business as usual' we will experience the human-made collapse sooner or later. Ecological economist Herman Daly writes: 'How big can the economy possibly be before it overwhelms and destroys the ecosystem in the short run? We have decided apparently to do an experiment to answer that question empirically!'⁷ In order to think about what a (just) future society would look like, there has to be a future for humankind on this earth. You can't share a pie when there isn't one. The problem of sustainability, and the exponential growth rate of the population of human beings ensure that we will ruin the planet. All moral and political thinking should have as top priority thinking about the future of humanity and the sustainability of the planet. Would you want to live in a world with 6 billion people or would you want to live in a world with 16 billion people or more? In the case of a scenario of 16 billion people, the pressure on the environment will be immense and there is a limit to what the planet can sustain.

The model of universal subjectivism is a procedure one can do oneself at any time. To do this rationally one should consider the worst possible positions, the so-called 'worst-off' positions. It is irrational to maximize positions, which are already good at the expense of those in a worst-off position. Taking into account the *chances* of these positions, it is not rational to bet on ending up wealthy and therefore maximizing this position. What is rational is to try optimizing the worst-off position, whatever that may be. Ideologically this is what the welfare state is about: the state tries to make life better for those worst-off in society, no matter the reason of their predicament.

The procedure is that one should pick one's 'favorite' worst-off position, go hypothetically behind the veil of ignorance and change the world as one thinks optimizes the conditions for this particular worst-off position. Then, one descends mentally, imagines how it works and adjusts if one thinks it can be better. Universal subjectivism is a dynamic process of mentally jumping into different existential possibilities. This theory will be a mental moral journey.

⁶ Singer (1993: 277).

⁷ Foreword to Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet*.

1.5 Practical Ethics

In *Ethics into Action* Peter Singer writes about the animal right's activist Henry Spira, who in turn was inspired to activism by Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. Spira:

I guess basically one wants to feel that one's life has amounted to more than just consuming products and generating garbage. I think that one likes to look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look at it from this point of view: What greater motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering?⁸

In their preface to *A Companion to Applied Ethics* Frey and Wellman remark: 'Substantive concerns and argument do not have to be alien to each other.'⁹ Within academia there seems to be a gap between science and (political and moral) activism. Feminist scholar-activist Phyllis Chesler remarks: 'Most academics and activists do not actually *do* anything; they read, they write, they deliver papers. They may not be able to free slaves or prisoners the way an entering army might, but they can think clearly, and in complex and courageous ways, and they can enunciate a vision of freedom and dignity for women and man.'¹⁰

Science is the organized cosmopolitan human endeavor to gain knowledge about the world and human culture in *order to make the world a better place*. What would be the use of medicine, if not to make people healthier? What would be the use of law, if not to organize how people cooperate smoothly with each other? What would be the use of psychology, if not to make people happier and healthier? What would be the use of sociology, if not to find out how people could live together in more harmonious ways? The uses of physics, mathematics and biology are somewhat more abstract: but they support medicine and technology. Science is a search for knowledge and, as a whole, this body of knowledge should be used to improve the human condition for now and in the future.

Swedish philosopher Torbjörn Tännsjö writes in *Understanding Ethics*: 'One gets the impression that ordinary, decent people, in their relation to the atrocities of their time, must have been suffering from moral blindness. When they were not themselves among the victims, they allowed all sorts of evil to be perpetrated. It is as if they had never been aware of the existence of any moral law.'¹¹ Universal subjectivism is an attempt to find and overcome the moral blind spots of our times. Intensive farming and environmental pollution that will harm future generations are two enormous moral blind spots. Will ethical reasoning be powerful enough to overcome these moral blind spots? Tännsjö notices that it is easy to judge the past, like the institution of slavery as evil, but hard to evaluate the present:

⁸ Singer (1998: 198).

⁹ Frey, Wellmann (2003: xvii).

¹⁰ Chesler (2006: 8.: 'For me ' [...] a vision of freedom for wo/man' would be enough. Reference to dignity seems unnecessary. See paragraph 6.4.

¹¹ Tännsjö (2008: 1-2).

It is easy, however, to pass moral judgments on the past. But what about our present age? One burning question for us is the following. Are there practices in advanced, industrialized 'civilized' societies that are just as evil as the practices of the past that we do not hesitate today to call crimes?¹²

Tännsjö continues to point out three areas as 'examples of how terrible things are allowed to go on relatively unnoticed: (1) our repression of other species; (2) our complacency in our relation to the destruction of our environment [...]; and (3) our tolerance of famine and abject poverty in the poor parts of the world.'¹³ All these three areas are addressed to in the theory of universal subjectivism as expounded in this book.

