Contemporary philosophers strive to ground their ethical beliefs in rationality. The ethical theory of Utilitarianism is one such attempt to rationalize morality. Yet, utilitarian’s seem to be unable explain everything about human ethics rationally. For example, utilitarian’s cannot explain why one might have a special moral obligation to ones own kin. This paper aims to investigate the nature and relevance of a special moral obligation towards kin, and reveal utilitarian thinkers’ inability to account for it. While many philosophers, and thinkers alike, would agree that this special moral obligation exists, it cannot be very well rationalized from the theory of Utilitarianism. Utilitarian theory is based on the idea that the overall consequences of an action determine its rightness or wrongness. In order to determine the morality of a situation, a utilitarian must first predict all likely consequences, and then select the action that creates the maximum amount of happiness for everyone involved in the situation. In his book, Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence, Peter Unger argues that one ought to donate a significant portion of his income to a humanitarian organization, such as UNICEF, in order to create the greatest amount of happiness, or at least decrease the greatest

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amount of serious suffering in the world. However, he also suggests that the special moral obligation towards one’s own child outweighs one’s general obligation to children in distant lands.² Unger’s inferred notion of qualitative assessment in moral situations seems to lack the rationality of the rest arguments within his book. John Stuart Mill explains in his book, *What Utilitarianism Is*,³ that one is to quantify the quality of an action by knowing the preferred outcome of individuals who have experienced all consequences. Paul Clough offers some relevant observations of kinship obligations people have in different societies.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*⁴ “Utilitarianism can most generally be described as the doctrine which states that the rightness or wrongness of actions is determined by the goodness and badness of their consequences.”⁵ The encyclopedia continues on to differentiate between several varying forms of utilitarianism. One particular distinction is between Egoistic and Universalistic utilitarianism. “Are the good consequences which must be considered by an agent the consequences to the agent himself... or are they the consequences to all mankind...?”⁶ The notion of a special moral obligation, it seems, would most rightly fit under the category of egoistic utilitarianism. Rather than taking into account the utility of helping all of mankind, even those who are distant to an agent, he would assign a higher quality of utility towards those who most directly affect him.

² Unger, *Living High*, 149.
In his book, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*, Peter Unger argues that one is morally obligated to lessen the serious suffering of distant others even to one’s own less-than comparable sacrifice.\(^7\) For example, one ought to drive a wounded man, who is bleeding profusely, to the hospital even though in doing so the upholstery of one’s car, supposed to be a vintage sedan, would be ruined and in need of a costly replacement. As defined by *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, it seems clear that Unger is taking a universalistic stance on utilitarianism in considering the consequences to all mankind.\(^8\) However, in a footnote in his book, Unger claims that, “...insofar as it’s needed to meet your strictest special moral obligations... you must do that.”\(^9\) This short aside is quite contrary to the universalistic approach Unger had previously taken, and abides more by an egoistic approach. In this instance, Unger judges that an act to lessen the serious suffering of one’s own child is of higher quality than an act to lessen the serious suffering of many children in distant lands. In a personal e-mail response to my inquiry on the subject, Unger fortifies this notion, “What I [Unger] must have meant there is something like this: Make sure your children don’t starve to death before you lessen the number of children dying in distant lands. The idea is that each of us, including each in Bangladesh, has a special, and a specially strong obligation, to each of her own children.” He goes on to say that he is “not SURE that’s so – but it does SEEM to be there in, at least, [his] own Basic Moral Values.” Unger’s qualitative analysis in his e-mail furthermore lacks the rational backing he had previously demonstrated

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\(^7\) Unger, *Living High*, 7-8.
\(^8\) Edwards, *Encyclopedia*, 207.
\(^9\) Unger, *Living High*, 57.
for the entirety of his book. The main point in *Living High and Letting Die* is that one
ought to give up a portion of his income to UNICEF. This, it seems, would generally
be a very unpopular position for most Americans. In so arguing, Unger must
anticipate any and all objections to his reasoning, which he does very well. His
expectancy of so many objections to his claims would have taken considerable
thought and research. Yet, he seems to have done very little in exploring the origin
of the special moral obligation.

The issue of quality versus quantity is a major one for utilitarian thought. Philip Wheelwright notes the difficulty in evaluating the quality of an acts utility,
“What is to be the test of quality? Quantities can be measured, they have objective
relations of less and greater, but a quality is something absolute. A red color is not
less or more of anything than a chord in G-minor...”\(^\text{10}\) John Stuart Mill attempts to

“Of two pleasures, if there be one to which all or almost all who have
experience of both give a decided preference, irrespective of any feeling of moral
obligation to prefer it, that is the more desirable pleasure. If one of the two is, by
those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that
they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of
discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which
their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a
superiority in quality so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of
small account.”\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) Philip Wheelwright, *A Critical Introduction to Ethics* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran &

\(^\text{11}\) Kessler, *Voices of Wisdom*, 90.
What Mill is claiming is that only those who have experienced both alternatives can determine quality. In relevance to Unger’s example of a special moral obligation, only a person who has experience both consequences of saving the lives of distant children while allowing one's own to die, and saving one's own child while allowing distant children to die are certified to judge the quality of either action. This application of evaluation, while possible, is highly unpractical. To carry out this method one must find a philanthropist who has had a minimum of two children in life or death situations, and has selected to save one, with money that is usually donated, while letting the other die, and donating his usual amount. In order for one to make the right decision, he must first make both the right and the wrong decision.

Paul Clough exposes a slightly different take on the matter of kinship in his article, “The Relevance of Kinship to Moral Reasoning in Culture and in the Philosophy of Ethics.” He notes, “...we can identify the tendency of individuals to compare possible actions with the social obligations that emerge within environmentally constrained groups, and to puzzle over potential conflicts.”12 In other words we see that people compare actions that they think they ought to take with actions their culture or society says that they ought to take, and are often confused over contradictions (e.g. Should one pay for a costly operation for his own child that will save one life [what our culture would have us do], or ought one donate to a charity, such as UNICEF, and save the lives of hundreds [what utilitarianism would have us do]).13 However, Clough claims that “...there must be

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13 Unger, Living High, 57.
in all societies a class of rules that are ultimately based on the mental trend of self-interest... you must give in order to receive.”\textsuperscript{14} This notion of self-interest could also fit quite nicely under the category of egoistic utilitarianism.\textsuperscript{15} Clough’s trend of self-interest implies that the special moral obligation one might have towards his own kin is only relevant due to some sort of reciprocal principle. “The categorization of persons as kin is rooted in a rule of prescriptive altruism... Kinship entails an obligation of amity or generosity... Kin have an irresistible claim on resources that non-kin do not.”\textsuperscript{16} The social closeness of kin entails an obligation to aid one another in whatever means necessary, be it through material resources or perhaps emotional consolation or monetary capital. Unfortunately Clough also fails to identify the origin of amity towards one’s kin, but simply observes its presence.

The special moral obligation is a qualitative assessment in regards to the maximum utility of a situation. This characteristic is based on a sort of egoistic or even hedonistic utilitarianism. Unger’s adherence to the notion of a special moral obligation seems to fit under a type of egoistic utilitarianism. Yet, he cannot be an egoistic utilitarian because he asserts that one is obligated to help others even when it will result in a loss to oneself. Unger’s position is highly confusing and seems to lack the particularly rational basis that the rest of his arguments are shown to have.

\textbf{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{14} Clough, “Relevance of Kinship,” 143.
\textsuperscript{15} Edwards, \textit{Encyclopedia}, 207.
\textsuperscript{16} Clough, “Relevance of Kinship,” 148.