What is the use of (moral) philosophy? 'Science can tell us what is going on, but not what we should do about it. What we should do depends largely on what we value and how we think about value.'¹⁴ Moral philosophy is reflecting about values. Philosophy reflects on fundamental issues: What is justice? What is good? What is right? How should we live? Philosophy within academia tends to be an inward and backward looking discipline, detached from social and political affairs. With some exaggeration psychologist Susan Blackmore remarked that philosophy is 'feeding on itself and going nowhere.'¹⁵ Due to Logical Positivism and Ordinary Language Philosophy a large part of twentieth century philosophy became a platitude that 'the job of the moral philosopher is not that of the moralist.' In the last twenty years, practical philosophy or applied ethics is a new branch of philosophy. But even within this discipline the discussions tend to be abstract and inward looking.

Applied philosophy is an academic specialization of philosophy, but it can be applied to live ethically and to improve society. Peter Singer,¹⁶ for example, is a scholar activist who pleads for an ethical life, including veganism.¹⁷ Philosopher Michael Fox remarks that: 'Everyone who is concerned about making the world a better place in which to live must consider, among other things, the food he or she eats.'¹⁸ And should be a vegetarian (or better: vegan), as Fox concludes. Moral reflection can and should lead to changes in personal life style: 'by being vegetarians we become part of the solution to global injustice rather than part of the problem of it.'¹⁹ Philosopher John Harris remarks: 'All these philosophers [e.g. Russell, Bentham] place philosophy at the service of humanity, for what use is knowledge and understanding without using that understanding to try to change things for the better?'²⁰

¹² Ibid.: 2.

¹³ Ibid.: 2.

¹⁴ Garvey (2008: 33).

¹⁵ Floris van den Berg, 'Memes, Overpopulation and the End of the Word. Interview with Susan Blackmore', in: *The Open Society*, Summer 2007.

¹⁶ See Singer's essay 'Philosophers are Back on the Job', in Kuhse, *Unsanctifying Human Life*. See also the Youtube film 'Peter Singer philosophizing in the city': http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-169NzCvw_U.

¹⁷ *Free Inquiry* April/May 2007 features Peter Singer's 'A Case for Veganism'.

¹⁸ Fox (2006: 296).

¹⁹ Ibid.: 307.

²⁰ Harris (2007: 3).

This study is a philosophical and, more in particular, applied ethical reflection on how to make the world a better place with less harm. Since the 1960's applied ethics has been developed as a new branch of ethics, both in teaching and research. In the first part of the twentieth century in the analytic tradition of philosophy 'the role of the moral philosopher was (...) restricted to the meta-ethical task of analyzing the meaning of moral terms.'²¹ Singer defines applied ethics as 'applying reason to practical problems; and since many of these problems are unavoidable, it seems clear that it is better for us to reason about them, to the best of our ability, than not to reason at all.'²²

Philosophers like Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Paine, Condorcet, Peter Singer, A.C. Grayling, Paul Kurtz, Phyllis Chesler, John Harris, Michael Allen Fox, Clive Hamilton, Dale Jamieson, Marc Bekoff, Etienne Vermeersch, Tom Regan and James Rachels are examples of this kind of philosophers. They are philosopher-activists, because they take a moral stance on the issue they discuss. Paul Kurtz coined the term *eupraxsophers*: 'eu' is Greek for good, 'praxis' is practice, and 'sophos' is wisdom; so a *eupraxsopher* is a person who searches for good practical wisdom. They are (academic) philosophers, as well as activists; without keeping the door shut between those activities. '*Eupraxsophy* differs from antiseptically neutral philosophy in that it enters consciously and forthrightly into the marketplace where ideas contend. Unlike pure philosophy, it is not simply the *love* of wisdom, though this is surely implied by it, but also the *practice* of wisdom.'²³

Applied ethics is, as Singer notes, the application of reason to practical problems. Peter Singer himself uses his version of preference utilitarianism²⁴ to apply to many different fields of applied ethics, like animal welfare, the environment, medical ethics and famine.

Applied ethics needs input from the world. This input is knowledge about what the problems are (a diagnosis), what the causes of the problem are, and what possible solutions are. Philosophers should start their moral inquiry with the best possible knowledge about the problems they are reflecting upon. In this study, many problems will appear on stage. When the problem is particular or (relatively) small, I make use of (investigative) journalism, when it comes to large and fundamental problems, most notably the environmental crisis; I make use of a wealth of (popular) scientific sources. Though it may seem that some of the problems that I introduce are exaggerated, these are from scientific sources. This study is based on the best available scientific knowledge,²⁵ especially about the ecological crisis.

According to philosopher Dale Jamieson a watershed in the history of philosophy, the (re-)birth of applied ethics, is the year 1975: 'For me the crucial year was 1975. The first publications that made me think that there might be a place for

²¹ Peter Singer, 'Applied Ethics', in Honderich (1995: 42).

²² Ibid.: 43.

²³ Kurtz (1994: 20).

²⁴ Preference utilitarians define a morally right action as that which produces the most favorable consequences for those involved. Preference utilitarians interpret the best consequences in terms of 'preference satisfaction'. This means that 'good' is described as the satisfaction of each individual's preferences or desires, and a right action is that which leads to this satisfaction. See Mautner (2005: 488)

²⁵ See also the paragraph: 'Naturalism'.

philosophers in the real world were Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and Tom Regan's "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism".²⁶ 'Since the 1960's academic work in ethics dealing with practical or 'applied' questions has become a major part of both teaching and research in ethics.²⁷ [...] once we reflect carefully on our choices, we discover that many might profoundly affect others, and therefore, that we ought to evaluate them morally. [...] Unfortunately many of us are individually and collectively nearsighted: we fail to see or appreciate the moral significance of our choices, thereby increasing the evil in the world. Often we talk and think as if evil resulted solely from the conscious choices of wholly evil people. I suspect, however, that evil results more often from ignorance and inattention: we just don't notice or attend to the significance of what we do. A central aim of this book [*Ethics in Practice*] is to improve our moral vision: to help us notice and comprehend the moral significance of what we do.²⁸ Thus writes Hugh LaFollette in the introduction to his anthology *Ethics in Practice* stressing the importance of linking ethics to real world problems and the role of applied ethics in helping to overcome nearsightedness. Brenda Almond, co-founder of the Society for Applied Philosophy, defines applied ethics as 'the philosophical examination, from a moral standpoint, of particular issues in private and public life that are matters of moral judgment.'²⁹ It is thus a term used to describe attempts to use philosophical methods to identify the morally correct course of action in various fields of human life. Bioethics, for example, is concerned with identifying the correct approach to matters such as euthanasia, or the allocation of scarce health resources, or the use of human embryos in research. Environmental ethics is concerned with questions such as the duties of humans towards landscapes or species. Business ethics is concerned with questions such as the limits on managers in the pursuit of profit, or the duty of whistle-blowers to the general public as opposed to their employers.

Dale Jamieson remarks that there is a difference between applied ethics and advocacy journalism, in that the latter is judged by its influence on public life. However, some books by philosophers working in applied ethics are both philosophical studies *and* advocacy journalism. The classic example of a philosophy book, which is also advocacy journalism, is of course Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which brought about both a stream of academic publications about the human-non-human animals relations, *and* it brought about and inspired the animal liberation movement. The accessible writing style of Singer's book makes that it is also being read outside academic circles.³⁰ Jamieson concludes that: 'Philosophers have a duty to bring their expertise to bear on the problems of real life.'³¹ I hope to do just that.

Environmental ethics is a branch of applied ethics. Environmental ethics is just one of the many new fields of applied ethics. In his introduction to the subject

²⁶ Dale Jamieson, 'Is Applied Ethics Worth Doing?', in: Jamieson (2002).

²⁷ 'Applied Ethics' by Peter Singer in: Honderich (1995).

²⁸ LaFollette (2007: 1).

²⁹ Mautner (2005).

³⁰ My book *Filosofie voor een betere wereld* is mainly advocacy journalism. *Harming Others* expounds the same ethical theory, but is intended as an academic dissertation.

³¹ Dale Jamieson, 'Is Applied Ethics Worth Doing?', in Jamieson (2001: 46).

DesJardins defines environmental ethics as: 'a systematic account of the moral relationships between human beings and their natural environment.'³²

In this study I develop an ethical theory called *universal subjectivism*, which can be applied to deal with problems in applied ethics. I am not focusing on one problem or application in particular. The applications are examples of how and where universal subjectivism can be applied. The outcome of universal subjectivism seems to be almost completely in harmony with Peter Singer's application of utilitarianism to ethical problems. But the problem Singer cannot answer is: 'Why should I be moral?'. Universal subjectivism aspires to be an ethical theory which can motivate people to act upon and which yields just outcomes to (many) ethical and political problems.

1.6 The Enlightenment Project

Is it possible to strive for moral progress? Intellectual historian Peter Gay writes about the Enlightenment as a program of 'secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms.'³³ 'The men of the Enlightenment united a vastly ambitious program, a program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms – freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one's talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his own way in the world.'³⁴ A.C. Grayling, as a 'New Enlightenment' philosopher, characterizes the project of the Enlightenment succinctly: 'The key Enlightenment concepts are reason and progress, the latter being the product of the former. The marks of progress are the growth of scientific knowledge and improvement of the condition of mankind through science's applications via technology; a correlative reduction of superstition and religious belief; and the replacement of tyranny both temporal and ecclesiastical by more and just democratic institutions of government.'³⁵ Campaigner and activist Henry Spira puts it more down to earth: 'If you see something that's wrong, you've got to do something about it.'³⁶

There can be moral progress: the less suffering and the more freedom the higher a society scores on the moral scale, if one agrees on the criterion. Philosopher Karl Popper writes in the preface of his book *In Search of a Better World* 'about the success of the search for a better world during the eighty-seven years of my life, a time of two senseless world wars and of criminal dictatorships. In spite of everything, and although we had so many failures, we, the citizens of the western democracies, live in a social order which is better (because more favorably disposed to reform) and more just than any other in recorded history. Further improvements are of the greatest urgency.'³⁷ Popper then mentions two things that have improved: 1) The eradication of mass poverty in the West, and 2) reform in criminal law. Popper is an optimist who sees the dust of light in a sea of darkness. Through piecemeal social engineering

³² DesJardins (2006: 274).

³³ Gay (1966: 3).

³⁴ Ibid.: 3.

³⁵ Grayling, (2007: 131).

³⁶ Motto in Singer (1998).

³⁷ Popper wrote this in 1989. Popper, (1992, viii-ix).

Popper wants to strive for a better world. In the end Popper is an optimist who believes that through feedback mechanisms we can improve our societies: 'But have we not destroyed the environment with our natural science? No! We have made great mistakes – all living creatures make mistakes. It is indeed impossible to foresee all the unintended consequences of our actions. Here science is our greatest hope: its method is the correction of error.'³⁸ It seems Popper might not be well enough aware of the nature of the environmental crisis and that the focus on science (and technology) to help overcome the mistakes we have made might not be enough. It seems that Popper thinks 1) that when we know about our mistakes we will work to undo them (which does not seem the case for many environmental problems, most notably climate change), and 2) that science and technology will be able to fix it (this is the popular hope/myth of a *technofix*, the hope that future technology will solve all our problems and that there is no need to try hard now, because future technology will solve it). Popper hopes for and beliefs in the possibility of making a better world: 'A shaping of our social environment with the aim of peace and non-violence is not just a dream. It is possible, and from the biological point of view obviously necessary, objective for mankind.'³⁹

Universal subjectivism, the moral and political theory, which is proposed in this study, provides a criterion to measure how a society scores on the moral scales *and* universal subjectivism shows how a society can be morally improved. There can be moral progress, but it won't come on its own. People need to strive 'toward the light of liberty' – as is the title of one of A.C. Grayling's book. *Sapere aude* is considered to be the slogan, which captures the essence of the Enlightenment. Kant's maxim is focused on knowledge. In order to attain moral progress there needs to be action: social engineering.

I hope, as Grayling does with his work, to contribute with this study to the fulfillment of the promise and project of the Enlightenment; I am much more gloomy and pessimistic about the prospect of success. My purpose is to develop a procedural normative theory, which can - in principle - generate universal consensus about a great many moral issues. The theory *universal subjectivism* combines social contract theory (mostly Rawls and Nussbaum), with Peter Singer's notion of the expanding circle of morality relying on the capacity for suffering. It is my hope that universal subjectivism can help 1) to solve moral and political philosophical problems, 2) motivate people to do the good and doing no harm, and 3) to find new moral blind spots and overcome them. 'Whatever does indeed happen, my hope is that the intelligence and access to knowledge enjoyed by future people will allow the enlightenment project to triumph at last.'⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid.: viii.

³⁹ Ibid.: 29.

⁴⁰ Grayling (2004: xi).

